

YEAR of SAINT JOSEPH



“Show yourself a father, and guide us in the path of life”

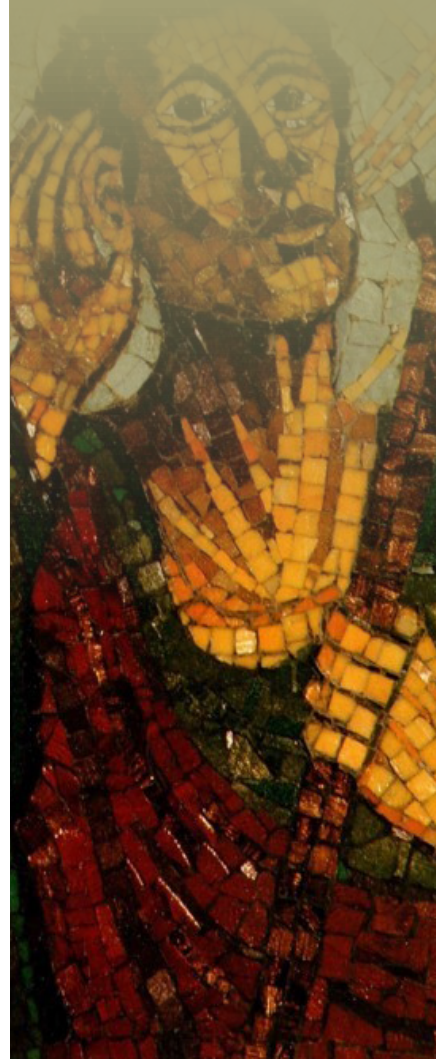
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St Joseph – a Man of Law

By Maria Casey RSJ

St Joseph is described in Matthew’s Gospel as “a just man” (Matthew 1:9). We learn about a man’s attitude to law both from what he says in certain circumstances, from how he interprets the law and from his actions in applying law. St Joseph has no word of his recorded in the Gospels. Therefore, we learn about his being a Man of Law from how he interpreted the law and how he applied it when it was necessary — both the civil law and his inherited Abrahamic and Davidic law. Joseph listened faithfully to the whisperings of God in his heart. He lived the words of Jeremiah, “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33). As a just man he knew and understood the law and was guided by it as is evidenced in his life.

Law is necessary in any society for the wellbeing of the society and its individuals. It enshrines the purposes of the society and the structures needed to attain those purposes. It establishes the rights of the members and their corresponding obligations. We learn that law needs to be interpreted according to the understanding of its time and then applied to the situation that arises. The longstanding rule of law allows for a strict application or a more lenient application when circumstances demand. Law needs to be applied with compassion according to the seriousness



of actions in order to avoid marginalisation of persons, but it needs to be strictly applied when there is serious damage to others or society.

St Joseph, a son of David, belonged to the Messianic line. He was born in Nazareth and espoused to Mary, a virgin, who, during the time of betrothal, was found to be with child. At that time the penalty for a woman found to be pregnant out of wedlock was to be removed from society. Usually, the removal from society was accomplished by stoning the woman to death. Joseph knew the law, but as Matthew writes, Joseph “being a man of honour and wanting to spare her publicity, decided to divorce her informally”: (Matthew 1:19-20). He truly applied the law with generosity, leniency and love. He then had a dream in which he heard the injunction, “Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:20). Joseph was now the foster father of the Messiah, the One who had been foretold for generations and awaited as a descendant of King David.

Joseph frequently exemplifies obeying civil law as well as divine law. St Luke tells us that Caesar Augustus, a Roman despot, “issued a decree for a census of the whole world to be taken... Everyone went to his own town to be registered”. Joseph set out with Mary to go to Bethlehem since that was the town of his lineage, “David’s House and line” – the line from which the Messiah was to come. As we well know, Mary gave birth to her son in Bethlehem, “her first born. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them at the inn” (Luke 2:7-8).

Joseph knew well the Abrahamic covenant where the Lord decreed that all males be circumcised (Genesis 17). He honoured that law so that “when the eighth day came and the child was to be circumcised, they gave him the name Jesus” (Luke 2:21). On the 40th day after Jesus’ birth, Joseph took him and Mary to the Temple in Jerusalem “to be purified as laid down by the law of Moses ... observing what stands written in the Law of the Lord - every first-born male must be consecrated to the Lord” (Luke 23). It was a double requirement: Jesus was to be presented in the Temple and Mary was to be purified after childbirth. Luke tells us they offered the required sacrifice of “two turtle doves or two young pigeons” (Luke 2:24-25). The family then returned to Nazareth.

Historically, it is believed that when Jesus was almost two years old, the Magi visited Herod in Jerusalem asking, “where is the infant king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose and have come to do him homage” (Matthew 2:2-3). Herod did not want another king in his

jurisdiction, so ordered that all males under the age of two years were to be killed (Matthew 2:16-17). Once more, Joseph heeded the voice of God in a dream: “Get up, take the child and his mother with you, and escape into Egypt, and stay there until I tell you, because Herod intends to search for the child and do away with him” (Matthew 2:13-14). Joseph obediently took Mary and Joseph and lived in Egypt until Herod died some years later.

Again, Joseph had a dream in which he was told to return to Israel. When the family returned, they lived in Nazareth in Galilee to avoid being in Judaea now governed by another despot, Archelaus (Matthew 2:21-23). Here in Galilee, Joseph watched the child grow to maturity and filled with wisdom (Luke 2:39-40).

Joseph continued, as head of the family, to observe the law. Luke tells us: “Every year his parents used to go to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover.” We learn that when Jesus was 12 years old he stayed behind in Jerusalem listening to the doctors and asking them questions. For three days, his parents searched for him but, on finding him it is Mary who is recorded as speaking and chiding Jesus (Matthew 2:46-50). That is the last occasion that Joseph is mentioned.

In those 12 or so years, Joseph has definitively proved that he is truly a Man of Law. He not only wisely interpreted law, but applied it with care. He related to his God with a constantly listening ear.

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