



PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP

appointed to be read aloud
in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Portsmouth
on 18th January 2105, the Second Sunday of the Year

MARY'S HUSBAND

Dear Chosen-Disciples of Christ,

I want to mention an extraordinary man, whom many of us ought to know better: Strong, silent, humble, decisive, a man of integrity, a saint: I mean Mary's husband, Joseph. What a shock it must have been for him to find that the young woman to whom he was betrothed was pregnant, and bewildering to hear her explanation: that the Child conceived within her was of the Holy Spirit!¹ Yet Joseph believed the message of the Angel. Although counter-cultural – as St. Thomas notes, Mary might otherwise have been stoned to death² – Joseph obeyed God's Word and took her to his home.³ When the time came for the Child's birth, he gave Him the name the Angel declared, the holy Name that is above every name, Jesus, meaning Saviour.⁴

St. Joseph played a key part in all the events of Christmas: the census in Bethlehem, the birth in a stable, the homage of the Magi, the flight into Egypt and the presentation in the Temple. But this fine husband, Guardian of the Incarnate Word, also played a key role in the hidden years of Jesus' home life in Nazareth: His childhood, His upbringing, His human development. As St. Bernadine of Siena notes, the Father entrusted Joseph with His greatest treasures, His Divine Son and the Blessed Mother, and whenever God calls someone to a particular vocation, He enriches them with the requisite graces and charisms.⁵ Although not His biological father, Joseph showed Jesus all the love and solicitude a father's heart can know.⁶ He gave Him an inspiring example of being a man. He taught Him a trade, the value of work, how to earn a living and support a family.⁷ And he socialised Jesus, inserting Him into the cultural and religious life of the time. In Joseph, the self-sacrificing father-son relationship would surely have run so deep, that in this profoundly good man, Jesus would have recognised a beautiful icon of His heavenly Father.⁸

Today, fatherhood, along with marriage, is in crisis. To the great distress of everyone involved, 42% of marriages in the UK end in divorce and nearly 50% of children are born outside marriage. Cohabitation is not a substitute, since the average length of couples living together is just two years. Many children live in homes led by a single parent, 92% of whom are mothers.⁹ Yet, as Pope Francis says, every child has a fundamental human right to be brought up by both a father and a mother. Every child has the right to grow up in a family capable of creating a good environment for their emotional development. The abandonment of the traditional religious culture of family and marriage – a loving, monogamous, covenantal relationship of one man and one woman with the procreative purpose of raising children – has resulted in a revolution, Francis adds, that has brought “spiritual and material devastation to countless human beings, especially the poorest and most vulnerable.”¹⁰ In other words, the ‘gender wars’ are causing poverty! We need a new human ecology.

In October this year, some of the bishops will gather with the Holy Father for a Synod on “The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and the Modern World”. Please pray for its success, for our families and married couples, and for those in difficulty. Pray too that the Synod will help us all receive afresh the Good News of Christ on the complementarity of being male and female, on the vocation to marriage and on the joy of Christian family life. May it inspire us to find new means of witnessing to the ‘natural way of life.’ For in today’s culture, a great battle is being fought between two very different understandings of what it means to be a human being. Are humans higher animals, biological machines, objects to be manipulated for pleasure, gain and power? Or are we fundamentally different, that is, persons to be respected, creatures with limits, people with dignity and vocation?

In this battle, St. Joseph, Defender of Life and Patron of Marriage, is a brilliant example. Why not invoke his prayers more often, especially on Wednesdays? Why not do some Bible-study on the Annunciation to Joseph in the Gospel of Matthew? Why not place a picture of him next to Mary with Jesus? Or put a magnet on your fridge? Or recite after Mass the Litany of Joseph? Or in the month of March run a ‘St. Joseph’s Table’¹¹ for the poor or the housebound? Let us often ask the help of Joseph, Patron of the Universal Church, whose venerable name recent popes have inserted into every Eucharistic Prayer.¹²

So let me end with an announcement. This May, to focus our prayers in the lead-up to the Synod, I have invited to the Diocese the relics of Blessed Louis and Blessed Zélie Martin, one of the first married couples ever to be beatified. Blessed Louis and Blessed Zélie are the parents of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. The two-day programme will begin on Wednesday 20th May with a Liturgy of Reception in Southampton at St. Theresa’s, Totton, before a day of veneration at the Cathedral in Portsmouth. The visitation will conclude with Mass at Christ the King, Reading, on Friday 22nd for those in the north of the Diocese. May the prayers of this saintly married couple, along with those of Joseph the Just and Mary the Virgin, renew us with the joy of the Gospel.

Thank you for listening!

In Corde Iesu + Philip Bishop of Portsmouth.

¹ Commenting on Mt 1: 18-20a, St. John Paul explains: “According to Jewish custom, marriage took place in two stages: first, the legal, or true marriage was celebrated, and then, only after a certain period of time, the husband brought the wife into his own house. Thus, before he lived with Mary, Joseph was already her ‘husband.’”
² “It was fitting that Christ should be born of an espoused virgin: first, for His own sake; secondly, for His Mother’s sake; thirdly, for our sake. . . . It was fitting for the sake of the Virgin. First, because thus she was rendered exempt from punishment: that is, ‘lest she should be stoned by the Jews as an adulteress’, as Jerome says.” St. Thomas Aquinas *ST*

³ Mt 1: 20b-21
⁴ Phil 2: 9. Cf. *Catechism* 1846

⁵ “There is a general rule concerning all special graces granted to any human being. Whenever the divine favour chooses someone to receive a special grace, or to accept a lofty vocation, God adorns the person chosen with all the gifts of the Spirit needed to fulfil the task at hand. This general rule is especially verified in the case of Saint Joseph, the foster-father of our Lord and the husband of the Queen of our world, enthroned above the angels. He was chosen by the eternal Father as the trustworthy guardian and protector of his greatest treasures, namely, his divine Son and Mary, Joseph’s wife. He carried out this vocation with complete fidelity until at last God called him, saying: *Good and faithful servant enter into the joy of your Lord!*” St. Bernadine of Siena *Sermo 2 de S. Joseph: opera* 7, 16, 2: 30; extract here from the Second Reading of the Office of Readings, the Solemnity of Joseph, Husband of Mary (19th March).

⁶ Pius XII *Radio Message to Catholic School Students in the USA* (19th February 1958): AAS 50 (1958) 174.

⁷ Joseph is mentioned fifteen times in the Gospels. He is known as a *taxov*, that is a worker in wood, a carpenter, builder, craftsman or joiner. Thus in Mt 13: 55, the people, astonished at Jesus, remark: “This is the carpenter’s son (*ho tou tektonos huios*), surely?”

⁸ St. John Paul suggests this: “Why should the ‘fatherly’ love of Joseph not have had an influence upon the ‘filial’ love of Jesus? And vice versa why should the ‘filial’ love of Jesus not have had an influence upon the ‘fatherly’ love of Joseph, thus leading to a further deepening of their unique relationship?” *Redemptoris Custos* 28. In an earlier comment on Luke 2: 41-50 (Jesus among the doctors of the Law), he notes how the answer Jesus gave

“was such that ‘they did not understand the saying which he spoke to them.’ He had said, ‘How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?’ (Lk 2:49-50) Joseph, of whom Mary had just used the words ‘your father,’ heard this answer. That, after all, is what all the people said and thought:

Jesus was the son (as was supposed) of Joseph (Lk 3:23). Nonetheless, the reply of Jesus in the Temple brought once again to the mind of his ‘presumed father’ what he had heard on that night twelve years earlier: ‘Joseph, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.’ From that time onwards he knew that he was a guardian of the mystery of God, and it was precisely this mystery that the twelve-year-old Jesus brought to mind: ‘I must be in my Father’s house’” (*ibid* 15).

⁹ I am reliant for this on Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Speaking at an interreligious Colloquium organised at the Vatican in November 2014 by the CDF called *Humanum. The Complementarity of Man and Woman*, he said:

“For a whole variety of reasons, some to do with medical developments like birth control, in vitro fertilisation and other genetic interventions, some to do with moral change like the idea that we are free to do whatever we like so long as it does not harm others, some to do with a transfer of responsibilities from the individual to the state, and other and more profound changes in the culture of the West, almost everything that marriage once brought together has now been split apart. Sex has been divorced from love, love from commitment, marriage from having children, and having children from responsibility for their care. The result is that in Britain in 2012, 47.5 per cent of children were born outside marriage, expected to become a majority in 2016. Fewer people are marrying, those who are, are marrying later, and 42 per cent of marriages end in divorce. Nor is cohabitation a substitute for marriage. The average length of cohabitation in Britain and the United States is less than two years. The result is a sharp increase among young people of eating disorders, drug and alcohol abuse, stress related syndromes, depression and actual and attempted suicides. The collapse of marriage has created a new form of poverty concentrated among single parent families, and of these, the main burden is borne by women, who in 2011 headed 92 per cent of single parent households. In Britain today more than a million children will grow up with no contact whatsoever with their fathers.”

For the full text, see Austin Ivereigh *Catholic Voices Comment* online at evccomment.org (January 2015)
¹⁰ See Pope Francis Address, at *Humanum. The Complementarity of Man and Woman*, an interreligious Colloquium organised at the Vatican in November 2014 by the CDF; <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/pope-francis-address-at-opening-of-colloquium-on-complementarity-of-man-and-woman> (January 2015)

¹¹ This Italian tradition is catching on across the US. For more on it, see www.catholicculture.org (January 2015)
¹² On May 1, 2013, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments promulgated the decree *Paternus Vices*. The decree instructs that the name of Saint Joseph, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary, should be inserted into Eucharistic Prayers II, III, and IV. Already on November 13, 1962, Pope John XXIII had inserted the name of St. Joseph into the first Eucharistic Prayer (the Roman Canon), and now that work has been carried forward to the other three Eucharistic Prayers, initially by Pope Benedict XVI and confirmed latterly by Pope Francis.