

**ADDRESS OF HIS EXCELLENCE ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,
“SAINT JOSEPH AND THE FATHERHOOD OF THE PRIEST”
CONVOCATION OF THE CLERGY OF ALASKA
CATHEDRAL COMPLEX OF OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE, ANCHORAGE
FEBRUARY 23, 2022**

My Dear Brothers,

We began our reflections today focusing on the Sacred Heart of Jesus and those characteristics of the Heart of the Redeemer which can be manifested in our priestly ministry. In showing mercy to the repentant sinner or in demonstrating compassion, Jesus was revealing the face of the Eternal Father. Jesus said, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.” (John 14:9)

In his Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde* on Saint Joseph, Pope Francis mentions the Polish author Jan Dobraczynski, who wrote *The Shadow of the Father*, which recounts the life of Saint Joseph in the form of a novel. Dobraczynski portrays Joseph as the earthly shadow of the Heavenly Father. It was Joseph who watched over and protected Jesus. Although Joseph was Jesus’ father by adoption, he accepted responsibility for him.

The Holy Father comments: “Fathers are born not made ... Whenever a man accepts responsibility for the life of another, in some way, he becomes a father to that person.” (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC LETTER *PATRIS CORDE*, 8 DECEMBER 2020, 7) We priests are called “father”, and with our ordination, we accepted the responsibility of generating life and faith, accepted responsibility for the well-being and salvation of those entrusted to our care.

Thus, I would like to reflect with you on Saint Joseph as a model for priestly fatherhood, utilizing the ten recent Wednesday audiences of the Holy Father. The last of the ten audiences spoke of the communion of saints and the relationship of the saints to Christ. The Holy Father spoke of the need for devotion, which he described as “a way of expressing love from the very bond that unites us.”

We too want to express our devotion to Saint Joseph by living our priesthood in a dignified manner. After all, the Holy Father points out that to Saint Joseph “God entrusts the most precious things he has: his Son Jesus and the Virgin Mary.” (POPE FRANCIS, GENERAL AUDIENCE, 2 FEBRUARY 2022) We too have been entrusted with bringing Jesus to those who are also precious to the Eternal Father - the Holy People of God.

The Priest as a Fruitful Father. In his first audience (17 November 2021) addressing the person of Saint Joseph, the Holy Father noted that the name Joseph means “may God increase, may God give growth.” The name was a wish, expressing a hope or trust in Divine Providence, especially with respect to fruitfulness and children. We, of course, want our priestly ministry to be spiritually fruitful, and we want to generate life and faith among the children of God.

Beyond the name of Joseph, we can look to those places where Joseph settled: Bethlehem, which means “House of Bread” in Hebrew and “House of Meat” in Arabic. In light of the story of Jesus, these allusions to bread and meat point us to the Mystery of the Eucharist. As spiritual fathers, we must provide for our families and nourish them. Joseph worked as a carpenter to provide nourishment for Mary and the Child Jesus.

Do we understand ourselves as spiritual fathers who must feed our families? Do we desire to celebrate the Mass as an act of love toward those entrusted to our care, so that they may grow “in wisdom, favor, and grace before God and men”?

Without proper nourishment, it is difficult for anything to grow or increase. Indeed, we speak of the twofold table of the Word and the Eucharist. It is important as priests to examine how we prepare to preach God’s Word which also nourishes the souls of our family. The preaching of the Good News leads us to recognize Him in the Breaking of the Bread. This preaching of the Good News is what we call evangelization, which the Holy Father points out begins from the peripheries.

Pope Francis notes that “Bethlehem and Nazareth were two outlying villages, far from the clamor of the news and powers of the time,” but “the choice of the periphery and marginality are preferred by God.” (POPE FRANCIS, GENERAL AUDIENCE 17 NOVEMBER 2021) Here in Alaska you are certainly at the peripheries – geographic, spiritual, and existential; nevertheless, have you ever pondered that the favor of the Lord is upon you?

Pope Francis offers hope:

“The Lord continues to manifest himself in the peripheries, both the geographical and existential ones. In particular, Jesus goes in search of sinners; he goes into their homes, speaks with them, calls them to conversion...And the Church knows that she is called to proclaim the good news starting from the peripheries. Joseph, who is a carpenter from Nazareth and who trusts in God’s plan for his young fiancé and for himself, reminds the Church to fix her gaze on what the world deliberately ignores.” (IBID.)

Saint Joseph reminds us that we are called to be fruitful fathers, even in those conditions which seem unfavorable to growth, by trusting in God’s plan and by cooperating with it through our work of nourishing the children of God with the Bread of Life and the Word of God.

The Fatherhood of the Priest in History. In his second audience (24 NOVEMBER 2021) on St. Joseph, the Holy Father reflected on the role of Saint Joseph in salvation history, noting that although he was the “husband of Mary” and a “carpenter”, “apparently, marginal, discreet, and in the background”, he was “in fact a central element in salvation history.”

Of course, Joseph was the link to Jesus’ birth from the “house of David”, but Pope Francis describes him as “the man who goes unnoticed, the man of daily presence, of discreet and hidden presence, an intercessor and support and a guide in times of difficulty. He reminds us that all those who are seemingly hidden or in the ‘second row’ are unparalleled protagonists in the history of salvation.”

What would things be like if we lived our priesthood with these characteristics? We do not need the bright lights of New York or Los Angeles to make a difference. Our people do not need us to be superstars or entertainers; rather, they need us to make a difference by getting out of the way and allowing Christ to be present to them through us.

Even living in the background, Joseph was called to be the guardian of Jesus and Mary. His was a tremendous responsibility. He was to protect the child and his mother. This remains the task of true spiritual fathers – to protect (and never to harm) those whom we are called to serve. Pope Francis believes that we live in a “liquid society”, that is, in a society without strong bonds. Saint Joseph reminds us that

even in the shadows of history, we priests need to establish meaningful bonds – with Christ Himself, with our brother priests, and with our people. In this way, we become friends of the Bridegroom, develop the fraternity needed to sustain us in our mission, and deepen our spousal love for our people, whom we equip to also be protagonists in history, even if we all go unnoticed. The only thing that matters is that Christ is recognized and made known, because it is He who brings salvation.

The Priest: A Man of Discernment and Spousal Love During Advent, Pope Francis explored the titles of Joseph as “the just man and husband of Mary.” Joseph was a just man – in right relationship with God and his neighbor. He was just inasmuch as he was subject to the Law and fulfilled his duties according to the Law. He was just, meaning that he was immersed in the things of God, and when it came to light that Mary, his betrothed and beloved, was with child, not desiring revenge or to humiliate her, Joseph decided to divorce her quietly.

The angel of the Lord intervened, appearing him and explaining everything, which the Holy Father described as God’s intervention in Joseph’s discernment:

“God’s voice intervenes in Joseph’s discernment. In a dream, He reveals a greater meaning than his own justice. How important it is for each one of us to cultivate a just life and, at the same time, to always feel the need for God’s help to broaden our horizons and to consider the circumstances of life from an always different, larger perspective. Many times, we feel imprisoned by what has happened to us: “But look what happened to me!” – and we remain imprisoned in that bad thing that happened to us. But particularly in front of some circumstances in life that initially appear dramatic, a Providence is hidden that takes shape over time and illuminates the meaning even of the pain that has touched us.” (POPE FRANCIS, GENERAL AUDIENCE, 1 DECEMBER 2021)

We priests need to be men of discernment, but the life of Saint Joseph reminds us that true discernment is not merely human deliberation and calculation but involves being sensitive to the things of God and trusting in Divine Providence. God broadens our horizons and deepens our justice; he opens new possibilities.

In the priesthood, we can often grow bitter, dwelling on some criticism offered by parishioners or even by the bishop. We can become negative especially toward our brother priests when one appears favored or gets the parish or posting we desired. Can we follow the example of Saint Joseph and accept things lovingly from the hand of God?

Surely, Joseph must have had his hopes and dreams for his life with Mary, but those had to die for God’s greater plan. Even when the angel revealed the situation to Joseph, he still had to decide what to do – in God’s larger plan and for God’s larger plan. He had to “choose in full freedom to take responsibility for one’s life as it comes.” Saint Joseph, with “his eyes open” – with all the risks before him – still chose Mary, because he loved her. Do we love our parishioners with a spousal love? With our “eyes wide open” as priests, trusting in Divine Providence, do we act for their good and God’s plan or for our own interests?

The Priest: A Man of Silence and Prayer. In his Wednesday audience, ten days before Christmas, Pope Francis spoke of the silence of Joseph:

"With his silence, Joseph confirms what Saint Augustine writes: "To the extent that the Word — the Word made man — grows in us, words diminish". To the extent that Jesus, — the spiritual life — grows, words diminish. ... John the Baptist himself, who is "the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord'" (Mt 3:3), says in relation to the Word, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn 3:30). This means that he must speak and I must be silent, and with his silence, Joseph invites us to leave room for the Presence of the Word made flesh, for Jesus." (POPE FRANCIS, GENERAL AUDIENCE, 15 DECEMBER 2021)

Silence is not inactivity; it is not mutism. Rather, silence demands listening – to God, to the spirit, to those around us, to our conscience. A synodal church is a listening church, and we need to develop this habit. Listening, in silence, also helps us as priests to develop the virtue of humility, which is absolutely necessary for us to be men of genuine service to God's plan of salvation. Silence can be "industrious", that is, it can bring about great interiority, which allows us to recognize the Voice of Christ the Good Shepherd.

Saint Joseph is the patron saint of workers; however, his silence reminds us of the need to nourish the contemplative dimension of our vocations. Silence can be frightening, because in the silence, we discover those areas of our spiritual life that need conversion. Often, our avoidance of silence leads us to seek diversions – television, YouTube videos, Netflix, and the like – distractions from our vocations. Or further, instead of keeping silent or showing restraint in speech, we avoid keeping our mouths shut and use our tongues for gossip or to speak ill of others.

The Holy Father invites us to be men of prayer and to "to cultivate silence: that space of interiority in our days in which we give the Spirit the opportunity to regenerate us, to console us, to correct us."

The Priest as a Man of Courage. Just before the turn of the year, the Holy Father, commenting on the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt, saw Saint Joseph as a persecuted and courageous migrant. He drew a contrast between King Herod and Saint Joseph. Herod was ferocious and wanted "to defend his power, his own skin, with ruthless cruelty, as attested to by the execution of one of his wives, some of his children and hundreds of opponents. He was a cruel man: to solve problems, he had just one answer: to kill. He is the symbol of many tyrants of yesteryear and of today." (POPE FRANCIS, GENERAL AUDIENCE, 29 DECEMBER 2021)

In contrast, Saint Joseph, instead of eliminating all his difficulties faced them with courage: in taking Mary as his wife; in obeying the angel's command to flee to Egypt; in returning to his homeland and settling in Nazareth, even when he was afraid. Saint Joseph understand that we cannot eliminate or flee from every problem, but we must confront them with the fortitude that comes from God.

As priests, like other humans, we at times can be tyrannical, forgetting our call to service and seeing the priesthood as an exercise of power. We risk becoming little princes in our little fiefdoms. On the other hand, at times, we must take difficult decisions and be strong, standing for what is right. We need to ask God for His help that we might be courageous more consistently.

The Holy Father says:

"In reality, the daily life of every person — yours, mine, everyone's — requires courage. One cannot live without courage, the courage to face each day's difficulties. In all times and cultures, we find courageous men and women who, in order to be consistent with

their beliefs, overcame all kinds of difficulties, and endured injustice, condemnation and even death. Courage is synonymous with fortitude..." (IBID.)

Our people want courageous priests. They will not follow a coward, nor will they respect the authority of one who is not willing to risk something for them. In the face of fear, will we run or will we follow the example of Saint Joseph, who relied on Divine Providence?

I am not saying that we need to be reckless; recklessness is not courageousness. Sometimes, a priest shows his strength by not striking back, by not becoming enraged like Herod, but by being silent and obedient to God. It was like that with Joseph, and it was like that with Jesus, who showed His courage in His trial, His Passion, and in His death. There, He was strong enough to bear the sins of the whole world.

The Priest as a Responsible Father. In his first General Audience of 2022 (GENERAL AUDIENCE, 5 JANUARY 2022), Pope Francis created a bit of a stir, when commenting on Saint Joseph as the foster father of Jesus. The media focused on the Holy Father's remarks pertaining to people who, instead of having children, acquire pets, denying fatherhood or motherhood and losing the richness of fatherhood and motherhood.

The real purpose of the audience was to emphasize that Joseph accepted legal responsibility for Jesus. He gave Jesus the name suggested by the angel. Although he did not beget Jesus, he accepted him as his son. God gave Joseph an authority, in naming the Child, to be the Guardian of the Redeemer. We live in a society that either despises or does not support fatherhood. We also live in a society in which many men beget children but abandon them and their mothers.

At the beginning of these reflections, I mentioned that fatherhood begins when we accept responsibility for the life of another. It is useful to repeat the words of the Holy Father: "Fathers are born not made ... Whenever a man accepts responsibility for the life of another, in some way, he becomes a father to that person."

As priests, it is useful to reflect on whether we have properly accepted responsibility for those children whom we have generated through the waters of baptism. While the parents have the primary responsibility in raising the children, have we done our part or what God has called us to? Have we generated faith through our preaching and catechesis? Does our celebration of the liturgy help nourish the faith of the children entrusted to our care?

Forty days after the birth of Jesus, Joseph and Mary brought Christ to the Temple and placed him in the arms of Simeon. They remind us of the need to bring our spiritual children into the Presence of God, and they remind us of our own need to pray to God for our people, for our spiritual children. Undoubtedly, in his own way, Joseph must have prayed to God the Father for his adopted son and His mission.

Our acceptance of responsibility as spiritual fathers means being firm with our children at times and demands challenging them but without crushing them. Being a courageous and responsible father also means admitting mistakes and asking forgiveness when necessary. In commenting on "cats and dogs", the Holy Father was really pointing out the need to not abdicate our responsibility, because, and we see this in family life, when parents are present to their children, there is abundant fruit in the lives of their children. Are we present or absent spiritual fathers?

The Priest as a Working Father. In using the title of the priest as a “working father”, I am not referring to the worker priest movement; rather, I am referring to the image, put forth by Pope Francis, of Saint Joseph as a carpenter or craftsman, a *tekton* in Greek. He was a man who was unafraid to roll up his sleeves and to work with his hands. He was a man who worked hard to provide for his family, even if his earnings were meager, as witnessed by the offering of two turtledoves at the time of the Presentation of Jesus.

In his General Audience of January 12, the Pope invited us to reflect on people who work, many of whom are exploited. He also invited us to think of those who do not have work and cannot provide for their families. Young and single people should not be excluded from our thoughts. The daily discouragement and anxiety cause some to despair. These are our parishioners, who demand our prayers and support. They are not merely parishioners, but they are our brothers and sisters.

Do we “work” on their behalf – not merely for their material needs but also for their spiritual ones, leading them to salvation? The sacred liturgy is “work on behalf of others”. The reverence and eagerness to offer prayers and sacrifices for them and to pray the Liturgy of the Hours for them, even when out of the limelight, is part of our vocation as priests. Developing an entrepreneurial spirit to assist them, through ongoing formation and leadership training, is a means also of better equipping ourselves to work on their behalf.

I heard a story of one priest who would say Mass only occasionally and keep office hours from 9 am to 5 pm only, despite the fact that most of his people worked during the daytime. He would not even refer to his flock as parishioners but called them “clients.” The priesthood of Jesus Christ is not this type of profession. There are many famous images in windows and paintings of Jesus working beside Joseph in a workshop; Joseph is often cutting a piece of wood and Jesus is fashioning for Himself a little cross from two wooden planks. This is the type of work to which we are called. We must learn from both of them to do the work of carrying our cross.

Here in Alaska, I imagine that you cannot afford to sit in an office all day and hire out every job. Manual labor is good for us, and spiritual work is good for us too. No one will follow a priest who is perceived as lazy. But why? The Holy Father reminds us:

“Work is an essential component of human life, and even a path of holiness. Work is not only a means of earning a living: it is also a place where we express ourselves, feel useful, and learn the great lesson of concreteness ... It is good to think about the fact that Jesus himself worked and had learned this craft from Saint Joseph. Today, we should ask ourselves what we can do to recover the value of work; and what contribution we can make, as a Church, [to ensure] that work can be redeemed from the logic of mere profit and can be experienced as a fundamental right and duty of the person, which expresses and increases his or her dignity.” (POPE FRANCIS, GENERAL AUDIENCE, 12 JANUARY 2022)

The Priest as a Tender Father. A few years ago, I visited Sacred Heart Seminary in Hales Corners, Wisconsin. There, I met a lay professor who speaking to me about trying to form priests to be gentlemen, but it made me think, “Why couldn’t we form gentle priests?”

The Holy Father proposes Saint Joseph as a model of tenderness. Occasionally, we think of tenderness as weakness, as something not masculine or even effeminate. Pope Francis noted:

"Although the Gospels do not give us any details about how he exercised his paternity, we can be sure that his being a "just" man was also reflected in the education he gave Jesus. Joseph saw Jesus grow daily 'in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor'" (Lk 2:52): so the Gospel says. "As the Lord had done with Israel, so Joseph did with Jesus: he taught him to walk, taking him by the hand; he was for him like a father who raises an infant to his cheeks, bending down to him and feeding him (cf. Hos 11:3-4)" (*Patris Corde*, 2). This definition in the Bible which shows God's relationship with the people of Israel is beautiful. And we think that there was this same relationship between Saint Joseph and Jesus." (GENERAL AUDIENCE, 19 JANUARY 2022)

The Holy Father, reflecting on the image of the Merciful Father in the story of the Prodigal Son, added that "it is beautiful to think that the first person to transmit this reality to Jesus was Joseph himself."

What type of image of God do we transmit to our people through the exercise of our priestly ministry? Are we tender merciful fathers? Fathers who don't want to be bothered? Stern and severe fathers?

Tenderness is not weakness. It is the experience of feeling loved and welcomed in our poverty and misery, which becomes an avenue for transformation by the power of God's love. When has a priest or bishop or even your own father shown you authentic tenderness? What is that you appreciated about those privileged moments?

The Holy Father invites us "to mirror ourselves in Joseph's fatherhood, which is a mirror of God's fatherhood, and to ask ourselves whether we allow the Lord to love us with his tenderness, transforming each one of us into men ... capable of loving in this way." (IBID.)

Tenderness is not weakness. We all have weaknesses. Tenderness develops within us when we acknowledge that the Lord helps us to walk, to carry on with our weaknesses. Perhaps, this is the tenderness that our parishioners seek from us – spiritual fathers who are willing to accompany them in their weakness to be embraced by the Father of Mercies.

In our priestly ministry, we should especially show forth this tenderness when celebrating the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. Saint Alphonsus Liguori proposed four models of the priest as confessor: Father, Physician, Teacher and Judge. Although the Council of Trent had proposed the priest to be like a judge – and, the priest has to make judgments about contrition, whether to impart absolution, and what penance to impose – Alphonsus listed this aspect of the confessor last.

The priest must teach, but the chief purpose of the sacrament was not to give lessons, even if at times the formation of conscience occurred during the sacrament. The purpose was reconciliation with God by the Church through the forgiveness of sins, that is, through an experience of mercy.

The priest was to be like a physician. Physicians need to listen to their patients' history. They need to make a diagnosis and offer a suitable remedy for the patient to get well. In places of pain, the doctor needs to not push too hard so as to aggravate a wound. A doctor must demonstrate wisdom and prudence in offering remedies, recognizing possible "side effects" of some remedies. The physician seeks the best outcome for the patient, and the bedside manner is critical to building trust and hope for improvement among the patient. We see the similarities here to the role of the confessor, who must make a spiritual

diagnosis, listen carefully to the sinner, and with prudence and tenderness, offer a suitable remedy leading to conversion.

But the image that Alphonsus placed first was that of the priest as *father*, offering the image of the story of the Prodigal Son. Alphonsus presents the priest as *father*. Alphonsus' experience hearing confessions as a young priest led him to move away from the rigorism he had learned from earlier manuals of moral theology to a more moderate and compassionate stance. He writes that to be a credible father, the priest must strive to show charity, must be a person of prayer and virtue, and must be patient. These are the characteristics of a good father.

The priest is a father who welcomes the repentant son in as in the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). The confessor, as father, should not immediately send the unprepared penitent away or try to frighten him; rather, he must encourage him through his words to true sorrow and repentance. Just as parents must listen to their children, so also the priest-father should listen to the penitent. Too often confessors want to talk but do not listen. Listening helps to discern the work of the Spirit and helps the penitent to discern it too. To listen is a gesture of poverty; it is to look at the issue from the point of view of the "other" and is the first salvo in the "revolution of tenderness."

The Priest as a Father who Dreams. In his penultimate audience on Saint Joseph, Pope Francis explored the four dreams of Joseph, returning to the themes of the need to discern – to distinguish God's voice from other voices – and the need for silence to hear that voice. The Holy Father really sees the "dreams" of Joseph as teaching us something about prayer. The priest must be a man of prayer, who as the spiritual father of his family leads the community in prayer.

In the first dream, the angel informs Joseph of how Mary conceived, and Joseph responded promptly to the angel's command in the midst of a difficult and confusing situation. The Holy Father says, "Praying in these moments – this means letting the Lord show us the right thing to do." (POPE FRANCIS, GENERAL AUDIENCE, 26 JANUARY 2022)

In the second dream, Joseph is informed that the Child is in danger and so obedient to the command to go to Egypt, he promptly does what is necessary to protect Jesus and Mary. Here the Pope says that "praying means listening to the voice that can give us the same courage as Joseph to face difficulties without succumbing."

The third and fourth dreams are connected, because they deal with the return from Egypt and Joseph's fear of Archelaus' reign in Judea, leading him to settle in Nazareth. Acknowledging that fear is a part of life, the Pope reminds us that even our fear is in need of prayer; thus, with God's help, fear does not become the criterion of our judgments. It is prayer, the guidance of God, instead which brings light to situations of darkness.

A priest must be a man who dreams – that is, who prays. Prayer is understood as being led by God who reveals the way to us; as listening to find the courage to act rightly; and as a purifying force that helps overcome fear. Additionally, the Pope points out that "Prayer is inextricably linked to charity. Only when we combine prayer with love for children ... or love for our neighbor can we understand the Lord's messages. Joseph prayed, worked and loved..." (IBID.)

This is an invitation for us as priests to "dream" about how we might serve our people – to dream is to pray for them, to work for them, and to, above all, love them. There is a temptation to reduce the

priesthood to a series of tasks or functions, but at the heart of our vocation must be prayer – the personal encounter with God that allows us to dream – to have true vision of what things might be like in friendship with Him.

Conclusion. The Priest as a Man of Holiness. I began these reflections with Pope Francis' final audience on Saint Joseph (2 FEBRUARY 2022), which placed the Universal Patron of the Church, within the context of the communion of saints, which the Pope describes as "the community of *saved sinners*." Saint Joseph was the imperfect member of the Holy Family. He was a good man, a just man, a faithful spouse, a hard worker, and a man of prayer.

To be a priest – to be a man like Saint Joseph – is to recognize one's weaknesses and to continue to strive for holiness. It is to have true devotion, which is "actually a way of expressing love from the very bond that unites us."

God has called you, as he called Saint Joseph, and entrusted you with the "most precious things he has." He asks that you share the gifts of Jesus, especially in the Holy Eucharist, with your people, and that you foster true love for the Mother of God. He calls you to holiness. It is one thing to be efficient or to be a good administrator; it is another thing to be a spiritual master and true father to your people. Your people want something more than efficiency – they want closeness. They want to know that the thrice-holy God is near to them through you.

At the end of these reflections, let me thank you for your vocations. May St. Joseph be your guide and may you never lose your place in the Sacred Heart of Jesus.