



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

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[Multimedia]

Catechesis on Saint Joseph - 3. *Saint Joseph, man of silence*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Let us continue our journey of reflection on Saint Joseph. After illustrating the environment in which he lived, his role in salvation history and his being just and the spouse of Mary, today I would like to consider another important personal aspect: silence. Very often nowadays we need silence. Silence is important. I am struck by a verse from the Book of Wisdom that was read with Christmas in mind, which says: “While gentle silence enveloped all things, your all-powerful word leaped from heaven”. [In] the moment of greatest silence, God manifested himself. It is important to think about silence in this age in which it does not seem to have much value.

The Gospels do not contain a single word uttered by Joseph of Nazareth: nothing, he never spoke. This does not mean that he was taciturn, no: there is a deeper reason. With his silence, Joseph confirms what Saint Augustine writes: “To the extent that the *Word* — the Word made man — *grows in us, words diminish*”. [1] To the extent that Jesus, — the spiritual life — grows, words diminish. What we can describe as “parroting”, speaking like parrots, continually, diminishes a little. 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.

Joseph's silence is not mutism; it is a silence full of *listening*, an *industrious* silence, a silence that brings out his great interiority. "The Father spoke a word, and it was his Son", comments Saint John of the Cross, — "and it always speaks in eternal silence, and in silence it must be heard by the soul". [2]

Jesus was raised in this "school", in the house of Nazareth, with the daily example of Mary and Joseph. And it is not surprising that he himself sought spaces of silence in his days (cf. *Mt* 14:23) and invited his disciples to have such an experience by example: "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while" (*Mk* 6:31).

How good it would be if each one of us, following the example of Saint Joseph, were able to recover this *contemplative dimension of life, opened wide in silence*. But we all know from experience that it is not easy: silence frightens us a little, because it asks us to delve into ourselves and to confront the part of us that is most true. And many people are afraid of silence, they have to speak, and speak, and speak, or listen to radio or television... but they cannot accept silence because they are afraid. The philosopher Pascal observed that "all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber". [3]

Dear brothers and sisters, let us learn from Saint Joseph how to cultivate spaces for silence in which another Word can emerge, that is, Jesus, the Word: that of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, and that Jesus brings. It is not easy to recognise this Voice, which is very often confused along with the thousand voices of worries, temptations, desires, and hopes that dwell within us; but without this training that comes precisely from the practice of silence, our tongue can also ail. Without practising silence, our tongue can also ail. Instead of making the truth shine, it can become a dangerous weapon. Indeed, our words can become flattery, vainglory, lies, backbiting and slander. It is an established fact that, as the Book of Sirach reminds us, "many have fallen by the edge of the sword, but not so many as have fallen because of the tongue" (28:18). Jesus said this clearly: whoever speaks ill of his brother or sister, whoever slanders his neighbour, is a murderer (cf. *Mt* 5:21-22). Killing with the tongue. We do not believe this, but it is the truth. Let us think a little about the times we have killed with the tongue: we would be ashamed! But it will do us good, a great deal of good.

Biblical wisdom affirms that "death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits" (*Pr* 18:21). And the Apostle James, in his Letter, develops this ancient theme of the power, positive and negative, of the word with striking examples, and he says: "If any one makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also... So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things... With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing" (3:2-10).

This is why we must learn from Joseph 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. I am not saying to fall into muteness, no, but to cultivate silence. May each one look within themselves: often we work on something and when we finish, we immediately look for our telephone to do something else... we are always like this. And this does not help, this makes us slip into superficiality. Profoundness of the heart grows with silence, silence that is not mutism as I said, but which leaves space for wisdom, reflection and the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we are afraid of moments of silence, but we should not be afraid. Silence will do us so much good. And the benefit to our hearts will also heal our tongue, our words and above all our choices. In fact, Joseph *combined silence with action*. He did not speak, but he acted, and thus showed us what Jesus once told his disciples: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Mt 7:21). Fruitful words when we speak, and remembering that song: "Parole, parole, parole...", (words, words, words), and nothing of substance. Silence, speaking in the right way, and at times biting your tongue a little, which is good for you instead of saying foolish things.

Let us conclude with a prayer:

Saint Joseph, man of silence,
 you who in the Gospel did not utter a single word,
 teach us to fast from vain words,
 to rediscover the value of words that edify, encourage, console and support.
 Be close to those who suffer from words that hurt,
 like slander and backbiting,
 and help us always to match words with deeds. Amen.

[1] Sermon 288, 5: PL 38, 1307.

[2] Dichos de luz y amor, BAC, Madrid, 417, n. 99.

[3] Pensées, 139.

APPEAL

In the past few hours there has been a devastating explosion in Cap-Haïtien, northern Haiti, in which many people, including many children, have lost their lives. Poor Haiti, one thing after another; they are a people who suffer. Let us pray, let us pray for Haiti, they are good people, religious people, but they are suffering so much. I am close to the inhabitants of that city and the

families of the victims, as well as the injured. I invite you to join me in praying for these brothers and sisters of ours, who are so sorely tried.

Special Greetings

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially the groups from Nigeria and the United States of America. I pray that each of you, and your families, may experience these final days of Advent as a fruitful preparation for the coming of the newborn Saviour of the world. May God bless you!

Lastly, my thoughts turn especially to *the elderly*, to *the sick*, to *young people* and to *newlyweds*. Dear elderly and sick people, thank you for your example. I pray that you may carry your cross with the meek and docile patience of Saint Joseph. Dear young people, I invite you to look to Saint Joseph as a guide for the dreams of your youth, the guardian of dreams. Dear spouses, may you find the virtues and serenity for your life journey, in the Holy Family of Nazareth. I offer my blessing to all of you.

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters: In our continuing catechesis on Saint Joseph, we now consider Joseph as a “man of silence”. The Gospels report none of his spoken words, yet they present Joseph as a model of attentive hearing of God’s word and acting upon it. Indeed, Joseph’s silence was the sign of a contemplative heart, confirming Saint Augustine’s observation that, “when the word of God increases, human words fail” (*Sermon* 288: 5). Joseph’s quiet humility teaches us to make room in our hearts for Christ, and thus to discern the Father’s will for our lives. Jesus learned the importance of silence from the example of Joseph and Mary, and in turn taught his disciples to cultivate it. We too are called to exercise interior silence and attentive listening to God’s word, lest our daily worries, temptations and fears lead our spoken words astray and cause hurt to others. Though not easy, fostering contemplative silence is a sure path to authentic self-knowledge and spiritual growth. May we learn from Saint Joseph’s example of silence to let the Lord fill our hearts and guide our words in the service of his truth and in charity towards all our brothers and sisters.
