



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 29 December 2021

[Multimedia]

Catechesis on Saint Joseph - 5. *Saint Joseph, persecuted and courageous migrant*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today I would like to present Saint Joseph to you as a *persecuted and courageous migrant*. This is how the Evangelist Matthew describes him. This particular event in the life of Jesus, which also involves Joseph and Mary as protagonists, is traditionally known as “the flight into Egypt” (cf. *Mt* 2:13-23). The family of Nazareth suffered such humiliation and experienced first-hand the precariousness, fear and pain of having to leave their homeland. Still today many of our brothers and sisters are forced to experience the same injustice and suffering. The cause is almost always the arrogance and violence of the powerful. This was also the case for Jesus.

King Herod learns from the Magi of the birth of the “King of the Jews”, and the news shocks him. He feels insecure, he feels that his power is threatened. So he gathers together all the leaders of Jerusalem to find out the place of His birth, and begs the Magi to inform him of the precise details, so that — he says falsely — he too can go and worship him. But when he realizes that the Magi had set out in another direction, he conceives a wicked plan: to kill all the children in Bethlehem under the age of two, which according to the calculations of the Magi, was the period of time in which Jesus was born.

In the meantime, an angel orders Joseph: “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt,

and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him” (*Mt 2:13*). Let us think today of the many people who feel this impulse within: “Let’s flee, let’s flee, because there is danger here”. Herod’s plan calls to mind that of the Pharaoh: to throw all the male children of the people of Israel into the Nile (cf. *Ex 1:22*). The flight into Egypt evokes the whole history of Israel beginning with Abraham, who also sojourned there (cf. *Gen 12:10*); to Joseph, son of Jacob, sold by his brothers (cf. *Gen 37:36*) before becoming “ruler of the land” (cf. *Gen 41:37-57*); and to Moses, who freed his people from the slavery of the Egyptians (cf. *Ex 1:18*).

The Holy Family’s flight into Egypt saves Jesus, but unfortunately it does not prevent Herod from carrying out his massacre. We are thus faced with two opposing personalities: on the one hand, Herod with his ferocity, and on the other hand, Joseph with his care and courage. Herod wants 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. And for them, for these tyrants, people do not count; power is what counts, and if they need space for power, they do away with people. And this happens today too: we do not need to look at ancient history, it happens *today*. It is man who becomes “wolf” to other men. History is full of figures who, living at the mercy of their fears, try to conquer them by exercising power despotically and carrying out inhuman acts of violence. But we must not think that we live according to Herod’s outlook only if we become tyrants, no! In fact, it is an attitude to which we can all fall prey, every time we try to dispel our fears with arrogance, even if only verbal, or made up of small abuses intended to mortify those close to us. We too have in our heart the possibility of becoming little Herods.

Joseph is the opposite of Herod: first of all, he is “a just man” (*Mt 1:19*), whereas Herod is a dictator. Furthermore, he proves he is courageous in following the Angel’s command. One can imagine the plight he had to face during the long and dangerous journey and the difficulties involved in staying in a foreign country, with another language: many difficulties. His courage emerges also at the moment of his return, when, reassured by the Angel, he overcomes his understandable fears and settles with Mary and Jesus in Nazareth (cf. *Mt 2:19-23*). Herod and Joseph are two opposing characters, reflecting the two ever-present faces of humanity. It is a common misconception to consider courage as the exclusive virtue of the hero. 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, which together with justice, prudence and temperance is part of the group of human virtues known as “cardinal virtues”.

The lesson Joseph leaves us with today is this: life always holds adversities in store for us, this is true, and faced with them, we may also feel threatened and afraid. But it is not by bringing out the worst in ourselves, as Herod does, that we can overcome certain moments, but rather by acting

like Joseph, who reacts to fear with the courage to trust in God's Providence. Today I think we need a prayer for all migrants, all the persecuted and all those who are victims of adverse circumstances: be they political, historical or personal circumstances. But, let us think of the many people who are victims of wars, who want to flee from their homeland but cannot; let us think of the migrants who set out on that road to be free, so many of whom end up on the street or in the sea; let us think of Jesus in the arms of Joseph and Mary, fleeing, and let us see in him each one of the migrants of today. Migration today is a reality to which we cannot close our eyes. It is a social scandal of humanity.

Saint Joseph,
 you who experienced the suffering of those who must flee
 you who were forced to flee
 to save the lives of those dearest to you,
 protect all those who flee because of war, hatred, hunger.
 Support them in their difficulties,
 Strengthen them in hope, and let them find welcome and solidarity.
 Guide their steps and open the hearts of those who can help them. Amen.

Special Greetings

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors. In the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, may each of you, and your families, cherish the joy of this Christmas season, and so draw near in prayer to the Saviour who has come to dwell among us. May God bless you!

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts turn to *the elderly*, to *the sick*, to *young people* and to *newlyweds*. May you know how to be strong in your faith, looking to the Divine Baby who, in the mystery of Christmas, offers himself as a gift for all humanity.

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters: In our continuing catechesis on Saint Joseph, we now consider Joseph's courage in the face of persecution. Like many of our brothers and sisters facing injustice or violence today, Joseph and Mary were forced to migrate from their homeland, in order to flee the wrath of King Herod. Deceived by the Magi as to the precise location of Christ's birth, Herod sought to kill all the male children in Bethlehem of two years or younger. In response to the message of an angel, Joseph courageously took the Holy Family on the perilous journey to Egypt. On their return to the land of Israel, Joseph led them to Galilee to set up home in Nazareth, safe

from the threat of Herod's successor. While Herod embodies cruelty, arrogance and aggression, Joseph, by contrast, shows us how to respond to our own challenges and difficulties with virtuous love, courageously trusting in God's providence. As we recall the fortitude and love shown by Joseph in the flight into Egypt, let us pray for all those who, like the Holy Family, find themselves forced to flee their homelands, that they will be blessed with the courage of Saint Joseph.