

On 8 December 1870, Blessed [Pius IX](#) proclaimed Saint Joseph Patron of the Universal Church. One hundred and fifty years on from that event, we are living a special year dedicated to Saint Joseph, and in the Apostolic Letter [Patris corde](#), I gathered together some reflections on him. Never like before, today, in this time marked by a global crisis made up of several components, can he offer us support, consolation and guidance. Therefore, I have decided to dedicate a cycle of catecheses to him, which I hope may further help us to let ourselves be enlightened by his example and by his witness. For a few weeks we will talk about Joseph.

There are more than ten people in the Bible who bear the name Joseph. The most important among them is the son of Jacob and Rachel who, through various vicissitudes, went from being a slave to becoming the second most important person in Egypt after the Pharaoh (cf. *Gen* 37-50). The name Joseph is Hebrew for “may God increase, may God give growth”. It is a wish, a blessing based on trust in providence and referring especially to fertility and to raising children. Indeed, this very name reveals to us an essential aspect of Joseph of Nazareth’s personality. He is a man full of faith, in providence: he believes in God’s providence, he has faith in God’s providence. His every action, as recounted in the Gospel, is dictated by the certainty that God “gives growth”, that God “increases”, that God “adds”: that is, that God provides for the continuation of his plan of salvation. And in this, Joseph of Nazareth is very similar to Joseph of Egypt.

The first geographical reference to Joseph, Bethlehem and Nazareth, also assume an important role in our understanding of him.

In the Old Testament, the city of Bethlehem is called *Beth Lechem*, that is, “House of bread”, or also Ephrathah, after the tribe that settled there. In Arabic, however, the name means “House of meat”, probably because of the large number of flocks of sheep and goats in the area. Indeed, it is not by chance that when Jesus was born, the shepherds were the first to witness the event (cf. *Lk* 2:8-20). In the light of the story of Jesus, these allusions to bread and meat refer to the mystery of the Eucharist: Jesus is the living bread descended from heaven (cf. *Jn* 6:51). He will say of himself: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life” (*Jn* 6:54).

Bethlehem is mentioned several times in the Bible, as far back as the Book of Genesis. Bethlehem is also linked to the story of Ruth and Naomi, told in the short but wonderful Book of Ruth. Ruth bears a son named Obed, to whom in turn Jesse is born, the father of King David. And it was from the line of David that Joseph, the legal father of Jesus, descended. Then the prophet Micah foretold great things about Bethlehem: “You, Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are so little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel” (*Mi* 5:1). The evangelist Matthew would take up this prophecy and connect it to the story of Jesus as its evident fulfilment.

In fact, the Son of God did not choose Jerusalem as the place of his incarnation, but Bethlehem and Nazareth, two outlying villages, far from the clamour of the news and the powers of the time. Yet Jerusalem was the city loved by the Lord (cf. *Is* 62:1-12), the “holy city” (*Dn* 3:28), chosen by God as his dwelling (cf. *Zech* 3:2; *Ps* 132:13). Here, in fact, dwelt

the teachers of the Law, the scribes and Pharisees, the chief priests and the elders of the people (cf. *Lk 2:46; Mt 15:1; Mk 3:22; Jn 1:19; Mt 26:3*).

This is why the choice of Bethlehem and Nazareth tells us that the periphery and marginality are preferred by God. Jesus was not born in Jerusalem, with all the court... no, he was born in a periphery and spent his life, until the age of thirty, in that periphery, working as a carpenter like Joseph. For Jesus, the peripheries and marginality were favoured. To fail to take this fact seriously is equivalent to not take seriously the Gospel and the work of God, who continues to manifest himself in the geographical and existential peripheries.

The Lord always acts in secret in the peripheries, even in our souls, in the peripheries of the soul, of feelings, perhaps feelings of which we are ashamed; but the Lord is there to help us move forward. The Lord continues to manifest himself in the peripheries, both geographical and existential. In particular, Jesus goes in search of sinners; he goes into their homes, speaks with them, calls them to conversion. And he is also rebuked for this: "But look, this Master", say the doctors of the law, "Look at this Master: he eats with sinners, he gets dirty". He goes in search also of those who have done no evil but have suffered it: the sick, the hungry, the poor, the least. Jesus always goes out to the peripheries of our heart, the peripheries of our soul, this is, that slightly obscure part that we do not show, perhaps out of shame.

In this respect, the society of that time is not very different from ours. Today, too, there is a centre and a periphery. And the Church knows that she is called to proclaim the good news from the periphery. Joseph, who is a carpenter from Nazareth and who trusts in God's plan for his young fiancée and for himself, reminds the Church to keep her eyes on what the world deliberately ignores.

Today Joseph teaches us this: "Do not look so much at the things that the world praises, look into the corners, look in the shadows, look at the peripheries, at what the world does not want". He reminds each of us to consider important what others discard. In this sense he is truly a master of the essential: he reminds us that what truly matters does not attract our attention, but requires patient discernment to be discovered and appreciated. To discover what matters. Let us ask him to intercede so that the whole Church may recover this insight, this ability to discern, this capacity to evaluate what is essential. Let us start again from Bethlehem, let us start again from Nazareth.

Today I would like to send a message to all the men and women who live in the most forgotten geographical peripheries of the world, or who experience situations of existential marginalisation. May you find in Saint Joseph the witness and protector to look to. We can turn to him with this prayer, a "home-made" prayer, but one that comes from the heart:

Saint Joseph,
you who have always trusted God,
and have made your choices
guided by his providence
teach us not to count so much on our own plans
but on his plan of love.

You who come from the peripheries
help us to convert our gaze
and to prefer what the world discards and marginalises.
Comfort those who feel alone
and support those who work silently
to defend life and human dignity. Amen.