

## **ST. AUGUSTINE ON ST. JOSEPH, THE FOSTER FATHER OF JESUS CHRIST**

Fatherhood is a great responsibility because the father has to promote his children in all ways possible. He has to look after their spiritual, physical, emotional, social, intellectual, material, and psychological well-being. After engendering the child many duties follow. It's really a gargantuan task that no one in his right mind will want to undertake. There has to be such a great force that leads a man to fatherhood and it can only start with the vocation to love. God created man out of love and calls him to love which is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being (CCC 1603).

In marriage man and woman are called to mutual love which becomes the image of God's absolute and unconditional love for humanity (CCC 1603). Marriage is the union of two lives. And this union can suffer the threats of discord, lust to dominate, infidelity, jealousy, and conflicts that can even lead to hatred and division (CCC 1606).

In talking about St. Joseph as the foster father of Jesus we have to remember that he was married to Mary. He was husband to Mary. But there is something special about their relationship and that is where St. Augustine comes in. For St. Augustine, Joseph is a real father to Jesus because he exercised a fatherhood toward Jesus that was authoritative, affectionate, and faithful.

In Sermon 51, 30, Joseph is the father of Jesus not by the work of the flesh but by the work of love. Most important in being a father is love. Maybe that's why there are sons who recognize their real father not as the biological one but the loving one who may be an uncle or someone else with whom they experienced affection and discipline.

Joseph became the father of Jesus without carnal union, but Joseph is still in the genealogy of Jesus because "his greater purity reaffirms his paternity". St. Joseph's fatherhood is not only about biology but about purity. Maybe it can be also a purity of intention to be a father. When Joseph heard for the first time that Mary was pregnant he reacted just as any man acts. He was preoccupied and sought to dismiss her privately. But when in a dream the angel explained to Joseph that the baby in Mary's womb was conceived of the Holy Spirit, Joseph had the purest intention to still take Mary as his wife and Jesus as his son.

Joseph is a chaste husband and a chaste father. The action of the Holy Spirit, according to St. Augustine, fell on Joseph and Mary for both of them were just. The Holy Spirit rested in the justice of both of them and gave them both the Son. Although it was Mary who had to give birth, the child belonged to them both. In fact, the angel ordered both of them to name the child and this showed that they had parental authority over Him.

For St. Augustine, if Joseph's fatherhood of Jesus is denied it would entail a reproach from Mary herself as seen in the way she placed her husband before herself when she found the lost Jesus in the temple. "Your father and I have sought you sorrowing" (Lk 2, 48).

This temple episode when Jesus was twelve years old was preached by Augustine in Sermon 51, 17, 19. The child Jesus separated Himself from his parents and was left behind in the temple, discussing with the elders who admired his words. As they returned home from Jerusalem, Joseph and Mary searched for Jesus in the caravan among their fellow travelers. They did not find Him

and became worried. They returned to Jerusalem finding their son with the elders. At this point St. Augustine explains a new dimension in the relationship of Jesus with his parents. They were not only parents of Jesus but parents of the Word of God that can never be silenced although not always listened to. When they found Jesus in the temple Mary said, "Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I were very worried while searching for you." Jesus answered her: "Why were you looking for me? Do you not know that I must be in my Father's house? But they did not understand this answer." Because they were now face to face with Jesus as the Son of God in the temple of God. *I must be in my Father's house.* What must Joseph have felt as Jesus is now admitting that Joseph is not his father; the temple is not Joseph's house? Humanly speaking this admission could be a great scandal. After worrying so much this is what Joseph and Mary get. It must have been terrible for them.

For St. Augustine, Joseph and Mary knew that Jesus was their son but they had to realize that Jesus was not **exclusively** their son. Their son was also the eternal Son of God and as such created his own parents. Jesus was their son in time and they were his parents in time.

Joseph and Mary experienced the greatness of their son in the temple amidst the doctors. Mary must have remembered what the angel told her before she conceived Jesus in her womb, "He will be great and shall rightly be called Son of the Most High" (Lk 1, 32). Mary was very humble, opines Augustine. She could have sought temple privileges seeing how her son was being admired by the doctors. She could have boasted that her son is the greatest. Still she placed herself after her husband and this is seen in her words, "Your father and I were very worried. And for St. Augustine, Jesus had never taught his mother to be boastful. Mary's "*your father and I*" expression indicates her great respect for the husband as the head of the wife (Eph. 5, 23).

For St. Augustine, Mary's example of humility, despite being the mother of the Son of God, is an example for women not to boast of their sons.

Furthermore Jesus words "I must be in my Father's house" does not exclude St. Joseph because Jesus still went down with them, returning to Nazareth, and he continued to be subject to them (Lk 2, 51). That **he was subject to them** is crucial for St. Augustine because it shows that both of them were Jesus' parents. Joseph was not more a parent, Mary was not more a parent for Jesus was subject not only to one of them but **to both of them**. He was subject to his parents. Both of them were his parents. Maybe this has implications for the equal role of the father and mother in raising a child. His being subject to them gives dignity to being a Son of man. Jesus as a son to Joseph is a relationship of submission and for St. Augustine this is a lesson for all children to obey their parents and be submissive to them. The world is submissive to Christ but Christ is submissive to his parents. This is the great lesson of the God who did not take equality with God.

Joseph as a father to Jesus and Jesus as a son to Joseph is for St. Augustine a lesson in the greatness of humility.

In the light of the above we can reflect on the relationship of fathers with their sons and daughters. Probably fathers have to realize that their children are their children but not exclusively. And this might be painful for some fathers to accept. Children are never exclusive property of their parents. Jesus could have chosen to remain in the temple and live a life of honor, comfort, and distinction.

Anyway, he had shown that he is not exclusively theirs. Still he went down to Nazareth to be submissive to Joseph and Mary.

Jesus must probably be showing us that no matter how much a child can achieve in his life he can still descend to his lowly Nazareth and not just remain in the glorious Jerusalem of his dreams and goals.

Even Pope Francis talks about careerism as the phenomenon when professed servants want to be promoted to ever higher positions in the Church hierarchy to enjoy more privileges unattainable to ordinary members.

Probably, St. Joseph can protect and foster us if like Jesus we are able to come down with him to the Nazareth of our life. If we prefer to remain in the temple with the doctors whom the world looks up as wise, what can St. Joseph do for us? He might say that we don't need his protection because the high walls can already assure our safety.

When we are lost in the ivory tower or temple St. Joseph and his wife Mary will be greatly worried. They will search for us. But they will be powerless regarding our destiny. We have to be like Jesus in choosing the lowly life of Nazareth and becoming humble to the carpenter and to the virgin. This is the heavenly life that we constantly fail to reach because we are too sophisticated, luxurious, and ambitious, willing to relate only with the wise doctors while avoiding the humble people of Nazareth.

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