

Saint Joseph, patron of the good death

9 February 2022

Pope Francis

9 February 2022

Catechesis on Saint Joseph: 11. Saint Joseph, patron of the good death

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In last week's catechesis, once again inspired by the figure of Saint Joseph, we reflected on the meaning of the communion of saints. And starting precisely from this, today I would like to explore the special devotion Christian people have always had for Saint Joseph as the patron of a happy death; a devotion that arose from the thought that Joseph had died, comforted by the presence of the Virgin Mary and of Jesus, before he left the house of Nazareth. There is no historical data, but since we no longer see Joseph in public life, it is believed that he died there in Nazareth, with his family. And Jesus and Mary accompanied him up to his death.

A century ago, Pope Benedict XV wrote: "through Joseph we go directly to Mary, and through Mary to the origin of all holiness, who is Jesus". Both Joseph and Mary help us to go to Jesus. And encouraging pious practices in honour of Saint Joseph, he recommended one in particular, and it went like this: "Since he is deservedly considered to be the most effective protector of the dying, having expired in the presence of Jesus and Mary, it will be the concern of the sacred Pastors to inculcate and encourage [...] those pious associations that have been established to implore Joseph on behalf of the dying, such as those 'of the Good Death', of the 'Transit of Saint Joseph' and 'for the Dying'". (cf. *Motu proprio: Bonum Sane*, 25 July 1920): they were the associations of the time.

Dear brothers and sisters, perhaps some people think that this language and this theme are only a legacy of the past, but in reality, our relationship with death is never about the past — it is always present. Speaking about himself a few days ago, Pope Benedict said, that he "is before the dark door of death". It is good to thank Pope Benedict, who at 95, has the clarity [of mind] to tell us this. "I am before the obscurity of death, at the dark door of death". It is good advice that he has given us. The so-called "wellness" culture tries to remove the reality of death, but the coronavirus pandemic has brought it back into focus in a dramatic way. It was terrible: death was everywhere, and many brothers and sisters lost loved ones without being able to be near them, and this made death even harder to accept and process. A nurse told me that a grandmother with Covid was dying, and she said to her, "I would like to say goodbye to my family, before I leave". And the nurse bravely took out her mobile phone and put her in touch with them. The tenderness of that farewell...

Nevertheless, we try in every way to banish the thought of our finite existence, thus deluding ourselves that we can remove its power and dispel fear. But Christian faith is not a way of exorcising the fear of death; rather, it helps us to face it. Sooner or later, we will all pass through that door.

The true light that illuminates the mystery of death comes from the Resurrection of Christ. This is the light. And Saint Paul writes: "Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (1 Cor 15: 12-14). There is one certainty: Christ is resurrected, Christ is risen, Christ is alive among us. And this is the light that awaits us behind that dark door of death.

Dear brothers and sisters, it is only through faith in resurrection that we can face the abyss of death without being overwhelmed by fear. Not only that: we can restore a positive role to death. Indeed, thinking about death, enlightened by the mystery of Christ, helps us to look at all of life through fresh eyes. I have never seen a removals van behind a hearse! Behind a hearse: I have never seen one. We will go alone, with nothing in the pockets of our shroud: nothing. Because a shroud has no pockets. This solitude of death: it is true, I have never seen a hearse followed by a removals van. It makes no sense to accumulate, if one day we will die. What we must accumulate is charity and the ability to share, the ability not to remain indifferent when faced with the needs of others. Otherwise, what is the point of arguing with a brother or with a sister, with a friend, with a relative, or with a brother or sister in faith, if then one day we will die? What is the point in being angry, in getting angry with others? Before death, many issues are put into perspective. It is good to die reconciled, without grudges and without regrets! I would like to say one truth: we are all on our way towards that door, all of us.

The Gospel tells us that death comes like a thief. This is what Jesus tells us: it arrives like a thief, and however

much we try to keep its arrival under control, perhaps even planning our own death, it remains an event that we must reckon with, and before which we must also make choices.

Two considerations stand for us Christians. The first: we cannot avoid death, and precisely for this reason, after having done everything that is humanly possible to cure the sick, it is immoral to engage in overzealous treatment (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2278). That phrase of the faithful people of God, of the simple people: “Let him die in peace”, “help him to die in peace”: such wisdom! The second consideration instead concerns the quality of death itself, the quality of pain, of suffering. Indeed, we must be grateful for all the help that medicine is striving to give, so that through so-called “palliative care”, every person who is preparing to live the last stretch of their life can do so in the most humane way possible. However, we must be careful not to confuse this help with unacceptable drifts towards killing. We must accompany people towards death, but not provoke death or facilitate any form of suicide. Remember that the right to care and treatment for all must always be prioritised, so that the weakest, particularly the elderly and the sick, are never rejected. Life is a right, not death, which must be welcomed, not administered. And this ethical principle concerns everyone, not just Christians or believers.

I would like to underline a real social problem. That “planning” — I don’t know if it is the right word — but accelerating the death of the elderly. Very often we see in a certain social class that the elderly, since they do not have means, are given fewer medicines than they need, and this is inhuman; this is not helping them, it is driving them towards death earlier. This is neither human nor Christian. The elderly should be cared for as a treasure of humanity: they are our wisdom. Even if they do not speak, or if they do not make sense, they are still the symbol of human wisdom. They are those who went before us and have left us many beautiful things, many memories, much wisdom. Please, do not isolate the elderly, do not accelerate the death of the elderly. To caress an elderly person has the same hope as caressing a child, because the beginning of life and the end are always a mystery, a mystery that should be respected, accompanied, cared for, loved.

May Saint Joseph help us to live the mystery of death in the best possible way. For a Christian, a good death is an experience of the mercy of God, that comes close to us even in that last moment of our life. Even in the Hail Mary, we pray asking Our Lady to be close to us “at the hour of our death”. Precisely for this reason, I would like to conclude this catechesis by praying together to Our Lady for the dying, for those who are experiencing this moment of passage through this dark door, and for the relatives who are experiencing bereavement. Let us pray together:

Hail Mary...

Summary of the Holy Father’s words

Dear brothers and sisters: In our continuing catechesis on Saint Joseph, we now consider him as the patron of a happy death. This traditional devotion was born of the Church’s meditation on Joseph’s own death, comforted by the presence of the Blessed Mother and the Lord Jesus. Today we tend to avoid the thought of our own death, yet our faith in the Risen Jesus invites us not only to be unafraid of death, but to accept it with trust in Christ’s promises. In faith, we see death as a part of life and in turn see life itself in a different perspective. Since we will carry nothing with us to the grave, our concern should be to live lives of faith, hope and charity towards all. The Church has always shown particular concern for the dying, offering them accompaniment and care, respecting the sacredness of life, even in its final stages, and rejecting the ethically unacceptable practices of euthanasia or assisted suicide. Through the prayers of Saint Joseph and the Virgin Mary, may the hour of our own death be a blessed encounter with God’s infinite mercy. For that intention, and for all the dying and those who grieve the loss of their loved ones, we joined earlier in praying the “Hail Mary”.