

## **Heroic Obedience of St. Joseph reflected in St. Francis of Assisi (Fr. Manoj Xalxo, OFM)**

**Obedience in the Bible:** Obedience means a complete trust and surrender to God and His will. It is to hear His word and act upon it. When one goes against it, one commits sin. “I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn from the way that I am commanding you today, to follow other gods that you have not known” (Deut 11:26-28). Adam and Eve were called to be obedient to God, to enjoy God’s blessings and everything in the Garden of Eden, but instead, they chose to obey evil. Through their disobedience, sin and death came into the world. Likewise, Israel, as the chosen people of God, was called to obedience to the covenant God had established with them. “Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people. And walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you” (Jer 7:23). However, Israel failed to obey and keep the covenant. Thus, their disobedience led to slavery in Egypt. Moses, who delivered the people from slavery in Egypt and to whom God entrusted His laws and yet, he was not allowed to enter the promised land because of disobedience. “Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them” (Num 20:12). He wavered in his faith, and failed to trust God fully. On the other hand, the obedience of Jesus (New Adam and New Moses), even to the point of death on a cross, brought about the redemption and salvation of humanity. Jesus says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (Jn 14:15).

**Obedience of St. Joseph:** St. Joseph, a saint whose voice we never hear in scripture, a saint who heard an angel only in his dreams, is a saint of action who teaches a lot about obedience to God. The Gospels do not have any record of any word being spoken by him, but only tell of his acts. His obedience to God’s word was carried out through his actions. He acted with conviction and totally surrendered himself to God’s will. We learn from St. Joseph that we can trust, even when we are afraid. His dreams in scripture lead us to a greater appreciation of his perfect obedience to the will of God. In each of his dreams, he was directed to do something and, in each case, he did not move until he received a word from God. He did not act based on impulse or emotions but rather, waited patiently upon God.

**Obedience to be a husband and a father:** When Joseph found out about the pregnancy of Mary, he resolved to leave Mary quietly and not put her to public disgrace. A number of the early Church Fathers pointed out that Joseph did not decide to divorce Mary quietly because he suspected her of adultery or because he was perplexed by her sudden and humanly inexplicable pregnancy. Rather, knowing that Mary was pregnant “by the power of the Holy Spirit,” Joseph was convinced that he was unworthy to be so close to the work of God and decided in his humility to step aside. Pope John Paul II explained, “Even though he decided to draw back so as not to interfere in the plan of God which was coming to pass in Mary, Joseph obeyed the explicit command of the angel and took Mary into his house, while respecting the fact that she belonged exclusively to God” (Redemptoris Custos, 20). As he was grappling within himself about Mary’s

pregnancy, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:20-21). Joseph did not question nor ask for explanations but followed the word of the angel of God. No doubt his soul was distressed, not knowing entirely what was going on, but he did not act hastily and rashly. So “when Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son and he named him Jesus” (Mt 1:24-25). If he had exposed Mary in public, she could have been put to trial and possibly stoned to death. Joseph, being a just man, could never condone that. It is ultimately his humility and faith in God that gives him the wisdom to accept and follow the angel’s order. He obeyed the Lord and did not put Mary away when found with child as a virgin. He took her as his wife - what a man of integrity and character.

In a similar act of obedience, when St. Francis of Assisi heard the voice in a dream in Spoleto, “Francis, whom do you want to serve, the Master or the servant?” He answered “Master”. Francis did not ask for clarification but simply obeyed that voice and from that moment on, his conversion began. His life took on a new direction, guided by his constant wish to know that to which God was calling him. Prayer and silent contemplation in the Umbrian countryside led him to embrace lepers and outcasts as brothers and sisters, those whom in the past he had always found disgusting and repulsive. He did not entirely know what God was leading him to, nor what his obedience to God’s word will unveil. Later as we know, he totally embraced the poor Christ and made himself poor to serve the Master all his life.

**Obedience to protect the child:** Joseph was warned in a dream to flee to Egypt to save the life of the child (Mt 2:13-18). The Son of the Almighty God faces a death threat from Herod, a cruel and cowardly king. Imagine when Joseph received this message from the angel, what went through his mind? One would surely wonder as Joseph might have - What! The Son of God has to flee to save His life? Why can’t a powerful God save His own Son? Indeed, the Son of God was not spared of the pains of being human. Joseph, as a parent, must surely have had some of these worries and concerns racing through his mind - a journey of around 450 miles, through the wilderness, danger of bandits on the road, a strange and foreign land, a new language, finding work and not knowing how long they will have to sojourn there, etc. One cannot ignore the hardships that obedience brought to Joseph. But “Joseph set himself to protect with a mighty love and a daily solicitude his spouse and the Divine Infant; regularly by his work he earned what was necessary for the one and the other for nourishment and clothing; he guarded from death the Child threatened by a monarch’s jealousy and found for Him a refuge; in the miseries of the journey and in the bitterness of exile he was ever the companion, the assistance, and the upholder of the Virgin and Jesus” (Pope Leo XIII-*Quamquam Pluries*, 3). If he would have delayed and said, I need to organize everything needed for travel and settlement in Egypt and then make the journey, the results could have been very different. This was his total and complete act of faith and obedience to the will of God.

Likewise, St. Francis of Assisi, in his obedience to the Gospel of Christ, in the year 1219, in the midst of the Fifth Crusade, crossed enemy lines to gain an audience with the Sultan of Egypt, al-Malik al-Kamil. His desire was to speak peacefully with Muslim people about Christianity, even if it means dying as a martyr. After an initial attempt by Francis and the Sultan to convert the other, both quickly realized that the other already knew and loved God. We know the end result of that encounter; reconciliation and peace, a true friendship between a saint and a sultan, and a peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims was established. Francis made this journey into the unknown with total faith and trust in God, who called him to serve the Master. With faith as the shield and love as the sword, Francis pierced the heart of the Sultan. Francis had committed to serve the Master and he remained obedient to that 'yes' even when it led him to dangerous and unknown territory.

**Obedience to return to Israel:** While in Egypt, Joseph was told in a dream to return to Israel (Mt 2:19-21). The threat of life was over as Herod had died. But again, Joseph waited to be directed by God. He was not moved by favourable conditions but waited in dependence upon God. He was again warned in a dream about Archelaus' (son of Herod) reign over Judea, so he took the Holy Family to make a new home in Nazareth (Mt 2:22-23). A big responsibility for safeguarding, supporting, caring for the son of the Most High and Mother of God continued in normal and daily circumstances of life in Nazareth. This was not just prudence but his subjection to the Lord and obedience in faith. "Joseph found happiness not in mere self-sacrifice but in self-gift. In him, we never see frustration but only trust. His patient silence was the prelude to concrete expressions of trust. Every true vocation is born of the gift of oneself, which is the fruit of mature sacrifice" (Pope Francis-Patris Corde,7).

Later in his life, St. Francis of Assisi withdrew increasingly from external affairs of the Order. He was called to "great things - to renew", with a spirit of obedience, the Church, which at that time was dealing with divisions and heresies. Francis remained with the church and defended her teachings. Even in unfavorable conditions, Francis continued to live his vocation and was obedient to God who called him to "rebuild His Church."

**Obedience to its perfection till the end:** We are all born into this world with a specific purpose, a vocation from God that only we can do to the fullest. "Joseph fully accepted his vocation, to which he was faithful until death. His worldly mission was to be the head of the Holy Family" (Pope Pius IX). Obedience is an essential part of the Christian faith. And spirit of obedience is as important as the act of obedience; we obey because we love God. Disobedience is caused by rebellion and distrust of God. To be disobedient is to yield to self-will instead of surrendering to God and desiring His will in all things. Joseph was led by God at each step, moving in dependence and obedience. Joseph responded to God out of love by immediately doing what was asked of him. He fulfilled his life's mission, his vocation. Likewise, St. Francis of Assisi loved God and lived the life of obedience unto the Lord. Until his last breath he heard, trusted and surrendered to God's word and will, no wonder he is called the "Second Christ."