

JOSEPH IN THE LIFE OF JESUS



Juan Manuel García de Alba S. J.
Translated from the Spanish by William Quinn

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*For all those who would take inspiration
for their own fatherhood from Joseph,
who had such an impact on Jesus's life.*

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PRESENTATION

Joseph's influence on Jesus's life invites us to reflect on the value of human fatherhood, the culture of Jesus's times and the importance of both factors in his upbringing.

Without purporting to be an exegetical or biblical study, this book offers an introduction to certain aspects of the culture in which Jesus lived. On the basis of the Gospel text, the book teases out implications that are absolutely coherent with the culture of the times; in other parts it resorts to imagination to help us contemplate Joseph and Jesus without straying from what could have been historical reality.

Taking as his starting point the few Gospel passages that mention Joseph, Juan Manuel looks at Joseph's participation in one of the most precious relationships that occurs among human beings—fatherhood. He recounts how Joseph's fatherhood incrementally shaped Jesus; by developing aspects of his personality and highlighting the influence of Jewish and biblical culture, Juan Manuel provides the reader with the full context for understanding one of Jesus's core messages. For example, the Gospel never once mentions that Joseph played with Jesus, but it is entirely reasonable to assume that he did and to conclude that his interactions with Jesus had a decisive impact on the development of Jesus's awareness of his divine sonship. Jesus could not have regarded God as Father, "Abba," Daddy, if Joseph had not been an "attentive and gentle father to him."

It is an interesting reflection to consider that on the basis of his condition as Joseph's son, Jesus addresses God as his Father and then he tells his disciples to do the same, as a model of their relation with God; if there is one Father for all of us, then we are all brothers and sisters.

It can be argued that at a very deep level it is from his experience of his parents, his culture and circumstances, and above all of his own heart that Jesus extracts the Gospel. He allowed himself to be influenced by the people around him and his circumstances, and from there his message arose. Joseph in the Life of Jesus suggests that in the Gospel, people play a decisive role in Jesus's life and message. It would be fair to conclude that Jesus invites us to consider how he has let himself, and continues to let himself, be influenced by us.

This brief sketch of one anthropological aspect, Joseph's fatherhood in the life of Jesus, invites us to consider how decisive our existential ties to Jesus are-- the ties between his circumstances and ours, between his life experiences and ours.

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ITESO

JOSEPH IN THE LIFE OF JESUS

It is important to point out that reflecting deeply on the ordinary dimension of our own life can help us to understand and value Jesus's life, especially in terms of its human aspects, because our life lived deeply is an open window for knowing Jesus, Joseph and Mary.

This account could be regarded as apocryphal, an exercise in imagination because it lacks a direct historical basis. It does not, however, lack a human basis, because the biography of all humans, including that of Jesus in the Gospels, reflects these experiences.

Joseph, engaged to Mary

The first mention Matthew's Gospel makes of Joseph is that "*Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary; of her was born Jesus who is called Christ.*" The fact that Joseph was Mary's husband is a strictly historical fact, and he usually appears linked to Mary as a faithful husband—5 times as husband and twice as her betrothed. Mt 1, 16.

The name Joseph is quite common among the people of Israel. The first was the son of Jacob and Rachel. His story prefigures Jesus's. The name is Hebrew and signifies, by way of a verbal contraction, "*may God give you more children.*" Jesus had a brother – cousin—named Joseph. And in the Gospel other people appear with the same name, such as Joseph of Arimathea. Jn 4,5; Heb 11,21f. Gn 30,23f. Mt 13,55; Mk 6,3; 15,40.

St. Matthew tells us that Joseph was the son of Jacob, who was therefore Jesus's legal grandfather on his father's side, but Luke presents a different genealogy, stating that Jesus's grandfather was named Heli. Genealogies at the time were kept rigorously. In spite of the differences, which can be explained in a number of ways, the important thing is to recognize that Jesus was descended from David, because that was a key requirement for being the Messiah. Mt 1,16. Lk 3,23.

Some authors have tried to relate Jesus to the priestly caste of Levi on Mary's side, since she was cousin to Elizabeth, wife of Zechariah and descendant of Aaron. But the priestly office was handed down only through the father and Joseph belonged to the tribe of Judah. The Gospel-writers were much more interested in linking Jesus, as the Messiah, to David's lineage than to the priestly caste. Lk 1,5.

St. Matthew presents Joseph as having already been betrothed to Mary. A betrothal under Jewish law implied such a serious commitment that the betrothed man was already called husband and subject to almost all the responsibilities of a husband, above all to be faithful, and he could not free himself from these responsibilities except by an act of repudiation. But this right applied only to the man.

Mt 1, 19.
Mt 5, 31; Mk 10, 2.

In the Semitic customs of Jesus's times, the woman, upon leaving her father's home, became the husband's property. She depended on him in everything. And the husband's personality absorbed the wife's personality, so to speak. The woman was expected to see to all his needs, keep house, take care of the children when they were small, prepare the meals, make and clean the clothes. This was a huge workload that was seldom recognized. When the woman did all this, she was seen as simply having fulfilled her obligations as a good wife. The man was expected to respect his wife, but he had full rights over her.

In this way Joseph was "*the father of the family*" – paterfamilias – in which Jesus was born and brought up. But Joseph was a good and holy man who never abused his authority over Mary and Jesus. St. Matthew tells us that he was a righteous man.

Joseph, a young man

It was the custom among the people of Israel to marry at a young age. It was not a religious event as such, either in Israel or among the neighboring peoples; it was more of a private and social matter between two families. The father would choose a wife for his son, and pay a dowry for her. In times of war a man could abduct a woman or take her as plunder. But people also married for love, for example when the couple met while working in the fields. The Song of Songs tells the story of a couple who loved each other tenderly.

Gn 24,2f; Dt 7,3;
Jg 14,2f.
Jg 5,30.
Rt 2,7f.

The woman was chosen preferentially from the same lineage. In this way the property stayed within the tribe. In late Judaism, a girl was considered apt for marriage at the age of twelve and a boy at thirteen, but people did not usually marry until the man was eighteen. Before the marriage they were considered betrothed, which was a serious commitment and actually a type of marriage. Once the dowry was paid for the wife, she became the husband's property and belonged to him. The dowry was a form of compensation. This all began to apply when the woman moved into the husband's household –the wedding. From that point on it was the husband's duty to maintain her and protect her, signified by the husband covering her with his cloak.

For these reasons Joseph must have been a young man or a boy when he was betrothed to Mary. Imagining him as an old man or a widower goes against the Jewish customs of the time and would seem to be no more than a contrivance to defend Mary's virginity or to justify the mention of Jesus's brothers by making them half-brothers.

The purpose of marriage was primarily and almost exclusively procreation. Numerous children were a blessing from Yahweh, and the lack of children was seen as a punishment from God. But none of this ruled out sincere love.

Gn 1,28; 9,1; 24,60.
Tb 6,18.
Ps 127,3; Gn 30,1f.
Jr 18,21; Is 47,9.

Joseph, a righteous man

In the Hebrew family, it was the duty of the father or head of the family not only to preside over the family community but also to ensure strict compliance with all the religious norms. He was expected to start the Shema prayer and probably also pray some Psalms at both the beginning and the end of the day. He blessed God for the food prepared by the wife. Seeing Joseph give thanks to God and bless the food with such devotion made an impact on Jesus, and he followed this almost ritual custom to the end of his life; in a certain sense it prefigured the Eucharist.

Mt 14,19; Jn 6,11;
Lk 24,30.

The righteous man was a man who strove to fulfill every single religious obligation set forth in Jewish law and the customs surrounding worship. But it was also up to him to provide everything necessary for maintaining the household. In Jesus's times, the family environment was in essence a domestic temple and the father of the family served as its priest and catechist; the mother took on the role of sacristan and always occupied the last positions in the small assembly. She was not even allowed to lead the Shema prayer. It was in this context that Jesus was brought up in his early years.

Joseph, unsure about marriage

"Before they came to live together, Mary was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit." – The Holy Spirit was God's force and life that was communicated to human beings. It was not seen as the third person of the Holy Trinity, which is why it is not said that Jesus is the son of the Holy Spirit, but the Son of God through the Holy Spirit. *Her husband Joseph, being a man of honor and wanting to spare her the publicity, decided to divorce her informally.* Mary's pregnancy must have presented Joseph with a thorny problem. He might well have thought: How can this woman who seems so pure of heart, so holy and so good, be pregnant?! I have not lived with her. I am her legitimate husband.

Mt 1,18-19.

The situation is evident; it speaks for itself. I do not know how this could happen. Was she faithless to God and to me, her husband? Was she raped?

Joseph's righteousness consisted of observing the law that commands: *"But if the accusation that the girl cannot show the evidence of virginity is substantiated, they shall take her to the door of her father's house and her fellow citizens shall stone her to death for having committed an infamy in Israel by disgracing her father's house."* Dt 22,20.24.

These texts make us realize how serious this matter was, and how confused Joseph must have felt. On the one hand he felt obliged to obey the law, or at least repudiate Mary and not live with her; on the other hand, he loved her dearly and did not want to do anything to make her suffer.

Joseph was a righteous man, i.e., observant of the law, but he was also a very good man, incapable of harming his beloved Mary. Thus *"wanting to spare her publicity, he decided to divorce her informally."* Would that be the right solution, in God's eyes? In his heart he struggled between goodness and righteousness. And goodness won. This solution was not considered in the law.

His goodness was directly proportionate to his love. Imagine the days and nights he spent wrestling with this issue! It must have looked to him like the biggest fiasco of his life. He would rather have died than gone through this. In the midst of so much disappointment, confusion and sorrow, fatigue overcame him and he fell into a deep sleep.

God communicates with Joseph

In the Old Testament, the Angel of Yahweh is Yahweh himself who communicates by way of a visible personal sign, who was called *"the Angel of Yahweh"* and sent to perform a specific task. Angels were not so much "members of a celestial court," as they were idealized later, or soldiers in an army, but simply Yahweh's servants. Through angels Yahweh communicated with people. That is how they are identified in the New Testament. Matthew speaks in the singular: *"The Angel of the Lord."* Gn 16,7.9; 21,17; 22,15; 28,12; 31,11; 48,16; Ex 3,2; 14,19; 23,20; Nb 22,22f. Mt 1,20.

As Joseph slept, he had a dream. For us, dreams have little or no importance. They are the involuntary expressions of our unconscious. As manifestations of this unconscious, however, they can be highly meaningful. But they can also be a form of communication with God and from God. God can make use of everything, and everything can be of service for us to know God. As a means or medium, dreams can be as important as visions or appearances.

In Joseph's case, God made use of a dream to give him an extraordinarily important message, one that would change his life forever. "*The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife.'*" Upon hearing his name in the angel's mouth, and mention made of his Davidian lineage, Joseph felt touched in the deepest and most intimate part of his being. He felt "*known by his name,*" taken into account, that is, that God had heard his prayer and considered his anguish. This is why the angel says to him, "*Do not be afraid.*" When God appears, it is always to reassure and give confidence. We could almost establish a rule of discernment, that when reassurance and confidence are lacking, it is not about the true God. The Christians' God is a God who instills confidence, trust and joy, not a God of fear and dread. "*Do not be afraid, in other words, do not hesitate to take Mary home as your wife,*" because this is God's doing at its utmost, which is the fullness of his communication. And it is also the ultimate meaning of creation. At least Joseph understands that this is about the Messiah that the patriarchs and prophets, indeed the whole people of Israel, have awaited for so long. Mt 1,20.

Joseph and Mary's marriage is something intended by God since before the creation of the world, a marriage after God's own heart and confirmed by Him. Ep 1,3f.

There is no exceptional marriage precept. Virginity within a marriage was hard to accept in Jewish culture, because for a true Israelite, refraining from having children, especially within a marriage, was in itself a defiance of God's will. Jg 11,37-40; Gn 38,1f; Mt 22,24f.

In Joseph's time there were Jewish sects that opted for celibacy, such as the monks of Qumran. But their motivation was a disparaging attitude toward human sexuality and women. Jesus himself confirms the value of marriage and justifies virginity only for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Mt 19,12.

Joseph was a man of discernment. He needed it to recognize God's action in his dreams and not to read assumptions and desires into it. In his dream, the angel represented God's will.

The message communicated to him is of the utmost importance, because it has to do with the Messiah coming to the world.

Joseph and Mary's marriage

Mary and Jesus, but not Joseph, attended the wedding in Cana of Galilee, which might have been of relatives of theirs, at the beginning of Jesus's public ministry. But Joseph had a better wedding, not Jn 2,1f.

because the wine flowed freely, but because of its meaning and transcendence.

Shortly after his dream, Joseph wanted to celebrate the wedding and start living with Mary, to safeguard her holiness. Love brings with it a deep sense of trust. Joseph's life was sustained by God's trust, which the angel has communicated to him, and by Mary's trust.

On a day chosen by them, as the sun was going down, Joseph, accompanied by his close relatives and friends, headed to Mary's parents' house to take her solemnly and festively to his own parents' house. According to the faith of the Church, Joseph and Mary, after the angel's announcement, could have decided to consecrate themselves fully to Jesus, who was not yet born.

Virginity in Israel was not common, but it was not unknown either. Before marriage it was held in high esteem, perhaps even to an excessive degree, as we saw in the text from Deuteronomy. The Qumran monks were unmarried and celibate. They regarded everything related to sex as legal impurity.

John the Baptist did not marry, nor did Jesus. The Jews might have interpreted their celibacy as a eschatological sign. The end of the world was at hand, and it made no sense to marry. In Joseph and Mary's case, virginity in marriage could only consecration to God.

Mt 24,19f

What was the wedding celebration like?

Wedding celebrations were different in each region, as they are today. But we can deduce what they were like, more or less, from the parable told in the Gospel.

Mt 25,1-13.

Both the groom and the bride put on special outfits and crowns of flowers for the celebration, in their respective houses. The Virgin Mary must have looked stunning, like the Virgin of Macarena, but dressed for celebration, not mourning.

The groom was accompanied by his brothers and invited friends. Everyone was joyful. Joseph's happiness was immense: he was going to marry his beloved, and that woman was going to be the mother of a son who would somehow also be his, and that son was the Messiah, the Son of God. And Joseph had been chosen to take care of Mary and to raise, protect and care for the one who was the hope and glory of Israel.

Mk 2,19; Mt 9,15.

The bride was accompanied by her sisters and friends, generally unmarried, which is why they were known as bridesmaids.

They spent the day listening to music, dancing, eating and playing games. Aside from Joseph, no one knew about Mary's situation.

At night, in the paternal household, lit up with lamps and torches, the bride awaited the groom's arrival accompanied by her relatives and friends.

The groom left his house in a parade of lights, followed by his friends and guests, and headed to the bride's house.

The bride's friends left her and went out to meet the groom. The bride waited for the party to arrive—the groom with his relatives and friends.

The groom took the bride and led her "to his father's house" in a festive parade surrounded by a sea of lights.

There they shared a banquet with the bride and groom's guests.

The climax and end of the celebration was the groom's entrance with his bride into his parents' house, which took place at some hour of the night.

Joseph and Mary undoubtedly had long conversations about Mary's situation. For Joseph, Mary was expecting the Messiah, the Son of God. This filled him with amazement, admiration, veneration and joy.

The wedding was not a religious affair, but rather social and civil. It lasted seven days, and in the case of Joseph and Mary, it must have been a splendid, but simple celebration; it could not have been otherwise, even if the two families spared no expenses. Some of these customs are still observed in Israel and among the Palestinians.

Joseph totally changes Mary's life. She will be understood and venerated in Joseph's heart, and he will put her before all things. But now Joseph has complete responsibility over Mary. In the customs of Israel, "*A husband is the head of his wife and wives should submit to their husbands in everything.*" She no longer depends on her parents because she is his true wife, and Mary is no longer a little girl. From now on she will wear not only a cloak but also a veil covering her head, and when she goes out onto the street, she must follow a few steps behind Joseph. Ep 5,21.

Mary, Joseph's wife

"Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife," the angel told him. The Greek text of Matthew speaks of Mary as Joseph's wife. On other occasions it presents her as Mary the mother of Jesus. Mt 1,16. Mt 2,11.21; 13,55-56; 12,46-50.

In the Jewish customs of the first century, the woman was regarded as the husband's possession: she was his, she belonged to him, and he was jealous of her as something he owned. The woman's identity referred to her husband, "Joseph's wife," and she felt owned by him. Before the marriage they might not feel any particular interest for each other; the betrothal was negotiated between the two sets of parents.

Prior to the wedding, during a family visit, the bride's parents highlighted her qualities, her capacity for work, her skills. The groom's parents did the same, until they finally reached an agreement about the dowry. It could seem like haggling in the market.

But regardless of these agreements, the woman was always expected to live happily as her husband's wife. The husband owned the wife, but not the other way around: it was never said that the wife owned the husband. As in today's custom, the wife took her husband's surname, adding an "of" to her name that indicated that she belonged to him, but the husband did not take the wife's surname, especially if he was a widower.

Thus the wife's identity was determined by her husband, and she was joined to him in honor, privileges and obligations. Her husband's fate dictated hers, absolutely.

In the Hebrew mentality children belonged exclusively to their father, not their mother. The mother's duty was to carry children in her womb for nine months and nurse them for two or three years. This gave a special meaning to Mary's virginity because her child Jesus belonged to God ever since his conception, not to Joseph. For some of the Church fathers, this served as an argument to prove Jesus's divinity, as if we were to say: Jesus is God on his father's side and human on his mother's side. This is evidently not the faith of the Church, which understands Jesus as one and the same, totally Son of God and totally Son of Mary. Jesus is, in the faith of the Church, God and man, both for having God as his Father and Mary as his Mother. Jesus's divine condition does not come from his virginal conception.

Cf. Lk 11,27.

Cf. Lk 1,20f.

In accordance with Jewish custom, St. Paul reminds women that they should submit to their husbands in everything, because the husband is the head of the wife. And the wife should "*submit in everything*" to her husband. The husband, for his part, should love his wife as he loves his own body. St. Paul says that when a man loves his wife, he loves himself. No one has ever hated their own flesh. For Jesus and for St. Paul, they are one body on account of being husband and wife.

Cf. Ep 5,20-25.
Mt 19,5; Mk 10,8;
Ep 5,31; I Co 6,16.

The visit to St. Elizabeth

There is one scene in the Gospels' infancy narratives where Joseph does not appear. This is not surprising in St. Luke's Gospel as he left out Joseph's name as much as possible, perhaps in order to avoid overshadowing Mary's virginity. Luke wrote his Gospel for Christians of pagan origin –Greeks—who not only saw nothing strange in the leading role that the Gospel writer gave Mary, and women in general, but would have found it odd had Mary and women been left out of the announcement of the kingdom. Lucas skips over the topics that were only relevant for Jews; we could say that he is the most Greek of the Gospel writers, and the most indifferent to Jewish customs and traditions.

Mt 15,1-20;
Mk 7,1-13.

The scene that follows the Annunciation is Mary's journey to the hill country of Judah. It is now recognized as Ain Karim, six kilometers west of Jerusalem. To this one would have to add the distance from Nazareth to Jerusalem, another one hundred kilometers, making it about a four-day trip. It was a long journey that involved certain dangers. It can be assumed that the Virgin Mary did not travel alone. She was already a betrothed woman, and pregnant, but not noticeably so. It is highly likely that Joseph went with her. By this time Joseph had been told by the angel of Yahweh of Jesus's conception, and surely by Mary as well.

Lk 1,39f.

Joseph also believed the things the Lord told him, which means he can be considered one of the first who "*are blessed for having believed.*" Joseph was a man who had opened his heart to God, and thus, a blessed man of faith. Joseph believed the angel's announcement, even though it came to him in a dream, and he believed Mary, even though for Jews women were not to be trusted. In this way he was a man who was open to God in the mysteries and ambiguities of life.

Lk 1,45.

It happened that "*in the sixth month*" of the Baptist's conception, the Angel announced to Mary the conception of the Son of God, and Mary stayed with her cousin Elizabeth "*about three months*" longer. This suggests that she was there long enough to help her cousin Elizabeth during childbirth and in time prior to childbirth, when women need the most help.

Lk 1,26.

Lk 1,56.

The *Magnificat* is a hymn written by Luke and attributed to Mary. It seems to be a gloss on the song of Hannah, Samuel's mother. It is easy to see the parallelism between Samuel and Jesus. Samuel was a great prophet who heard the word of God since the time he was a boy, just as Jesus would hear it and fulfill it.

I S 2,1f.

I S 2,2; Lk 2,52.

Joseph at the hour of birth

St. Luke situated this event within the history of his time. Jesus is the center of the story, the one who imbues it with meaning, the one who brings time to its fullness. The narration of Jesus's birth is given an entirely eschatological meaning. Through the artistic structuring of the story, the Gospel writer presents the manifestation, or incarnation, of the Son of God in the Son of Mary.

Lk 2,1.

Ga 4,4.

Jesus belongs to David's lineage because Joseph was his descendant. This child is the Messiah and in him the promise made to our fathers will be fulfilled: The Virgin is *"betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the House of David."* *"The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David... and his reign will have no end."*

Lk 2,4.

Lk 1,27.

Lk 1,32.

Belonging to the House of David and being his descendant were, according to the prophecies, indispensable requirements for the Messiah. God giving him the throne of David and his reign having no end were promises made to the Messiah.

Is 9,6; Dn 7,14.

"The time came to her to have her child and she gave birth to a son, her first-born." As with all childbirths, this must have been a moment of great anxiety for Joseph and Mary. Things were not entirely prepared and the circumstances were less than ideal. The place left much to be desired. There were no people on hand who could help. Jesus's birth is presented in the Gospel as a perfectly normal birth, and in all things true, including his eventual death. Just as he truly died, he was truly born.

Lk 2,6.

This is a moment of vital importance for Mary, for Joseph and, of course, for Jesus. This moment constitutes Mary as a true and authentic Mother. It will identify her forever as the Mother of Jesus. Her virginity derived from her motherhood. She was not a mother on account of being a virgin; rather, because she was going to be the mother of the Son of God, she was a virgin and immaculate. Thinking that the Virgin loses her integrity by giving birth to the Son of God is equivalent to putting in the bodily dimension what belongs to the spirit and to the person. If that were the case, Christ would have lost his bodily and personal integrity by being circumcised, Mary's motherhood is her main glory and in no way makes her less worthy; on the contrary, it makes her more authentically the mother of Jesus.

It was also a very important moment for Jesus because he started to live the way all human beings do. Taking his first breath was a remarkable feat.

A person begins to live in the womb, but we normally talk about life beginning at birth because it can be difficult to determine the exact date of conception.

Jesus was able to say, just like any other person: I thank you, Father, for having been born, and born healthy. God's work *par excellence* was having sent his Son to the world. Jn 3,16.

For Joseph, this was the biggest thing that ever happened to him: he would now have an authentic descendant, albeit miraculously. It would be up to him to assume God's responsibility, to take care of his Son... Divine filiation and human fatherhood are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they complement and explain each other. Having been born is the necessary condition for living; it qualifies Jesus as an authentic human being. With Him and in Him a genuine history began. Jesus was born poor because his parents were poor. He was poor the way the poor are, without another option.

Using the imagination is not alien to the Gospel, or to the Gospel writers, and it serves as a wonderful aid to contemplation. If Mary truly gave birth, and if Jesus was truly born, who received the child? Who cleaned him up? Who cut the umbilical cord? Mary? Joseph? A midwife? In Byzantine representations of the birth, Joseph is always present, although they imagine him with his gaze turned away, out of respect for Mary. It would be a mistake to think that Jesus simply appeared in Mary's arms without any previous hard work, because that is not what human birth is like, nor does it explain the purification for the flow of blood during childbirth. St. Paul identifies Jesus as "*born of a woman*" and to the Romans he says that Jesus "*according to the human nature he took, was a descendant of David.*" Joseph was an eyewitness to the reality of Jesus's birth. Lk 2,22; Lv 12,1.8.
Ga 4,4.
Rm 1,3.

Jesus was born of Mary. Greek uses the preposition "ex," which means "coming from." It indicates separation, movement, origin, like water that rises from the earth. St. Paul uses the same concept, and it is also used in the Creed: "born of a woman" and "born of the Virgin Mary." Gn 2,6.
Ga 4,4.

"*There was no room for them at the inn.*" The phrase insinuates misfortune; it is a kind of grievance. "*He came to his own domain and his own people did not accept him,*" says John. All of this must have caused Joseph great sorrow. His first-born son, the Messiah, and he had no proper place to make his entrance into the world! It so happened that he was born outside of the city, just as he died outside of the city; he was laid in a manger and he was hung on a tree; he came naked into the world and he died virtually naked. Lk 2,7
Jn 1,11.
Mt 27,35; Jn 19,24;
Ps 22,18.

It is possible, however, that the stables for the animals were on the bottom floor of the inn and that the upper floors were full, so Joseph and Mary had to settle for the space where the animals slept. Whether this was simply a chance occurrence or not, it was a sign of tremendous debasement.

Mk 14,14.

The core of Luke's account is the angel's announcement, which is not made to important people but to shepherds: poor, humble, marginalized people. The announcement is made by an angel. Angels are instruments for making God's presence and revelation known.

Lk 2,8.

There are authorized documents by St. Leo the Great from the year 449 AD declaring Mary's virginity in childbirth as the faith of the Church. We know that when it comes to defined faith, people's devotion plays an important role, along with popular faith and the community's vision of the dignity of sexuality. When people think that "being born of a woman" is unworthy of God, a conclusion reached by the Marcionites, they reject the reality of the incarnation.

Dz-H 291.

"I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people." The reason for the shepherds' joy is that their liberator has been born, their Messiah, the one who will change their lives for the better. What is announced here, the topic of this "evangelization," is not the kingdom as an event, or a doctrine, or a message; it is all of this and more: it is the birth of a person, Jesus. In him the entire Gospel is contained; he is God's yes, God's gift, God's Word, God's presence and everything God can be for humanity. This announcement and this joy belong to the whole people, i.e., to all of humanity, but in a very particular way, to Joseph and Mary, because whenever a child is born, the first people who are affected are the parents.

Lk 2,10.

Luke presents Jesus's birth as a universal event. *"And all mankind shall see the salvation of God"; "A savior has been born to you."* This is the cause of the great joy, this is the heart of the angelic message. By giving Jesus the title of Savior, Luke is summing up all of Jesus's life and activity. Jesus saves us by what he does, but also by what he is.

Lk 3,6; 2,11.

The sign of salvation is the reality of this baby *"wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."* Mary prepared the swaddling clothes, the diapers, while Joseph prepared the manger.

Lk 2,14.

Then Luke sets the stage with a choir of angels who praise God by singing *"Glory to God in the highest heaven and peace to men who enjoy his favor."* Luke has composed a literary birth to convey a theological message grounded in the reality of a birth that must have occurred under circumstances more or less similar to those he describes in his account. But the main focus is not on the circumstances as fact,

Lk 2,14.

but on the circumstances as the necessary means by which God gives himself to us. The main focus is definitely on the Gift and not on the wrapping.

Upon the child Jesus, God's glory shines. Joseph and Mary first, and then the shepherds, are the ones to witness it and announce it. The apostles are tasked with proclaiming and reflecting God's glory in the face of Christ. The angel's announcement to Mary and Joseph is continued by the shepherds' as they give glory and praise, which in turn prefigures the apostles' proclamation.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus's birth is told in the barest terms. "*And though he had not known her, she gave birth to a son.*" As often is the case in the Old Testament, "*know*" refers to marital relations, meaning that this verse affirms once again Jesus's virginal conception, consistent with the earlier verse: "*Before they came to live together she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.*"

Joseph must have understood that Jesus’s conception by Mary was an exceptional miracle, “*through the Holy Spirit.*” All conceptions were seen as a miracle and a favor from God, but this one had unique features.

Children are incapable of developing without parental upbringing, because parents serve as an indispensable bridge between children and the world. The shock of being thrown into the world is so harsh that without parents, it would be life-threatening. The world is so hostile that children simply could not cope after being born. Absolutely everything is unknown. Their swaddling clothes and the manger are their contact with the outside world. The manger was not a cradle made by Joseph but rather a simple trough where animals were fed.

Newborn babies take nourishment from their mother's breast, but their father cuddles them and identifies with them by caressing their cheek. *"I was like someone who lifts an infant close against his cheek; stooping down to him I gave him his food."*

Cf Ho 11,1-9.

Jesus's circumcision

Jesus's circumcision is a fact accepted as entirely historical by all exegetes. In ancient time the practice was related to rites of initiation to marital life and procreation; it was most likely taken from the Egyptians. The pre-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan did not practice circumcision.

1 S 14,6.

In Israel it was regarded as a sign of the covenant with Yahweh and a mark of obedience, as an insignia of belonging to the people and the community of faith. Circumcision is the *"sign of the justification by faith."* It was meant to recall the duties of the covenant. And it was also a sign that distinguished the Israelites from neighboring peoples. Its institution went back to Abraham, father of believers and of the circumcised.

Ac 7,8; Ex 4,25.
Rm 4,11.
Dt 30,6; Jr 4,4;
Ez 44,7; Ga 5,3.
Jg 14,3; 1 S 14,6;
2 S 1,20.
Gn 17,9-14;
Rm 4,12.

Genesis orders boys to be circumcised when they are eight days old. This was seen as a rite that incorporated them into God's people and into the time of the Messiah. In ancient times, the father of the family did the actual circumcision, using a flint knife, but later certain specialized people took care of it, most often in the synagogue or the Temple in Jerusalem. In Luke's Gospel we read that *"they came to circumcise"* the Baptist. It is very likely that Jesus was taken to the synagogue, and that Joseph did not circumcise him at home.

Gn 17,12.
Lk 2,21.
Ph 3,5; Jn 7,22.

Lk 1,59.

Circumcision went hand-in-hand with the naming of the child. It is worth highlighting the importance these moments must have had for Joseph and Mary, who as devout Jews fulfilled Mosaic law to the letter. And not just the ritual importance, but also the spiritual and emotional significance of these moments.

Jesus must have cried out in pain, like any child who is cut, and Joseph, who was probably holding him in his arms, must have felt

Jesus's pain in his heart, but also pride at being the adoptive father of a new Israelite.

The giving of the name Jesus

This boy was to be given a fairly common name—Jesus—which means God saves. But God's salvation cannot be fuller or more complete than the salvation that is given to us in this boy named Jesus.

The Church has always known that Jesus was not an orphan; he did not lack for a father figure. In fact, this figure was perhaps the decisive element in his coming to know his relationship with God. Joseph, far from hindering Jesus's trust in God, was the one who inspired it and nourished it. Joseph did not get in God's way; on the contrary, it was in Joseph that God revealed himself as a loving Father. God in his proximity does not neutralize or replace Joseph; rather he makes Joseph more autonomous, more himself, more that father of God's own Son.

In New Testament times, circumcision and the giving of the name happened together. This rite identified the boy with his faith: one was "so-and-so" and at the same time an Israelite. This obligation corresponded by rights to the father of the family, not the mother, because the understanding was that women bore children for the man. And the man bore primary responsibility for the family. We can read this clearly in Matthew's Gospel where it is Joseph who gives the boy his name: *"You must name him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins."* In Luke we read that the angel tells Mary, *"You are to conceive and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus,"* which in a certain sense makes implicit reference to her virginity. But it is also clear in Luke that the obligation and the right to name the child corresponds to the father, as the angel tells Zechariah in verse 1,13: *"Your wife Elizabeth is to bear you a son and you must name him John. He will be your joy and delight and many will rejoice at his birth."* Here joy and delight are linked first of all to the father of the family, in this case, to Joseph, as must have happened in Jesus's case as well.

Lk 1,59; 2,21.

Lk 1,62.

Lk 1,31.

Lk 1,13.14.

A father's joy at having his first-born son was tremendous because it represented more than an extension of himself. Joseph had no reason to consider himself less than a father due to Jesus's miraculous conception. Jews of his time saw any conception as a miracle and human beings belonged first of all to God. *"Yahweh spoke to Moses and said, 'Consecrate all the first-born to me, the first issue of every womb, among the sons of Israel. Whether man or beast, this is mine.'"*

Ex 13,1.

"And when your son asks you in the days to come, 'What does this mean?' you will tell him, 'By sheer power Yahweh brought us out of

Egypt, out of the house of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, Yahweh killed all the first-born in the land of Egypt, of man and of beast alike. For this I sacrifice to Yahweh every male that first issues from the womb, and redeem every first-born of my sons.’”

Ex 13,14f.

The presentation in the Temple and the redemption

It was set down that the baby was to be presented in the Temple as a new child of Israel forty days after birth. Joseph must have made this pilgrimage with great devotion, from Nazareth to Jerusalem, which took about four days –100 km–. *“They took him up to Jerusalem to be presented to the Lord—observing what stands written in the Law of the Lord: ‘Every first-born male must be consecrated to the Lord.’”* It was Joseph’s fatherly right and responsibility to present Jesus in the Temple to be circumcised and to give him the name established by God, as well as to present him in the Temple.

Lk 2,22.

The presentation in the Temple was a kind of consecration, which made particular reference to Yahweh’s dominion over all things. The law decreed that all first-born humans and animals were Yahweh’s property, that they were to be consecrated to him, to be sacrificed, or otherwise to die. This law was applied to animals in a strict sense, but since God is never pleased with human sacrifices, the first-born child of a family was not subjected to death but rather redeemed. The father was bound to do this thirty days after the child’s birth. The first-born especially was seen as Yahweh’s property, as belonging to him in a preferential way, because the first-born represented the whole family, and recalled the way God had rescued the first-born of Israel in Egypt, and Isaac for Abraham. Joseph in this case implicitly brings to mind Abraham, who redeemed Isaac by sacrificing a ram.

Ex 13,1. 13-16.

Gn 22,8f.

The law of the Old Testament prefigures Christ, whom Paul would call *“the first-born of all creation.”* For Joseph, Jesus was his first-born son. For St. Paul, the first-born of all people who were to die and rise again.

Col 1,18.

According to the logic of the rites of the first fruits, it was Jesus’s lot to be sacrificed, which meant total surrender to God, but according to the rites of redemption, he was substituted -redeemed- by a lamb, or in cases of extreme poverty, by doves, because God takes no pleasure in the death of any human being. Joseph offered a pair of turtledoves. This is a clear indication of the extreme poverty in which Jesus was born, and of the shame Joseph must have felt at not having a white yearling lamb without blemish to redeem Jesus.

Lk 2,23.

Joseph’s turtledoves were offered in place of Jesus, and the baby Jesus represented the whole human family and the universe. The Virgin had

to hand the baby over to Joseph, so that Joseph could present him as his own, and at the same time redeem him as not his own, because the baby no longer belonged to him but to God. Joseph redeems him, however; in other words, he receives the baby back to take care of him, raise him and educate him.

As a human being, Jesus was raised by Joseph, the same Jesus who took shape in Mary's womb, and was born nine months later. From a psychological viewpoint, one of the factors that has the greatest impact on a boy's masculinity is his father: from him he learns how to become a man, all the more so when the father teaches him how to dress, how to conduct himself as an Israelite, even how to earn a living.

The purification of Mary

Joseph took Mary to be purified, which occurred forty days after giving birth. The purification of a woman is the wiping away of a ritual impurity owing to blood or contact with blood. For example, a woman becomes impure when she menstruates, or by giving birth, or through sexual contact. The Church has always maintained that the Virgin was never impure due to sexual contact, and that her purification was for ritual reasons that did not reflect on her morality.

Ritual impurity is a state in which God's holiness and transcendence with respect to humanity is highlighted. It can be seen as an obstacle to communication with God, a way of venerating the sacred in human life. In Holy Scripture, the holy and the impure are qualities that are "contagious" and can be passed on to others. The elimination of impurity is called sanctification. Impurity did not necessarily have moral overtones; it was rather a sign of the sacred in ordinary life. It was possible to fall automatically into impurity, and then to regain purity in seven days. This did not imply any kind of act of contrition, because it was not exactly a matter of sin.

Lv 15,4-12.20.28.

Flavius Josephus
Antiquities I, IX.
Lv 15,1f.

Yahweh, who is holy, dislikes impurity; this is the basis of Israel's legislation on this point. Israel's purity laws are religious laws, and point to God's transcendence over the human condition.

Lv 11,44f; 19,2;
20,7.

Jesus gave no importance at all to ritual purity, only to moral purity, the purity of the heart. For St. Paul, Jesus's life, death and resurrection freed us from all the impurities Judaism was subject to, and in the economy of salvation, nothing in and of itself is impure.

Mk 7,15.
Ga 5,1; 4,3.
Rm 14,14;
Ac 10,15; 11,9.

The purification of the Virgin Mary after childbirth was an act of legal obedience to the provisions of the Old Testament: *"If a woman conceives and gives birth to a boy, she is to be unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly periods. On the eighth day*

the child's foreskin must be circumcised, and she must wait another thirty-three days for her blood to be purified. She must not touch anything consecrated nor go to the sanctuary until the time of her purification is over... She is to bring to the priest at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting a lamb one year old for a holocaust, and a young pigeon or turtledove as a sacrifice for sin. The priest is to offer this before Yahweh, perform the rite of atonement over her, and she will be purified from her flow of blood... If she cannot afford a lamb, she is to take two turtledoves or two young pigeons, one for the holocaust and the other for the sacrifice of sin. Lv 12,2-8.

According to the faith of the Church, Joseph and the Virgin Mary fulfill these rites as children of Israel, not to meet any real need for purification, which was non-existent in Mary's case, especially when it came to the purification of sin, given her virginity, and the fact that her child was the Son of God, whom she had also made Son of man, in history. Mt 2,1-12.

Joseph and the Magi

It is well known that King Herod —the Great—died four years before Jesus's birth. The story reflects the popular belief that each person is represented by a star that appears upon his or her birth, which might explain why Matthew speaks of "*his star*." There is no heavenly body that can be identified as the star of Bethlehem. It could be interpreted as "*the star from Jacob*," an allusion to David and interpreted in a Messianic sense. Furthermore, no star can stop over a house; considering how far away they are, stars stop over half the world, which is where their light can be seen. Nb 24,27.

The significant elements of the story— the wise men from the east, the star, the interview with Herod— are implausible. This clearly shows that the Gospel writer's intention is catechetical and theological, not historical. The important takeaway is the legendary and mystical meaning of this passage, which contains theological meaning: from his childhood all peoples will recognize in Jesus the Messiah and the Son of God.

Jesus is the king of the Jews, but in Matthew's telling, the first to recognize this are the Gentiles, while in Luke's version, they are the poor Jewish shepherds. The rich Jews, represented by Herod, even when informed of his birth, remain indifferent.

"Going into the house they saw the child with his mother Mary, and falling to their knees, they did him homage." It is worth noting that at this moment, which is the climax of the story, Joseph is nowhere to be seen, in spite of being such a central figure in Matthew's text. The Mt 2,11.

intention might have been to underscore the fact that Jesus is the Son of God, an idea that is linked to the adoration: *“falling to their knees, they did him homage.”*

If we understand the Gospel story in its theological sense, and not as a historical account, it is pointless to ask what Joseph did with the gold, frankincense and myrrh. The gifts served to highlight aspects of Jesus’s nature: incense for the Son of God, myrrh for a man who was to die, and gold for a king with a crown of thorns.

Joseph flees to Egypt

The flight to Egypt is along the same lines as the adoration of the Magi, except that in this story, Joseph plays a leading role: God speaks to Joseph in a dream and tells him both to flee to Egypt and to return to Nazareth. *“So Joseph got up, and taking the child and his mother with him, went back to the land of Israel.”* Mt 2,21.

Matthew applies to Jesus, as the Son of God, the text from Hosea: *“I called my son out of Egypt,”* which in its original context referred to the people of Israel’s flight from Egypt, and to the people as a whole as God’s child. In this way Matthew condenses in Jesus’s person the history of the people of Israel. Ho 11,1.

Jesus returns to Nazareth

For a third time God speaks to Joseph in a dream to tell him to return, but not to Judea; he is to go to Galilee, to Nazareth. Mention is made of a non-existent prophecy: *“He will be called a Nazarene.”* It is true, however, that the first Jewish Christians would be called Nazarenes. In his appearance to Paul, Jesus calls himself *“the Nazarene.”* His place of origin identifies him. Joseph must have had a house and some land in Nazareth; that is why he returns there. There Jesus would grow up and develop. The Gospel notes that the Virgin, after her visit to Elizabeth, returns to Nazareth, her *“home.”* Her home must have been that of Joseph, her husband. Ac 24,5.
Ac 22,8.
Mk 1,24; 14,67;
16,6; Lk 24,19;
Jn 19,19.
Lk 1,56.

During his childhood, Jesus received everything from Joseph, who fulfilled his role as a father who provided for his family. He received it not as something that was owed to him but as a gift that expressed personal love. This is why trust, love and reliance on God are requirements to enter the kingdom of heaven. Mk 10,15; Mt 18,3.

At the time Jesus lived, houses tended to be small. They were just places to sleep. Life and work took place outside the house. Houses had small doors and windows. At night they were pitch dark, which is why people often left a small oil lamp burning to indicate that the house was

inhabited, and at night the dim light allowed people to move around if necessary.

To sleep, people laid down sheepskins or a sort of rug on the swept hard-earth floor. During his first year of life, Jesus slept next to Mary, so that she could be alert to the baby's every movement: to calm him if he cried, to cover him if he was cold, to breastfeed him if he was hungry. Jesus most likely slept between Joseph and Mary. Up to the age of three children were breastfed and depended completely on their mothers. She gradually taught him to eat solid food: cheese, dates, figs, the bread she made herself, similar to flour tortillas.

For a five-year-old boy it was a thrill to sleep with his father. Jesus must have kept it as a memory of his childhood. No father would hand his son a snake when he asked for a fish, or a stone when he asked for bread. Any father would readily share his bread if his child asked for some. And what father, if his son fell into a well, would not pull him out without hesitation, even on a sabbath day?

Lk 11,7.

Lk 11,11.

Lk 14,5.

A small child has no better cradle than his mother's arms, and when he is a little bigger, no greater thrill than to sleep in his father's bed. His father is authority, strength, protection and sacrifice for love. There is no fear that the father cannot vanquish. *"He frees me from all my fears."*

Ps 34,4.

Joseph, a free, aware and responsible father

From a genetic viewpoint, fatherhood consists of engendering and giving origin. From a human viewpoint that considers all of a person's aspects, the father's role consists of care, continuity and responsibility in the child's development. This was Joseph's mission when it came to Jesus. We cannot speak of humanly complete fatherhood when it does not involve care and responsibility for the development of a new being, genetic fatherhood notwithstanding.

Human fatherhood is naturally grounded first of all in awareness, freedom and responsibility. God wanted Jesus's genetic fatherhood to lead back to God only, by way of a miracle without parallel in Scripture: Mary's virginity. The paternal relationship of care, protection and responsibility maintained over a lifetime are the real hallmark of a father, and that is what Joseph was asked to provide here on earth.

Joseph, a wise man for Jesus

A child is always asking questions. And Joseph, like any father, has all the answers. Fathers offer the first answers, and although they are

sometimes off the mark, they are the only “true” ones for the child, because they are the only ones he can understand. Jesus’s divine condition was so great that it allowed Jesus to become so small.

As a boy Jesus, under Joseph’s watchful eye, probably had to scrub the cooking pots, inside and outside, until they were perfectly clean. And it might have been then when he noticed that the important thing for God was not washing dishes but rather the purity of one’s heart. Lk 11,39.

It is common for little birds to draw children’s attention. Their size, their colors, their birdsong and their ability to fly spark children’s imagination. Children dream of being able to fly like birds. Jesus must have come back from the market one day brimming with happiness at the pair of little sparrows that Joseph had bought him for a penny. Mk 10,29.

Joseph, a workingman

The Gospel tells us that Joseph was a carpenter: *“This is the carpenter’s son, surely? Is not his mother the woman named Mary, and his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Jude?” “His sisters, too, are they not all here with us?”* Joseph’s profession could better be described as a day worker— a man who made his living from manual labor, willing to do whatever was needed. Like almost all Galileans, he might have had a field and some sheep. Joseph taught Jesus to work when Jesus was old enough. Mt 13,55.
Mk 6,3.

His first chore was probably keeping an eye on the sheep, walking ahead of them but making sure none of them went astray. Calling them by their names, some of which he probably gave them. He learned to track down those that got lost and to bring them back. To cure any that got hurt. Joseph taught Jesus to be a good shepherd, to look after sheep as his own, not like a hired man. Jn 10,1f.

It is possible that Joseph also taught him how to sow seed in the field. He would have noticed that when he cast the seed, not all of it fell on good soil, and that the earth is like people’s hearts: it can bear much, little or no fruit. Mt 13,4.

It cannot be overlooked that most of Jesus’s parables seem to evoke personal experience.

Joseph, a master carpenter

Matthew’s Gospel tells us that Joseph was a carpenter, but he could also have been a day laborer, a man who supported himself and his family primarily by doing manual labor. Of course, he could well have had other small sources of income, but his main livelihood came from Mt 13,55; Mk 6,3.

the work he did with his hands. For Mark, Jesus is also a carpenter, who learned the trade from his father, and who worked like his father, and with his father.

It could well have happened on more than one occasion that Joseph and Jesus were waiting for someone to give them work. They had gotten up early to be among the first to arrive at the place where the foremen hired the day laborers, the ones who expected their denarius in exchange for a day's work. Joseph and Jesus were willing to do any kind of work, from carrying loads to working as expert craftsmen. They were also willing to work anywhere, because Nazareth was not a busy place where they could always find a job. Well, maybe not anywhere: not in pagan cities like Tiberias and Sepphoris, built in the pagan style, with Greek customs, gymnasiums, statues and temples. These cities, founded on Galilean territory, were an affront to the Galilean Jews. This might explain why they are not even mentioned in the Gospels. Mt 20,2f.

During his time in Nazareth Jesus was not always a child. He grew up. He became a young boy, a teenager, a young man, an adult. Lk 2,40; 2,52.

Joseph, as a father, felt gratified to have a son, a reflection of his own person but also independent, aware and responsible, who thought, judged, decided and acted on his own.

Joseph, an attentive and gentle father

During his childhood Jesus must have fallen ill more than once. This must have caused Joseph and Mary no end of worry because they did not just procure his sustenance, they also looked after his health and well-being. We can imagine Jesus with a bad cold. He is lying on a kind of woven mat, hung from four ropes tied to the roof beam. It was a sort of cradle used to rock the baby. Joseph stands next to him, making sure he does not fall out and rubbing his hands and feet to warm him up. Mary fixes him a cup of hot tea. And since children get sick easily and just as easily recover, Jesus is soon playing again as if nothing happened.

Joseph must have been especially affectionate with Jesus, showing an unconditional fondness, like the father who covers his prodigal son with kisses when he returns home. Cf. Lk 15,20.

Joseph as an educator

Jesus learned from Joseph everything a boy learns from his father: to walk, to speak, to eat, to fend for himself, to make friends and get along with others, to understand Scripture according to the customs of his time; to understand his own mission on the basis of Scripture and above

all, of his own personal reflection and deep, extraordinarily contemplative prayer. In the same way he learned to work, to fulfill his religious obligations, to be kind and humble, to serve and not be served. Joseph “projected himself” onto Jesus.

The responsibility for teaching sons to read and write in Hebrew fell to the father. Jesus learned from Joseph at his first school, which was his own home, to read God’s word and to write it. It is quite likely that the first letters and words he learned were the ones written in the phylactery: “*Hear, oh Israel, Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one.*” Praying this prayer was a dignity reserved for men. Women were not supposed to read Scripture or participate in worship or ask questions in the Synagogue. Even St. Paul states that if a woman has something to ask, she should ask her husband in the privacy of their home.

1 Co 14,34-35.
1 Tm 2,11-12; 3,10.

Responsibility for education is an ongoing confirmation; more to the point, it is a particular manifestation of human parenthood, because the important thing for a human being is not just to come into the world, but to know how to live in it.

Jesus Christ depended on Joseph not just for the satisfaction of his material needs; more importantly and profoundly, his dependence was on the spiritual plane. Like all children, by discovering other people he discovered his own existence, his unique value. From Joseph he learned to serve and give of himself, and in so doing he revealed himself to others and to himself. By welcoming others and sharing his person with them, Jesus lived what he was. Jesus grew up, became a person in the psychological sense, most of all by contemplating Joseph.

Nothing has a greater impact on children, on the formation of their identity, than the contemplation of their own parents. Jesus understood that he was “Yeshua bar Yosef,” Jesus son of Joseph, and that is how he would give his name and be known and identified by his contemporaries. That, or “*the carpenter’s son.*”

Lk 3,23; Jn 1,45;
6,42; Mt 13,55;
Mk 6,3.

Joseph undoubtedly taught Jesus to go out into the field, to observe the flowers that are fresh one day and withered the next. To take the sheep out to graze, watch over them and bring them back home at sundown. He surely called them by their names and felt confident that they knew him.

Jn 10,1f.

Jesus gradually learns to love God above any personal satisfaction, as Joseph did. His center of gravity is the response to the father in freedom and love.

Normally, when children are treated aggressively, they grow up to be aggressive, and when they are treated with kindness, they grow up to be

kind. The Gospel reports that from the time of his childhood, Jesus was extraordinarily kind, and this must have been because he was treated with the utmost love. Lk 2,52.

Jesus Christ became what he was by welcoming and loving others, and committing himself to them. Jesus Christ underwent a learning process to be not just for himself and for the Father, but also for others. He learned to receive others, to communicate his thoughts to them and to listen to theirs. The upbringing he received from his father, and his father's way of dealing with others was the best example for Jesus. He knew that both new and old things can come from the heart, and this is why he listened avidly to the stories that Joseph told.

By seeing who others are and accepting them, people come to know themselves and to accept others. Jesus Christ learns that loving Yahweh will all his heart and all his strength implies loving his neighbor, because this second commandment is simply the incarnation of the first. Jesus Christ learns to love everyone, and with that same love he loves the Father in them. Jesus Christ learns that the way to serve the Father is by serving others, and for that reason he has come to serve.

Jesus Christ learns that neither this world nor other people are the way they ought to be; he himself is not the way he ought to be: he needs to grow, just as the world does, and other people. Jesus has to undergo the painful process of learning to suffer on account of others, to understand others, to be loyal and sincere to them, to admire their values. He is learning to look past the surface and into the heart. The reality of things and the value of people are grasped with the heart. The only things we know in depth are the things we love. And it is by loving that we learn what love is. We could say, with a fair degree of certainty, that Jesus loved no one more than he loved Joseph. Joseph was God's image on earth for Jesus. Lk 5,22.

Joseph as a pedagogue

Here we take the word pedagogue in its etymological sense: a person who takes a child to school. But Jesus was not taken to school exactly, but to the Temple: *"Every year his parents used to go to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover."* Also to the synagogue, and to all the places where children were expected or wanted to go but could not go alone. Joseph had to teach Jesus to orient himself in the wider world and to take care of himself, to find the best route and proceed with caution. Lk 2,41.

The synagogue in Jesus's time was not just the Jews gathering somewhere; it was the proper place for such a gathering. The custom was to go to the synagogue every Saturday and on feast days. In Nazareth, as in other places, the apse of the synagogue pointed toward

Jerusalem, toward the Temple. The Holy Scriptures were kept in a special cabinet in the apse, and the Jews showed special veneration for them. There were benches for the congregants and a pulpit for the person who read or commented on the Scriptures. Congregants were welcome to make comments. All ceremonies or Scripture studies started with the Shema prayer: *"Hear, oh Israel, Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one,"* etc. The gathering ended with the blessing from the book of Numbers: *"May Yahweh bless you and keep you. May Yahweh let his face shine on you and be gracious to you. May Yahweh uncover his face to you and bring you peace."* There was a president who directed the ceremony and appointed the reader, and a minister in charge of the holy books. There were also people in charge of order and cleaning.

Nb 6,24; Mt 5,25f.
Ac 13,15.

Jesus gradually learns that in everything there is something of beauty, goodness and truth, but he does not get sidetracked there; instead he relates everything to the Father. The relation with the father is the maximum value for Jesus, the value that encompasses all things. All of this he learns by loving others; in a certain sense they are telling him these things.

It is clear that Jesus's message and attitudes cannot be reduced to what he learns within his family circle. Jesus as an adult was much more than what he learned to be as a child. God reveals, manifests and gives himself to us if all of Jesus's being as a particular life and history.

Joseph as playmate

For children, play is an important job, an integral part of their development. And before Jesus had friends, Joseph had to play with him. For children, interaction with others is often a kind of play. Jesus identified closely with Joseph, his dad, *"Abba,"* and it is highly likely that this identification started with play. It is not at all improbable that they played hide-and-seek. This game is as old as opening and closing our eyes. Other times they might well have played piggy-back, with Jesus clambering onto his father's back and Joseph playing the role of donkey, horse or camel. Jesus surely had a much better view of the world when he was perched on Joseph's shoulders.

It is clear that Jesus had an incredible imagination that surpassed the ordinary and reached the level of poetic, even sublime. How easy it was for Jesus to shift from the ordinary to the divine, from the earth to heaven! Jesus might well have played the lost sheep or blind man's bluff with Joseph. And while he played hide-and-seek he could well have thought, *"This is what God does with us: look for us until he finds us. As if we were his sheep."*

Jesus very likely had a pet, maybe a puppy or a black sheep. Jesus did not have any siblings to play with when he was very little, so his first playmate was his father.

For Joseph and Mary, Jesus was the First-born, which in the Biblical tradition meant a special gift to be enjoyed the way young parents enjoy their first child.

Joseph as a model

For children who live in a functional family, the father is always a model to follow. The capacity for admiration and love, before they are projected onto any other person, are directed at the father. Proximity is a key element. The father is the person who is always there when needed.

Children learn from their father, including by imitation: they talk the way he talks, with the same tone and cadence; in the Praetorium Jesus would be linked to Peter by his way of speaking. But Jesus also used Joseph's gestures, and the same expressions. His accent when he spoke Aramaic gave him away as a Galilean. Aramaic was the language Jesus learned from his father, although it was influenced by neighboring dialects. The Gospels have preserved a few words, certainly spoken by Jesus, such as "*Eli, Eli! Lama sabachthani?*" or "*Talitha, kum!*" The term to refer to God was the same one he used to refer to Joseph: "*Abba.*"

Mk 14,70.
Mt 26,73.
Mt 27,46; Mk 5,41.

In the Hebrew culture of Jesus's time, women did not learn to read and write, so Mary could not have been Jesus's teacher. In Nazareth, Jesus read the text from Isaiah in Hebrew and commented on it in Aramaic.

Lk 4,16.

Among the people of Israel, the father taught by example to respect things and people, to pray at all times, to give thanks to God for everything: food, things and above all people. "*I give you thanks, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, or I bless you for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children.*"

Lk 10,21; Mt 11,25.

Israel is a people that devotes its life to prayer. Any good Jew, upon entering or leaving a house, at night or at midday, when traveling, must recite certain prescribed prayers. An Israelite lives and prays in the light of his faith, and works in the light of the sun. Even as an adult, Jesus prayed at all hours of the day. He had a particular way of praying when he sat down to eat. Perhaps as a small boy, Jesus's recited devotions became genuine prayer. Jesus knows that more important than reciting prayers is doing God's will.

Lk 24,30; Mt 14,19.
Mt 7,21.

Jesus was not just a marvelous human being. His condition as the incarnate Son of God surpasses the natural and the normal. He was not just the fruit of his upbringing and his experiences; God is inherent in his being, joining the profoundly human with the exceptionally divine, nature with grace, the material with the spiritual, death with eternal life.

Joseph as a “Father of the family” --Existential, living image of God—

Parents create the environment of care that children need. Parents are authority, protection and sacrifice motivated by love. Only because Jesus had the experience of an outstanding father could he call God “Father.” St. John the Evangelist and his community regarded Jesus as Joseph’s son: “*Surely this is Jesus son of Joseph. We know his father and mother.*” Matthew tells us that Jesus is descended from David on his father’s side. St. John and St. Paul make no mention of Mary’s virginity, even when it might have been convenient to encourage faith in Christ as the Son of God.

Jn 6,42.

Mt 1,16.

Ga 4,4; Rm 1,1f.

John does not seem to relate Jesus’s virginal conception to the divine filiation of those who believe in Christ because for him these are different kinds of truths, as we read in the prologue to John’s Gospel: he insists that being born of God through faith, being a child of God, has nothing to do with human generation; it is a gift from God. –“*jóí,*” Jn 1,13, in all of the Greek versions is plural, “*those who,*” and refers to those who believe in his name--. Human generation is not linked to the divine filiation received through faith. In St. Peter’s first epistle we read “*God...in his great mercy has given us a new birth as his sons... so that we have a sure hope.*” “*Your new birth was not from any mortal seed but from the everlasting word of the living and eternal God.*”

Jn 1,12; 1 Jn 5,18.

Jn 3,3.

Cf. St. Jerome’s
Biblical
Commentary

1 P 1,3.

1 P 1,23.

The first Jewish Christians –Ebionites—had no trouble accepting Mary’s virginity since many patriarchs and prophets had been born under miraculous circumstances, but they did not accept Jesus’s full divinity. However, Joseph in the Gospel account is a legal, almost hidden father. Jesus’s life, like that of any human being, proceeded according to the stages of normal human development, which in no way undermined his condition as the incarnate Son of God.

In a culture that is not at all distant from our own it is highly unusual for parents to explain to their children how they came into the world; it is likely that neither Joseph nor Mary explained anything to Jesus.

Joseph taught Jesus to pray as indicated in Deuteronomy: “*Listen, Israel: Yahweh our God is the one Yahweh. You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength.*”

Let these words I urge on you today be written on your heart. You shall repeat them to your children and say them over to them whether at rest in your house or walking abroad, at your lying down or at your rising.” And during the Passover ceremony: *“And on that day you will explain to your son, ‘This is because of what Yahweh did for me when I came out of Egypt.’”*

Dt 6,7.

Ex 13,8.

It was the obligation of the father of the family to teach his sons the morning and evening prayers, and to explain the meaning of the rites: *“Ask of your father, let him teach you; of your elders, let them enlighten you.”* *“And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ritual mean?’ you will tell them, ‘It is the sacrifice of the Passover in honor of Yahweh who passed over the houses of the sons of Israel in Egypt.’”* And Joseph had to explain in detail and with great devotion the facts and rites of the Passover celebration.

Dt 32,7.

Ex 12,26.

Jesus grew up in Joseph’s shadow

This aspect of Jesus’s growth is already prefigured in John the Baptist: *“The child grew up and his spirit matured,”* and in Samuel: *“The boy Samuel grew up in the presence of Yahweh.”*

Lk 1,80.

1 S 2,21.

It is common in Holy Scripture for some authors to be inspired by others, and the Church Fathers regard relevant figures of the Old Testament as harbingers or announcements of Jesus himself.

It was an ancient custom among the people of Israel for the woman of the house to be in charge of fetching water. With a jug on her shoulder she carried water from the spring or the well to the receptacle that each house had for different uses. Water was stored in large clay jars, also in sheepskins. Women were often tasked with washing their husband’s feet and those of guests, too, when they came to the house. The Virgin Mary must have washed her husband Joseph’s feet when they sat down at the table. It is interesting to note that in the Gospel a woman appears washing Jesus’s feet, and Jesus washing his disciples’ feet, doing the job of women and slaves.

Jn 4,6f.

1 Tm 5,10.

Lk 7, 38; Jn 13,14.

Jesus increased in wisdom, in stature and in favor with God and men. He gradually penetrated deeper and deeper into the mystery of God and himself. Growing in wisdom means appropriating the supreme values of Israel as his own inner motivation. Growing in favor with God means that day by day Jesus is the object of God’s overflowing love.

God is well pleased with Him, the way a father loves his child more every day, without implying that at the end he has something he lacked at the beginning. We can say that Jesus grows in the sense of becoming and revealing God’s affective core. Growing in favor with men means

Pr 3,4.

that Jesus earns more and more good will, respect and acceptance from people.

Luke's Gospel makes special mention of Jesus's obedience to Mary and Joseph. "*He then went down with them and came to Nazareth and lived under their authority.*" Obedience to Joseph was like a perceptible and clear sign of his obedience to his Father in heaven, as shown in the scene of the child lost and found in the Temple. Luke's text affirms that from a young age, Jesus felt the presence and love of God as a Father, without denying in the least the importance of Joseph's fatherhood; in fact the text goes on to say that he went down with Joseph and Mary to Nazareth and lived under their authority. Joseph had the authority and responsibility of a real father. And Jesus must have obeyed Joseph's indications with genuine respect.

Lk 2,51.

Lk 2,49-50.

Lk 2, 41-50.

Joseph and Mary take Jesus to the Temple

St. Luke tells us about one episode that is firmly grounded in Jewish customs. But only he, the most Greek of the Gospel writers, chose to include it from the traditions of the first Christians, and he gives it a transcendent meaning. The Torah prescribed that Israelites were to go to the Temple for the three great festivities. During Passover, or the Feast of Unleavened Bread, they commemorated and celebrated the liberation from Egypt by eating lamb and offering the first fruits of barley. On the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost, fifty days after Passover, they offered the first fruits of wheat. The third was the Feast of Tabernacles, also known as the Feast of Booths, when they gave thanks for the harvest. The first and third feasts lasted eight days; the second, only one day.

Ex 23,17; 34,23;
Dt 16,16f.

It is not clear whether women were obliged to make the pilgrimage; some rabbis said they were, but others disagreed. It was more common for women to attend the Passover celebrations as opposed to the other two.

Exemptions from the obligation to go to Jerusalem were given to children, women, the sick and the elderly who could not make the journey on foot.

Boys were obliged as of the age of thirteen. At that age they were considered "religious adults," i.e., subjects who were expected to know and fulfill the obligations of a good Israelite with respect to fasting, ceremonies and festivities.

St. Luke starts his account by telling us that "*Every year Joseph and Mary used to go to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover,*" but now that Jesus was twelve years old, they went up for the feast as usual.

Lk 2,41.

They almost certainly arrived for the celebration a day ahead of time, and returned to Nazareth a day after the festivities ended because the trip from Jerusalem to Nazareth took several days.

It is highly likely that both on the trip to Jerusalem and on the way back to Nazareth, the family split up, with the men in one group, probably farther ahead, and the women bringing up the rear. Small boys would travel with their mothers, and when they grew up they could join the men.

It is fascinating to imagine Jesus's excitement on the trip to Jerusalem, at times walking by Joseph's side, other times playing with his friends.

Even before they turned thirteen it was considered edifying to take boys to the Temple, to familiarize them with their obligations. Jesus would have been wearing his religious clothes, consisting of a white shawl with tassels on the corners, and with his phylacteries on his forehead and left arm. Jewish men tied phylacteries –little boxes that contained four main passages of the law– to their head in such a way that they sat on their forehead, with the straps running over the shoulders to the chest. This represented a literal interpretation of Moses's precept to keep Yahweh's precepts and benefits before their eyes and on their arm. Dt 6,8.

Upon approaching Jerusalem and seeing in the distance its walls or the massive Temple construction, they began to sing or recite the psalms composed especially for this occasion: Ps 84,122-121

"How I rejoiced when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of Yahweh!' And now our feet are standing in your gateways, Jerusalem! Jerusalem restored! The city, one united whole! Here the tribes come up, the tribes of Yahweh, they come to praise Yahweh's name, as he ordered Israel, here where the tribunals of justice are, the royal tribunals of David. Pray for peace in Jerusalem, 'Prosperity to your houses! Peace inside your city walls! Prosperity to your palaces!' Since all are my brothers and friends, I say 'Peace be with you!' Since Yahweh our God lives here, I pray for your happiness." Ps 122,1f.

Passover was celebrated on the fifteenth day of the month of Nisan and the seven days following, in other words, during the full moon of March-April. This must have been a wonderful thing for Jesus: the day of his first Passover. The fourteenth, after sundown, in groups of ten to twenty people, they ate the Passover lamb, remembering the liberation from Egypt. It was the day of the foundation or constitution of the Jewish people. During the celebration Jesus would have been next to Joseph so that Joseph could carefully explain the meaning of each ceremonial act. Ex 13,14f.

According to rabbinic theology, on this day, at the age of thirteen and on Passover, the yoke of the Law was placed on all Jews so that they could control their passions and follow God's ways. For a Jew, the Law is the beloved yoke that he wears tied to his head by straps, which represent the education he receives. Yoke straps were strips of leather that tied the ox to the yoke. Education is what ties the people of Israel to God's law.

The next morning, the start of the seven-day festivities, custom called for them to attend the solemn morning sacrifice and later in the day, the afternoon sacrifice accompanied by a blessing for the people and a dismissal. After this series of celebrations, the pilgrims were free to go back home. On the way back, they broke up again into groups of men and women, and children were allowed to choose whether to go with their mother or their father.

But Joseph and Mary were caught by surprise. Jesus, without telling them, stayed behind in Jerusalem, in the Temple, to be exact.

This must have put Joseph into a panic, since he was in charge of protecting the family, and obviously Mary as well. After the first day of the journey, at sundown, they realized that Jesus was not with either of them, scaring them out of their wits. He could have been stolen or sold, and they surely thought of Jacob, who lost his son Joseph that way. After looking for him among the groups of pilgrims, they went back to Jerusalem and started asking people whether they had seen him. Three days passed that Jesus was lost to them, counting the first day of the journey, and the day they took to return to Jerusalem. Only someone who has lost a child for a long period of time can appreciate what they were going through. They blamed themselves for their carelessness. Gn 37,28.

We cannot help but wonder what Jesus did over those three long days. Where did he eat? Where did he sleep? Who was he with? On the third day, Joseph and Mary, who had not separated during those days of wrenching anxiety, decided to look for him in the Temple, a wide-open place where people were always coming and going, surrounded by archways, probably quite dirty given the number of pilgrims who had crowded into the space in the previous days. Some of the rabbis had the custom of reaching out to the crowds of pilgrims to teach them about different topics they considered important, or to answer doctrinal or legal questions that people were always asking, such as whether it is permitted to draw water from the spring when a household's jug is cracked and leaks water, or should the family go thirsty?

St. Luke tells us that on the third day they found the boy sitting among the rabbis, answering and asking questions. The rabbis asked, for example, What is the most important commandment of the law? Jesus

sat in the midst of them, taking an active part in the academic dynamic, because he asked and answered questions as well. It was evident that he had a vocation to be a teacher of the Law.

When Joseph and Mary found him, Mary asked him, *“My child, why have you done this to us? See how worried your father and I have been, looking for you.”* Joseph and Mary felt anxiety at the prospect of losing Jesus, but at the same time overwhelming joy for having found him. In Luke’s telling, as always, he gives the leading role to Mary: she asks the question, although she speaks in the plural to include Joseph, and even names him first: *“Your father and I.”* But from the historical perspective, it would have been more likely for Joseph to ask the question, since he was the head of the family, and for his question to sound more like a reproach and a scolding: “Jesus, how could you have done this to us? Your mother and I have been beside ourselves, looking for you for three days.” *“Jesus replied, ‘Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be busy with my Father’s affairs?’”* Lk 2,48.
Lk 2,49.

Jesus, like any good Israelite, regarded the Temple as God’s house, the place of his presence (although He permeates all space), and he (Jesus), a devout boy who like Samuel felt a genuine vocation and wanted to dedicate himself to God’s service from a young age, believed that the best and only place to do so was in the Temple. I S 3,1

Jesus, as a devout twelve-year-old boy, thought that he needed to stay in the Temple to dedicate his life to Yahweh, like any boy who feels an early vocation, or like Samuel. I S 1,19f.

Joseph fails to understand

“Joseph and Mary did not understand what he meant.” The boy’s staying behind in the Temple, which was the place of God’s presence, was not difficult to understand. What the Gospel writer thought that Joseph and Mary did not understand was the transcendent implication of Jesus’s belonging to the Father, which in the Gospel writer’s eyes already implied absolute belonging. Lk 2,50.

Jesus’s relationship with God the Father does not contradict human fatherhood, but they are not identical, because God is father, for Jesus and for all human beings, in a transcendent way. God’s fatherhood has to do with God’s way of being, which makes him a good Father who overlooks our failings. He is Father because He gives rise to life and bestows it freely, because He urges us and sustains us, because He joins himself to us, because He calls us and fulfills us. But He is not a father in the genetic or sexual sense, either to Jesus or to us.

Jesus's person and life surpass any understanding conditioned by a particular culture or by human limitation. This is what happened to Joseph in particular: at that moment he had no reason to realize any transcendence beyond what his senses perceived. The boy Jesus had stayed behind in the Temple without his parents' permission! Jesus forgot to tell them, to ask for permission. This caused them a tremendous scare.

His attitude clearly highlights his religious inclination, his desire to serve God, his desire to observe the liturgical rites and services. He could say, like the psalmist: *"A single day in your courts is worth more than a thousand elsewhere; merely to stand on the steps of God's house is better than living with the wicked."* Ps 84,10.

To Jesus's question, Why were you looking for me?, Joseph could have answered, Because you stayed behind without permission and without telling us, and Jesus answered back with another question, Did you not know that for me the main thing is being in my Father's house?

Some commentators contend that this shows a clear awareness on Jesus's part that he is the Son of God, which could well be the Gospel's intention and reflect St. Luke's catechetical purpose. Jesus is the Son of God from the time he is in his mother's virginal womb, but not necessarily in the awareness of the real, historical Jesus, because in that case we would be speaking of a disembodied awareness, that is, an awareness that is not expressed in the growing awareness of the boy Jesus. Luke concludes the account by telling us that Joseph and Mary *"did not understand what he meant."*

Flavius Josephus, who tends to stretch the facts a bit to please his countrymen, says that these festivities drew "so many people that it surpassed three million pilgrims." Even with a considerable reduction in the number, it is evident that the walls of Jerusalem would rule out a multitude of that size. And of course, all kinds of abuses would have taken place—robberies, fights, frauds, food shortages and high prices. People of modest means knew that they needed to take their own provisions to meet their basic needs. Flavius Josephus. Antiquities of the Jews, X,4-5.

Jesus' message, and the message about Jesus, is only complete after his death and resurrection. We could thus say that during his life on earth Jesus was never fully understood, and not just by his parents, also by his disciples and all the people he dealt with, because he would only be fully understood after the resurrection and on account of the resurrection. It is evident that Luke was already shining the light of the resurrection on these verses. There is nothing surprising in the fact that Joseph and Mary did not fully grasp Jesus's mystery before the full revelation.

Jesus “was bound to them”

Joseph is the authority in his home in Nazareth. The house is small, not unlike the tents of earlier times. It consists of two or three small rooms with a multi-purpose courtyard that was usually shared with the neighboring houses.

There is place on the floor for sleeping in groups—the boys on one side, the girls on the other. A space for the parents, another for storing the family’s things, maybe a box or a chest where they could bring out things both old and new. Furniture was scant due to the scarcity of wood. Simple people slept on the floor on a kind of mat. Beds were for the affluent. The sick lay down on cots, a simple frame with two or four short legs and a rough piece of fabric tied or sewn to the frame. Jesus told one sick man whom he cured, “*Get up, pick up your sleeping mat and walk.*” When people did have a bed, it stood some forty or fifty centimeters off the floor, and was used during the day for eating, like a table. “*Would you bring in a lamp and put it under a tub or under the bed? Surely you will put it on the lampstand?*”

Mt 13,52.

Jn 5,8.

Mk 4,21; Mt 5,15.

Joseph is the authority in his home in Nazareth. He tells Jesus what to do; for example, ‘Jesus, tell your mother to lower the hem on your tunic, or to add ten more lines of knitting because you have grown and it is too short for you. Remember that you are never to take off your tunic in front of anyone; only your mother and I can see you in your underwear.’ Great care was taken to keep children from running around naked. The undergarment was a triangular or rectangular piece of cloth that was placed behind, drawn through the legs to the front and tied by the corners around the waist so that it would not fall.

The father of the family was almost by definition a model of justice, fairness and righteousness. The Book of Proverbs tells us in the first verses: “*Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction,, do not reject your mother’s teaching: they will be a crown of grace for your head.*” The light of the righteous man illuminates his house, and those who enjoy it the most are those who live there. “*Instruct a child in the way he should go, and when he grows old he will not leave it.*” The most precious thing in Joseph’s house was his wife Mary. “*Her husband is respected at the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land.*” “*Many women have done admirable things, but you –Mary– surpass them all!*”

Pr 1,8.

Pr 22,6.

Pr 31,23.

Pr 31,29.

Of course, the greatest value was Jesus, the first-born, and after Jesus, Mary. In Nazareth everyone was amazed at Jesus. “*They were astonished by the gracious words that came from his lips.*”

Lk 4,22.

It is true that when Jesus was an unheralded inhabitant of his town, he enjoyed the respect and acceptance of all of his neighbors, but when he left his town to announce the kingdom of heaven, they were taken aback and even rejected him. Nazareth was located on a hilltop, *“they took him up to the brow of the hill their town was built on, intending to throw him down the cliff.”* Lk 4,23f.
Lk 4, 29.

Jesus has no objection to family or patriarchal life; on the contrary, it provided the clearest, most existential image he could find to speak of God and the kingdom of heaven. For Jesus, the kingdom of heaven is the only thing worth leaving the family for. And anyone who does his Father’s will is like his mother and his brothers. When Jesus died, the apostles went back to their homes, –Emmaus, Galilee– and when he rose from the dead, they left them again. And “home” was the most evocative image to describe eternal life, where one lives in communion with God. Mt 28,16; Jn 21,1f.

Joseph hidden in the hidden life

It is undeniable that the Gospel writers have a special interest in downplaying the figure of Joseph. It is not plausible that they had more information about the details of the Annunciation to Mary than about Joseph’s influence on Jesus’s upbringing. Moreover, the evidence does not suggest the Joseph died when Jesus was young. Jesus’s spiritual attitude, his teachings and parables, give the strong impression that he was profoundly shaped by Joseph as a father figure. Jesus would not have spoken spontaneously of the man who breaks bread for his children, of the father of the family who sleeps in the same bed with them, of the prodigal son, if he had lacked a father figure.

Love is manifested when people go beyond themselves. There is no more disinterested love than when people give of their very person for the sake of others. Human love is not an instinctive impulse; it is a conscious and free decision. Love is Joseph’s offering projected onto Jesus. When one gives the ultimate gift, one shows maximum generosity. Joseph’s ultimate gift was giving of himself to the Father in his love for Jesus. *“A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.”* Jn 15,13. Jesus observed Joseph’s example and learned how to give of himself motivated by his acceptance of others, his love for them and his commitment to them.

Jesus learns not to love others for his own sake, but to love himself for the sake of others. He loves his Father by loving others, and by loving others He loves Himself. Jesus learns, in the intimacy of his family, that love manifests itself in oneness. For this reason, He and the Father are one and the same, and for this reason He calls us to live in communion with Him, and He tells us that eternal life is being where He is. From Jn 17,21-26.

the love of his parents Jesus learned that love consists of the communion of life, which is why He taught people to form a family, to live as brothers and sisters.

He learned from his experiences that oneness is not confusion, not a mixing, but a communion of persons that relates them while respecting their personality. This is how Joseph treats Mary. Family unity was something that fulfilled them both as persons. The family is the fertile ground where self-esteem and personal dignity develop.

Love of God and of others was already an extraordinarily important value for Jesus. Loving implies completing one's personality, and in love a person is fulfilled. Love of self comes before love of the other, but it is in the other where the meaning of self-love is found and has its foundation. This is why it is possible to love beyond oneself. Jesus, by loving, grew in love, and by giving of Himself He grew in generosity.

Jesus learned to love others through the signs in which He, like all of us, wanted to make Himself present. But his signs, like ours, on account of being signs and not entirely revealing their content, can be betrayed. They can be authentic, like that of the sinful woman, or false, like that of Judas. Lk 7,36f.

Jesus grew and developed in his love, in his self-giving, in his faithfulness to the Father and to us. Jesus grew, He walked the path of becoming, He was a man underway.

He, who proceeded entirely from the Father, was the author of his own development. Upon assuming human nature, he underwent everything that falls under the heading of "becoming a man."

Jesus, son of Joseph, as it was thought

"Being the son, as it was thought, of Joseph." At the beginning of St. Luke's account of Jesus's public life, it is important to note how he introduces Jesus. He places Jesus in the context of his town, Nazareth. Everyone knows him as the son of Joseph. They have seen him work and they have lived with him since he was little, over the course of thirty years. Jesus has won their hearts with his presence, his way of being, his way of interacting with others. When he speaks up in the synagogue to give his point of view, explain the Scriptures, or ask and answer questions, everyone is always *"astonished by the gracious words that come from his lips."* Jesus won over the hearts of his countrymen and filled them with hopes, expectations and fears. He was identified as the son of Joseph: that was his name and that was how people related to him.

Lk 3,23.

Lk 4,22.
Cf Lk 2,52;
4,36; 4,28.

Luke's account describes Jesus as the son of an ordinary family from the town of Nazareth, in Galilee. Nothing suggested that Jesus was a person worthy of note. Everyone knew his family. *"This is the carpenter, surely? Is not his mother the woman called Mary, and his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Jude? His sisters, too, are they not all here with us?"* This is why he took them aback. As Jesus himself said, *"No prophet is ever accepted in his own country."*

Mk 6,1-6; Jn 6,42.

Mt 13,54; Lk 4,28.
Lk 4,24.

Jesus as the first-born of his family had a special status in his clan. For everyone, without exception, he was the son of Joseph.

Jesus's miraculous conception was utterly unknown. Only Joseph and Mary had any idea of the mystery. They never told anyone, probably not even Jesus. Jesus always interacted with Joseph as his natural father, which in no way kept him from regarding Yahweh as his true heavenly Father; on the contrary, it facilitated this relationship. St. Luke, who is aware of Jesus's divine origin and proclaims it, considers it very important to draw attention to the fact that although everyone thought that Joseph was Jesus's father, they were all mistaken. Because Jesus's only Father is God. That is why St. Luke says, *"Being the son, as it was thought, of Joseph."*

Jesus's childhood was so rich and significant for him that He compared the highest level of communion with God to the way children relate to their father. And He insisted that *"being like a child"* was a condition for entering into eternal life. *"Unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."* This is why He taught his disciples to address God with the term *"Abba,"* the equivalent of Daddy, spoken with affection by a well-loved and well-treated child. The word comes from Aramaic, which suggests that this attribute of God comes more from the experience of family than from the Bible.

Mt 18,3; Mk 9,36.

Rm 8,15; Ga 4,6.

Calling God "Father" is not unknown in the Bible, but it is not common either. Jesus's use of the term *"Abba,"* however, is unique. Only Jesus and the Christians call Yahweh *"Abba, Father."*

The death of Joseph

It is almost certain that Joseph died young, before Jesus started his public life, probably some 25 years after marrying Mary, perhaps at the age of 42 or 45. We can surmise this from the fact the Jews usually married around the age of 17, and that Joseph does not appear at all, not even in the moments when we would most expect him to, during Jesus's public life. It would have been highly unusual for Mary and Jesus to attend the wedding at Cana without Joseph, the head of the family, or that Mary, accompanied by other family members, would

Mk 3,21; 31f;
Mt 12,46-50;
Lk 8,19.21.

Jn 2,1.
Mk 3,32; 3,21.

send a message asking for Jesus; that would have been Joseph's role. Qo 9,9

Joseph lived his brief life with the woman he loved, educating, protecting and contemplating, not only with his heart but also with his eyes, the Messiah, the Son of God. And loving Yahweh with all his heart during his entire life, as a righteous and holy man. But God's plan was to call him at an early age, so that he would not be an earthly witness to Jesus's death, but would experience it from heaven with the heart and the eyes of the Father-God.

Joseph would bring Jesus up in the human and religious values of a good Israelite, and then die having fulfilled his mission before Jesus would begin to announce the kingdom of heaven.

And he could say, together with Simeon:

"Now, Master, you can let your servant go in peace, just as you promised; because my eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for all the nations to see, a light to enlighten the pagans and the glory of your people Israel." Lk 2,29-32.

Joseph's death must have caused Jesus and Mary great sorrow. Both surely never left his side until his head drooped and he gave up the spirit. Then, if he had not already done so, Jesus placed a phylactery on Joseph's forehead and then one on his left arm. He covered him with the tasseled shawl and solemnly recited the Shema prayer with a broken voice: *"Listen, Israel: Yahweh our God is the one Yahweh. You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength. Let these words I urge on you today be written on your heart. You shall repeat them to your children and say them over to them whether at rest in your house or walking abroad, at your lying down or at your rising; you shall fasten them on your hand as a sign and on your forehead as a circlet."* This was the first prayer that Joseph taught Jesus before he learned to talk. Now Jesus whispered it into Joseph's ear when Joseph was unable to talk. Then he blessed him, just as he had been blessed countless times by this holy man: *"May Yahweh bless you and keep you. May Yahweh let his face shine on you and be gracious to you. May Yahweh uncover his face to you and bring you peace."* Dt 6,4-8. Nb 6,24-26.

For Jesus, death was a passage from this life to God's kingdom in heaven. He did not regard it as a separation of the soul from the body; that was a Greek way of thinking, and did not belong to the Jewish worldview. For Jesus, upon death human beings stop existing in this world in order to be with God. Dying was like lying down to rest, the way he would lie down with Joseph to sleep. Joseph lay down with God, and would later get back up, be raised. Dying meant returning the spirit to God, the spirit each person had received at the time of their

creation, giving it back to God, who alone is immortal. Jesus considers death from the standpoint of resurrection, not immortality. What is raised is the whole person, the way she was before God here on earth and this life is like a kernel or a principle of eternal life that will come to fruition in the resurrection. Jesus treasures the image of “going to sleep with the ancestors.” Paul, who inherited the wisdom tradition, regards sin as the cause of death.

1 Tm 6,16.
2 K 14,16; Jb 14,12;
Ac 13,36; 1 Co 11,30;
15,6.18.20.51;
1 Th 4,13f.
Rm 5,12.17; 6,23;
1 Co 15,21f.

Jesus does not attribute death to sin, nor does he personify it, as if it were someone who shows up unexpectedly. What occurs is the death that all of us somehow have inside of us. Because when we were given life, we were given the privilege of handing it back to God when he calls us. Death implies a profound sense of obedience. –Lord, whenever you see fit–.

Lk 23,46.

The people of Israel saw a long life as a consequence of a righteous life, and an early death as a consequence of an unrighteous life. This way of thinking, while Jewish, was certainly not Jesus’s way of thinking, because in the cases of young people dying, like Jairus’s daughter or Lazarus or the widow’s son, he never made any mention of sin and, like Joseph, he himself would die young in spite of being a righteous man.

Mk 5,22; Lk 8,41.
Jn 11,1f; Lk 7,12.

Joseph’s burial must have followed the customs of the time, on the outskirts of Nazareth. In this way Jesus fulfilled his religious duty to bury his father Joseph, as Isaac buried Abraham.

Lk 7,12.
Gn 25,7f.

Bodies were not placed in a coffin; they were carried on a sort of stretcher, covered by a shroud, to the burying ground, which was always outside the city or town. The Virgin followed, weeping, accompanied by Jesus, who also wept, as he did when Lazarus died and on many other occasions. Because love is a cause of suffering, which in no way contradicts faith in resurrection.

Jn 11,35.

Israelites were very expressive, to the point of exaggeration. When people died, their loved ones were expected to manifest their love with public sobbing and lamentations. “*Jesus wept*” on the occasion of Lazarus’s death, “*and the Jews said, ‘See how much he loved him.’*” Musicians were even hired to play dirges on flutes and other instruments, as well as women who were paid to wail even though they did not know the deceased. We can assume that these excesses did not occur when Joseph died, although it does not seem that Jesus rejected them on other occasions.

Jn 11,35.
Mt 9,23; Lk 7,32;
Mt 11,17.

The body was placed in a shallow grave, and dirt was shoveled over it. If it was a rich person, he was buried in a tomb hewn out of rock. Joseph would have been buried the ordinary way.

Mt 27,57f.

Mourning lasted seven days, concluding with a purification rite. It was not to be extended any longer. Nb 19,11f.

For an Israelite, the dead, here on earth, are dead, not alive. This means that their world is *sheol*, a sort of region or common dwelling-place that constituted the place of the dead, a land of shadows inhabited by those who had passed away. *Sheol* was not seen as an individual place, like a tomb, but as a shared destination. From there the dead would be raised. 1 P 3,19; Ac 2,27.

Jesus believed firmly in the resurrection and therefore Joseph would be raised as He would be, and take his place with God the Father.

The Israelites worshipped only God, not the dead, not even Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses or David. They were remembered but not venerated. They are honored when people live the faith of their ancestors.

Upon the death of Joseph, Jesus became the head of the family. Jesus lived with Mary, his mother, and very likely with his other relatives or brothers: James, Joseph, Simon and Jude, each of them with his respective wife and children. It must have been a close family whose first head was Joseph, but once Joseph died, Jesus, as the first-born, automatically took his place until the time came to proclaim the kingdom. At that point Jesus, with the utmost spontaneity and just as He asked his disciples to do, left everything to carry out the mission the Father had entrusted to him. Mt 13,55; Mk 6,3. Lk 14,26.

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