

PASTORAL LETTER 2021



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Take the Child and His Mother
and go!
(Matthew 2:20)

BISHOP PAUL HINDER OFM CAP.

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To all the faithful in the two Vicariates of Arabia
on the occasion of the Year of Saint Joseph and the Year
“Amoris Laetitia Family”

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Go to Joseph!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ!

1. On 8 December 2020, Pope Francis published the Apostolic Letter “With a father’s heart” (*Patris Corde*). It marked the beginning of the “Year of Saint Joseph” and the 150th anniversary of the declaration of Saint Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church. On 19 March 2021, the solemnity of Saint Joseph, Pope Francis will also inaugurate the Year “Amoris Laetitia Family” which will end on 26 June 2022, on the occasion of the X World Meeting of Families in Rome. Pope Francis frequently refers to the grandparents as an integral part of the family and as a lasting reminder established the fourth Sunday of July (which is close to the feast of Ss. Joachim and Anne, the parents of Mary and grandparents of Jesus) as the World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly. I do not want to repeat what the Holy Father has already written and what you can easily find on the Vatican website. With this letter, I simply wish to present a few reflections putting the “Year of Saint Joseph” and the “Year of the Family” in the context of our situation in the Arabian Peninsula, taking into account the impact of the pandemic which marks our life for longer than expected.

2. I do not need to list all the problems that affect the lives of our families and individual persons. We know how much people have to struggle, living in insecurity about the future and suffering under the threat of a rapidly changing world. Many are anxiously asking: Can I keep my job? Can we further afford the rent for the

apartment or house? Can we remain here as a family or do we have to split or relocate? What will the future of our children be? What about their human and religious education? Will they continue to believe in Jesus Christ and practise their faith in the Catholic Church which is going through stormy waters? During this time of crisis, many feel that it is difficult to live in confidence and to put their trust in God. However, we have to ask ourselves: is there a real alternative to the One who said, *“I am the way, the truth and the life”* (*John 14:6*)?

In light of the above, allow me to speak to you “with a father’s heart”, as Pope Francis entitled his Apostolic Letter.

JOSEPH, PATRON AND PROTECTOR OF THE CHURCH

3. 150 years ago, Pope Pius IX declared Saint Joseph as patron of the Universal Church. It was a difficult time for the Church which was under fire from both outside and inside. From outside, because after the French Revolution and the time of the Enlightenment, the worldly power of the Church (most manifest in the Papal States) was contested and seen as something to be destroyed. From inside, because the Church was torn between tendencies to restore a lost past on one side, and movements which attempted to reconcile faith and active engagement with the world. The loss of the Papal States made the spiritual relevance of the Church more visible and led to a process of reflection and renewal

of its traditions and priorities. However, the difficult dialogue between modern philosophies on one side and the Catholic faith on the other, continues until today. We all swim in stormy waters and risk drifting away because our faith is sometimes shaky. Many doubt whether Jesus is still on the boat, patiently waiting for the right moment to calm the storm. However, he is still with us and says the same words to you and to me that he said to the disciples, “*Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?*” (*Mark 4:40*)

4. In the Gospel, we read that Joseph was faced with scandalous news about his bride Mary, who was pregnant. He had to regain his confidence at this critical moment of his relationship with her. He did so by relying on God’s faithfulness and the words of His promise given through the angel. We too are very often confronted with scandalous news that we do not know how to deal with. Scandals and crimes caused by church members, even prominent ones, shake our trust. Many faithful around the world have been shocked and rightly so! It seems that the Church is going again through a difficult time. However, like Saint Joseph, let us trust in God’s word and believe in the promise of Christ, that “*the gates of Hades will not prevail against it*” (*Mt 16:18*).

5. Let us also recall the role of Saint Joseph after the visit of the Magi. The Holy Family was forced to flee to Egypt to escape the murderous king Herod, and could only return after his death. We see that the life of Jesus is a mirror of the story of the people of Israel,

who went to slavery in Egypt and then returned to the Promised Land. It is also a sign of the story of the Church on pilgrimage in the world until it returns to the Promised Land of heaven. Joseph, the guide of the Holy Family, also guides the family of the Church on this journey. In Nazareth, he watched over and took care of the Holy Family. As Saint Joseph was the caretaker and protector of Mary and Jesus, he continues to be the protector of the universal Church as well as our local Church.

JOSEPH, HUMBLE FOLLOWER OF GOD'S WILL

6. In the cathedral of Abu Dhabi, dedicated to Saint Joseph, there is a beautiful mosaic showing Saint Joseph and the boy Jesus. At first glance, it seems as if Joseph is guiding Jesus. However, looking more carefully, we notice that it is rather the boy Jesus who is taking Joseph by the hand. This gives us a very important first insight not only regarding the relationship in the Holy Family but also in our families, in the life of the communities, and in the whole Catholic Church. Although Mary and Joseph, as the parents of Jesus, had to bring up and guide their son, at the very end it was the Son who took the lead and guided Mary and Joseph. We notice in the gospel that several times the parents had difficulties in understanding Jesus. The family even tried to bring the uncommonly behaving son to his senses! Think of the moment when the family members were worried about Jesus going his messianic way, as we read in the gospel: "*When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were*

saying, ‘*He has gone out of his mind.*’” (Mark 3:21) It seems that Joseph at this moment was no longer alive. However, the scene shows that Jesus did not follow the normal family code but the code of God, risking a break with his family clan. True family-membership with Jesus is created not by blood-relationship but by doing the will of God (Mark 3:35).

7. Sometimes, I wonder if certain difficulties in our families and communities come from the fact that we give more importance to “blood-relationships” than to the spirit. The honour of the family, the belonging to the same ethnic group and the pedigree are more important to us than a mature relationship rooted in the will of God. Family and social conventions are important, but they have their limits. Looking again at the mosaic in the cathedral of Abu Dhabi, we would expect Joseph to be leading Jesus. However, we - families, communities, local and universal Church – do not take Jesus by the hand and show him the way. The opposite is true. Jesus takes us by the hand and leads us on the way. Very often, Jesus is disguised in simple people and innocent children who know better than us where and how to go forward. This is the reason why we have to listen carefully to the voices, not only of the adults and those in authority, but also of the children, of the youth, and of those who keep silent most of the time. It happens quite often that God speaks through those channels, as Saint Benedict states in the Rule for his monks that God often reveals His mind to the younger ones.

JOSEPH, PATTERN OF FAITHFUL RELATIONSHIPS

8. It is becoming more and more common in this region of the world that people are “singles”. Some are not married, while others have left spouse and/or children in their home country out of economic necessity. The pressures of work and the loneliness of life are a burden for many. In such situations, there is the temptation to form temporary relationships of convenience or turn to various addictions for comfort. In his own relationship, it would have been easy for Saint Joseph to divorce Mary. However, he listened to God’s message and remained faithful to his wife. In the life of Joseph, we see that true love is not based in physical relationships, or in fulfilling one’s own desires. Rather, it “always protects, always trusts, always hopes and always perseveres” (cf. 1 Cor 13:7). In the relationship of Joseph with Mary we find those elements that characterize all healthy Christian relationships: mutual respect for dignity of persons, working and sacrificing for the good of the other, and shared holiness and faithfulness to God. Jesus Christ was truly at the centre of their life and relationship as spouses.

JOSEPH, HEAD OF THE HOLY FAMILY

9. Saint Joseph was not only a faithful spouse but a dedicated father, concerned with the spiritual and material needs of his family. As guardian of the Holy Family, he also took an active role in their spiritual life. Together with Mary, he brought the child

Jesus to the Temple to be circumcised and to offer a sacrifice as given in the law of Moses. The Gospel of Luke tells us that he took his family on the long journey to the Temple in Jerusalem “every year for the festival of the Passover” (Luke 2:41). He is a model and help for all parents who are struggling with all the difficulties of ordinary life to bring their children up in the way of faith. Given the difficulties caused by distance, time, daily activities, professional or educational ambitions and many other factors, parents may be tempted to make the spiritual welfare of their children secondary. Joseph’s example is important, especially for fathers. Very often in some of our families, the imparting of faith to children is seen as the task of the mother. But, as the baptism ceremony tells us, it is the responsibility of both father and mother to be the “first teachers of their children in the ways of faith” (Rite of Baptism 70). Saint Joseph shows us the powerful impact of the faith of a father in the life of the family and of the children.

10. We have no detailed report in the Bible about the daily life of the Holy Family in Nazareth and the relationship among its members. However, we can draw some legitimate conclusion from the behaviour of the adult Jesus. It was certainly not only his divinity which made him act as he did, but also the human education he received from his parents. The gospel of Luke gives us a hint when it states that after the return of twelve-year old Jesus from Jerusalem, *“he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them... And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour”* (Luke 2:51, 52). His attention towards

children, the sick, the possessed and the segregated people of all kinds must also be a fruit of the education in a house where his foster-father Joseph and his mother Mary were sensitive towards people at the peripheries. The tenderness in his relationship with the men and women who followed him must have had roots not only in heaven but also on earth in his family with Mary and Joseph in the village of Nazareth.

11. The conditions within many of our families do not help to live the ideal that we all dream about. Today, there is the risk of neglecting the human relationship among the members due to one's workload. Sometimes, the family cannot enjoy real common life, because they can rarely gather physically. Pure economic needs force many families to such abnormality. But a climate of human love, warmth and mutual respect is also necessary for the growth and development of children. Joseph worked in a simple job as a carpenter, but the home of the Holy Family was filled with love. It can be the case that one is economically and professionally successful or has given many opportunities to the children – but the climate in the family is not healthy and relationships of the members with each other is bad. I invite you to ask yourself: is economic success the only things that matters for the life of my family? What about the values and love that my children need?

LIKE JOSEPH, ACCEPT HARDSHIPS AND SIMPLICITY

12. We all know the story of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem

according to the gospel of Luke. Most of us connect it with fond memories of our childhood and the celebration of Christmas in our family. However, we should never forget the difficult circumstances of that first Christmas in Bethlehem where it is said, that Mary “*gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn*” (*Luke 2:7*). To have “no place” is the experience of millions around the world at this very moment. Look at the reports from refugee camps and you will have a picture of how Bethlehem was during the birth of Jesus for the Holy Family. It was amidst poverty and shortage of space that the King of kings and Ruler of the world was born. At that moment, Mary and Joseph were surely not aware of the historical significance of this event. They had many other difficult, precarious and ordinary circumstances to struggle with. Even in our day, we should not forget that great things happen not so much in the palaces of the mighty and the comfort zones of the rich, but in the simplicity of people who patiently accept the challenges of the situation and do what is needed at the given moment. Only many years after the birth of Jesus could people see, understand and appreciate the great event that had taken place. Here we can learn that great things happen in the simplicity of life with its trials. Let us try to discover it in our own lives!

JOSEPH, MAN OF PRAYER AND SILENCE

13. Joseph, the foster-father of Jesus, is the great silent saint. We do not have a single word of his own in the Bible. Nevertheless,

he speaks to us through his courageous actions as caretaker of the Holy Family and through his silence. He teaches us that the church should never be a place of empty noise and useless words, but of devout prayer and true love, a place where we are more listening to the voice of Jesus than rattling off a lot of words. Jesus told his disciples, *“do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him”* (Mt 6:7-8). Am I wrong to believe that Jesus in his humanity also learnt this from Joseph, the carpenter, with whom he must have spent several years before he started his messianic mission? We learn from Joseph how important it is to not only hear God’s word but also carry out what God asks. The ability to be silent and listen to God’s voice is necessary in order for us to properly discern what path we should take amid the challenges of life.

JOSEPH, MODEL FOR MIGRANT WORKERS

14. Pope Pius XII declared Saint Joseph as patron of workers. For those among you who have come to the Gulf for a temporary job, he is a good example and point of reference as intercessor in heaven. Like Joseph, most of you do not have a voice. You simply do your duty to bring up the income needed for your own and for your family’s livelihood. Is this not what Joseph did for the Holy Family? Many of you have also to deal with critical situations here or back home as it happened to Joseph at his time. You may have to help people back home who are affected by natural calamities; you

may have to deal with embarrassing situations like an unexpected pregnancy. Joseph can be a good signpost. He too knew the feeling of insecurity, he too had to migrate for the sake of his family to Egypt for a time. From Joseph, we do not hear words of complaints, we only see actions done in faith and confidence that God would lead him the right way. He could not plan long-term but was given on-time the advice for the next step. Is this not exactly the situation of many among us?

LIKE JOSEPH, LEARNING TO ACCEPT UNFORESEEN CIRCUMSTANCES

15. We are living in a time of great insecurity and unforeseen circumstances. The present pandemic has taught us this reality in a rather brutal way. We had (and still have) to learn to live with the fact that all our plans are uncertain. Here again Saint Joseph can be a model for us. More than once in his life he had to change his plans. It started with the embarrassing moment when he discovered that his fiancée was pregnant without his knowing how it happened. He needed heavenly assistance from the angel in a dream to understand the mystery and to act properly. It happens very often in our personal lives and in the life of families that unforeseen events can hamper or change all our previous plans. It could be an unexpected pregnancy, as in the Bible. It could be an accident, a sickness, the death of a family member, the loss of a job and many other things. Life has to continue, although very often in a first shock we do not know how. During these moments, it is good to remember

the words that were spoken to Joseph, and to adapt them to our particular situation: *“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit”* (Mt 1:20). Fearlessly accepting the unforeseen and unplanned can help us to discover the hidden work of the Holy Spirit.

LIKE JOSEPH, PRESERVE THE SPIRITUAL TREASURES GIVEN TO US

16. We all are migrants (or better “expats”), and that means that we are people without citizenship or a guarantee of long-term residence in the country where we live at present. Some people have dramatically experienced how fast one can lose one’s job, one’s apartment and one’s residence visa. This insecurity has become even more obvious during the time of the pandemic when many people have experienced helplessness in the face of an adverse reality. One who is permanently traveling or has to flee in haste cannot take everything one owns. He or she has to leave behind the house with its furniture, the garden with its plants, the neighbours and friends. He or she is forced to enter another culture and learn one or more foreign languages. It is a continuous process of adaptation with the risk of losing one’s original identity. This was and is precisely the problem migrant families are facing. This also applies to the Church. Many conflicts within the Church nowadays are related to the question of what has to be preserved on her earthly pilgrimage and what can be left behind. The shortest answer is given in the order of the angel to Joseph, “Get up, take the child and his mother,

and go..." Jesus was himself on the move as an itinerant preacher in what we call "the Holy Land". He taught his disciples to take with them the minimum possible in material things, but the maximum in spiritual things, that means: to announce the Kingdom of God, to drive out the bad spirits and to forgive sins, to heal the sick, to feed them with the Bread of Life, to make people believe in Jesus Christ. The words of the angel to Saint Joseph are also addressed to every follower of Jesus: "take the child and his mother and go!" Never give up Jesus Christ and his mother Mary and what they stand for: the Word of God, the sacraments, and the profession of faith in God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. With Mary we are called to ponder all these things in our hearts (Lk 2:19, 51) and step by step understand better the mysteries of our faith.

17. Dear friends in Christ, it is important that we redefine our own life in the light of Joseph. Each of us in his or her own way is told, "take the child and his mother", take Jesus and Mary into your life. Give them space and trust so that they will reward you for the pains you have to go through: being an expat, feeling the solitude, living in fear of losing the job, experiencing the threat of the pandemic. As long as you are taking the child and his mother with you, you will be fine even in times of distress. Joseph and Mary had to go through difficult moments from the time of the Annunciation to the Crucifixion, where Mary stood as a widow under the cross, representing also Joseph, "the guardian of the Redeemer", as Saint John Paul II called him.

I thank all those who, working simply and humbly like Saint Joseph, did their best to assist people in distress and to give them a spark of hope amidst the darkness of despair. There were many in our parishes who openly or discreetly showed solidarity to people who felt lost. The same is true for all those who worked in the field of healthcare, of food provision, of social services and so on. They bore the “heat of the day” (Mt 20:12) - or better, the “heat of the pandemic” - in order to minimize the suffering and solitude of so many people.

JOSEPH, PROTECTOR OF LIFE

18. We learnt during the pandemic more than ever the fragility of the gift of life. Many of us may have lost family members, relatives or friends, often within a few days. Very often, there was no possibility to accompany them on their last stretch of their earthly journey and take our leave from them in a proper manner. Many may even feel guilty about this, although they were simply not able or not allowed to do what they would have liked to do for those who were infected by Covid-19. As we have seen, Saint Joseph too had to take care of a life under deadly threat when Herod was about to kill all the male infants in Bethlehem. We know very well how much even in our own times, life is at risk from sickness or external violence. Keep in mind the millions of abortions around the world. Think about the children in war zones like Yemen, in sprawling camps for the displaced. Remember all those who are sexually abused or victims of human trafficking, very often killed

if they do not submit to the slave traders. Jesus escaped such a fate, thanks to the warning from heaven and the resolute action of Joseph. Are we ready to do what is within our power to protect the life of every human being from its conception to its natural death? We all are called to contribute through our lifestyle and our action to promote a culture of life against a culture of death. Let us be Joseph and not Herod!

JOSEPH, PATRON OF A GOOD DEATH

19. Finally, the year of the pandemic has taught us in a very explicit way that we all are living door to door with death. Perhaps earlier we were less aware of this reality, and the pandemic was a necessary wake-up call. Suddenly, each of us has to take into account the possibility that he or she could be infected unexpectedly by a deadly virus. Many of us have seen death brutally hit our own family or our neighbourhood. Now is the right moment to refresh our memory and devotion to Saint Joseph who is universally venerated as patron for a good and happy death. The Church encourages the dying and those around them to ask for the prayers of Saint Joseph at the moment of death (cf. Commendation of the Dying 217, 220A). We do not know when and how Joseph died. Popular piety however believes that he passed away in the presence of his son Jesus. What more can we wish for than to have the same assistance and presence of Jesus when our own final hour comes?

GO TO JOSEPH!

20. On the feast of Saint Joseph, we pray during the Mass: "This just man was given by you as spouse to the Virgin Mother of God and set as a wise and faithful servant in charge of your household to watch like a father over your Only Begotten Son, who was conceived by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, our Lord Jesus Christ." Saint Joseph had to fulfil a very humble and purely instrumental mission. In this, he can be a guide for our personal faith life. He teaches us that to believe, to care about the things of God, to look after his incarnate Son does not require academic studies or a lot of religious efforts. It simply requires the silent "Yes" to the plans of God. It required him to be there at the side of Mary and to look after the growing Son whose strange behaviour may even at certain moments have hurt his heart! Mary spoke also on behalf of her husband when she questioned the twelve-year-old son in the temple: "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." They only received the rather embarrassing reply: "*Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?*" But they did not understand what he said to them (*Luke 2:48,49*). Is this not a consolation for all of us who very often do not understand what Jesus is doing with us? Saint Joseph can teach us more than anyone else what it means to live close to the mystery of God.

The doctor of the Church, Saint Teresa of Avila, who had a great devotion to Saint Joseph would often advise her nuns "*Go to Joseph!*" (*Genesis 41:55*). Many Saints in the past applied this word about the

Joseph of Egypt in the Old Testament to Saint Joseph, who in a similar way helps us in times of distress. He is a reliable guide for all of us who wish to live in the presence of God while we take care of our daily affairs and work, travel and care for others. Let us all go to this “wise and faithful servant” whom God has “set in charge of the household” of the Church to encourage, guide and protect us on our pilgrim way. Saint Joseph, pray for us!

+ Paul Hinder, OFM Cap.

Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia

Apostolic Administrator of Northern Arabia

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