Voices of Sisters

Spirituality



A depiction of St. Joseph cradling the infant Jesus while Mary sleeps is seen in a stained-glass window at St. Patrick Church in Smithtown, New York. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)



by Sr. Sue Paweski

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Pope Francis has proclaimed a year for St. Joseph. I am elated. I have a special devotion to St. Joseph because he reminds me of my father, who was a steady, faithful presence in our family. Joseph has that same aura. I remember putting Joseph's figure in the crèche in front of the manger, when I was a child, only to have him put back on the side near an ox after my mother rearranged the figures. I tried!

There is little about Joseph in the New Testament. We know he was from the House of David; he was a carpenter, and he was a faithful and devoted spouse to Mary, and a loving father to Jesus. We don't know when he died. We last hear about him in Luke 2:41-52 when he and Mary find the 12-year-old Jesus speaking to the teachers in the Temple. Joseph is not at the marriage feast in Cana so I surmise that he died before Jesus was 30 years old.

I reflect on how disturbing it must have been for Joseph to realize that his betrothed and beloved Mary was pregnant. What was their conversation like, which surely included tears and pain? In the Jewish tradition, Joseph could divorce Mary. How he must have loved her — because he had decided to divorce her quietly in order to spare Mary from further embarrassment.

Joseph's fears and trepidation are relieved by a dream of an angel comforting him and reassuring him that Mary would be his wife and Jesus "will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Joseph accepts and becomes a loving husband to Mary.

On their way to Bethlehem for the census, Mary was about to give birth. Where can they find a room with so many people in Bethlehem, all looking for lodgings? Joseph must have been frantic. He has to protect his wife and is grasping the importance of the baby that would soon enter the world. All he can find is a cave where animals are kept. He accepts the offer of the owner to let them stay there. While he and Mary were surely relieved, I would guess that Joseph was still looking for a better place for them.

The blessed event of Jesus' birth takes place. Shepherds visit the family. Was Joseph welcoming but a little wary because he must shield the baby from any harm? How did he react to the Magi? In Matthew 2:11, the Magi visit Jesus in a house. Had

Joseph found a more suitable place for the family? Joseph must have been very concerned that these three Wise Men have journeyed far to find Jesus. Joseph may have been cautious and questioned the Magi until he believed it was safe for them to bring their gifts in homage to Jesus. Mary may have looked to Joseph for direction since she, as any new mother, was consumed with caring for Jesus.

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At some point in the Holy Family's time in Bethlehem, Joseph is again visited by an angel in a dream. He is not to return to Nazareth but to find refuge in Egypt because of Herod's plan to kill Jesus. Joseph must have been frightened and filled with dread.

He and Mary take Jesus to Egypt and stay until Herod's death. They are refugees in a strange land. Were they welcomed when they looked for lodgings? Did Joseph find some carpentry work to provide for the family? Joseph is the steady and constant protector and provider.

The last mention of Joseph in the Scripture is looking for Jesus, who is missing during the pilgrimage to the temple. Imagine losing your child and frantically looking for him/her in the midst of many people during a pilgrimage. Joseph and Mary kept each other hopeful as they searched faces on their way back to the Temple. And there was Jesus in the Temple speaking with the teachers. What relief! What joy tinged with parental frustration!

Francis describes St. Joseph as "a beloved father," "a tender and loving father," "an obedient father," "an accepting father," a father who is "creatively courageous," "a working father," "a father in the shadows" (*Patris Corde*).

As we continue to celebrate the birth of Jesus the Christ, the light of the world, reflect on the example of Joseph. We will need to be "creatively courageous" this Christmas. Be hopeful and filled with the peace of Christmas!

(And look at your crèche and move St. Joseph toward the front of the manger!)

[Sue Paweski has been a Sister of Providence of St. Mary of the Woods for 22 years. For 10 years, she has ministered in the advancement office of her congregation. Currently, she is co-director of her community's associate program.]