November reflections for the Year of St. Joseph
Patron of the Dying—Joseph and end-of-life care

Being with others in suffering

WHY IS ST. JOSEPH KNOWN AS “PATRON OF THE DYING”? Traditionally, it is believed that St. Joseph died with Mary and Jesus by his side, loving St. Joseph until the very end of his earthly life. I find it particularly moving that St. Joseph is the Patron of the Dying not because we have a record of his heroic death, but because we know who was with him at the moment that he died.

Often when someone is suffering or dying, we shy away from being near them because we do not know the right thing to say. We don’t have satisfying answers to human suffering. Peter Kreeft, in his book Making Sense Out of Suffering, explains that God’s answer to our suffering is not a formula, a placebo, a pill or good advice, but Christ Himself. Kreeft writes:

“Christ came. He entered space and time and suffering. He came, like a lover. Love seeks above all intimacy, presence, togetherness. Christ did the most important thing and He gave the most important gift: Himself. It is a lover’s gift. Out of our tears, our waiting, our darkness, our agonized aloneness, out of our weeping and wondering, out of our cry, ‘My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?’ He came, all the way, right into that cry.

“He does not turn His face from us, however much we turn our face from Him. He endures our spiritual scabs and scars, our sneers and screams, our hatreds and haughtiness, just to be with us. With-ness—that is the word of love.”

St. Joseph’s death is an example of this “with-ness.” His death is holy, revered, because Jesus and Mary were with him.

Personally, I do not interact with the dying or destitute on a daily basis. I am a stay-at-home mother to three little children. But I am challenged by the scene of Mary and Jesus present at St. Joseph’s deathbed in two ways. First, I am reminded that the best way to love my husband and my children is to be present to them, especially in their suffering or sadness.

Secondly, I am convicted of the need for mothers to support one another simply by practicing this “with-ness.” Motherhood is a call to die to self. This “dying” comes in the form of coming face to face with my own selfishness that I didn’t recognize before, and trying to allow the Lord to strip me of it. I think that when mothers are with each other in these daily challenges, the “dying” is made so much more peaceful, hopeful, and fruitful. When I am in the presence of other moms and children, my own burden doesn’t seem as heavy; I know that I am not alone on this beautiful, but difficult journey.

Of course this “with-ness” is necessary for everyone. All walks of life, all vocations, include a call to die to ourselves so Christ can rise in us. For all of us, the best way to love is often simply to show up, to really be present to those around us. And we all need others to be Mary and Jesus for us in our daily life, especially in moments of suffering.

When I think of the comfort that Mary and Jesus brought to St. Joseph, and the comfort that other mothers have brought to me by inviting me into their lives, I wonder: Who do I know who may be lonely or in need of love? Who is alone in their daily dying (physical, spiritual, or emotional) who may need me to be with them? Do I only gather with those who help me along in my journey, or do I seek to give that gift of presence to others?

St. Joseph, Patron of the Dying, give us the courage to be with those who are suffering. ✝
A doctor’s wisdom

St. Joseph has been venerated as an important patron of the sick and dying since the early Church. As St. Alphonsus Ligouri, doctor of the Church, explains, adopting Joseph as Patron of the Dying was only natural, principally for three reasons: his unique holiness, his powerful intercession against evil and his deathbed experience of Christ and Mary.

St. Joseph is uniquely holy because he enjoys a unique relationship with Christ: “Jesus Christ loved him not only as a friend, but as a father, and on this account his mediation is far more efficacious than that of any other saint.” By virtue of his moral character and his intimacy with Christ before the start of his public ministry, St. Joseph is holy, but more importantly, Joseph is holy because he is the father of Christ on earth, personally chosen by the one Father. This fact is the highest testimony of St. Joseph’s great holiness, and it is of course most natural for Christians to appeal to none other than the greatest of saints at the hour of their death.

Second, St. Alphonsus explains that St. Joseph was the natural saint for people to turn towards as the patron of the dying, “because St. Joseph has obtained special power against the evil spirits who tempt us with redoubled vigor at the hour of death.” In fact, St. Joseph is venerated in the Litany of St. Joseph as “Terror of Demons,” a title that comes from the great power of his protection against evil spirits, merited through his intimacy with Jesus.

Third, St. Alphonsus points out, “The assistance given St. Joseph at the hour of death by Jesus and Mary obtained for him the light to secure a holy and peaceful death for his servants. Hence, if they invoke him at the hour of death, he will not only help them, but he will also obtain for them the assistance of Jesus and Mary.” Thus, according to St. Alphonsus, it is the presence of Jesus and Mary to Joseph at the moment of his own death that allows him to come to the aid of all Christians who call upon him at the time of their own deaths.

Indeed, because of the unique circumstances surrounding the end of St. Joseph’s life, he is said to have merited the happiest of all deaths. St. Alphonsus reflects on the joy of St. Joseph’s death:

After having faithfully served Jesus and Mary, St. Joseph reached the end of his life in the house at Nazareth. There, surrounded by angels, assisted by Jesus Christ the king of angels, and by Mary, his spouse, who placed themselves at each side of his poor bed, filled with the peace of paradise, he departed from this life. Who shall ever be able to understand the sweetness, the consolation, the blessed hope, the acts of resignation, the flames of charity which the words of eternal life coming alternately from the lips of Jesus and Mary, breathed into the soul of Joseph at the end of his life?

When St. Joseph’s disciples call upon him for the grace of a happy death, St. Joseph can bring them forth into the presence of Jesus and Mary, securing for them the same joy that he himself felt at the moment of his death. As St. Alphonsus says well, “Since we all must die, we should cherish a special devotion to St. Joseph that he may obtain for us a happy death.”

REFLECT AND PARTICIPATE

As the Diocese of Lafayette celebrates the Year of St. Joseph, reflecting upon the virtues of adoration, obedience and service, several events have also been planned in which all are invited to actively participate. Events scheduled for November include:

- Nov. 4 (5:30 p.m.): Parish Mission (St. Joseph Church, Milton)
- Nov. 7-19: Opportunity to gain Year of St. Joseph indulgence (any St. Joseph Church)
- Nov. 10-12 (6:30 p.m.): Triduum on the life of St. Joseph (St. Peter Church, New Iberia)

Additional information about the Year of St. Joseph may be found at diolaf.org/stjoseph.