Columns
Coronavirus
Spirituality



Detail of a 17th-century etching depicting St. Joseph holding the infant Christ, after a painting by Guido Reni (Metropolitan Museum of Art)



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The pandemic has spoken to us in millions of ways and has taught us to live more disciplined lives, to be satisfied with the minimum, one could say. I personally had an experience learning to live without things by just managing with a couple of them, when I got stuck at the border crossing.

While at the service of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Sindhurdurg in the outskirts of Kadawal (which is composed of five far-off substations in the Kudal district of Maharashtra, India), I had to travel to Goa, India, for official work.

I had to report to the passport office in Goa for the renewal of my travel document on March 23, 2020, and the Indian prime minister had declared the national travel ban on March 22 in light of the pandemic. So I traveled on the 21st, and then I could not travel back due to the continuous lockdown and the closure of interstate borders.

In May, I was transferred to Holy Family Convent, Sancoale, Goa. Until Nov. 28, the day I finally got to return to my old community — and came back the same day with my luggage — I understood the reality of living with minimum and foregoing my needs.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Pope Francis has reached out with kind gestures, one in heart and mind with humanity. At a time when the global pandemic had forced millions to live hidden away, isolated and alone, the pontiff surprised the church on Dec. 8, 2020, by the proclamation of the Year of St Joseph. Yes, Joseph befits the grim situation, as a model of hidden life for the millions of people in troubled waters, homeless and separated from their loved ones.

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His hidden life was intimately shared by millions of people making their way through the pandemic. The health care worker on the front lines whose sacrifices are hidden even from their families; the single parent who cannot confide to anyone her intense worry about her children; the adult child of an aging parent living in a nursing home terrified about the spread of illness; the widow lone and forsaken. Those struggling to eke out a living with unspoken crises, the debts and loans, the soaring prices of essentials — the list can go on!

The hidden life of Joseph also speaks to those overwhelmed by the pandemic, who wonder if God is with them, if God sees.

Appearing only briefly in the Gospels, given no words at all to speak, Joseph leads a life of quiet service to God, a life that remains almost totally unknown to us, yet — filled with countless hidden, unseen, unrecorded acts of love — of infinite value. Joseph's life says to all of us, "Do not neglect to do good; share what you have with others, for God is pleased by sacrifices of that kind" (Hebrews 13:16).

As I reflected on the title of the pope's proclamation — *Patris Corde*, "With a Father's Heart" — the word *heart* reminded me of Billye Brim, who says, "There's an 'ear' in the middle of your heart." If you look intently, you see that the word *heart* indeed has an ear in the middle, at the H(ear)T of it. And if we join both our ears, you can see the shape of a heart.

It's amazing! It is not a coincidence: I see a finger of God in the creation of our faculties and the word related to it. Definitely, St. Joseph is a man who listened with his heart, which we witness in several episodes mentioned in the Bible: the Annunciation by the angel Gabriel, Joseph's betrothal to Mary and refusal to divorce her, the Nativity woes, the flight to Egypt ...

He was a man of action who listened to his dreams and followed the instructions in a given situation. He took Mary as his wife. He fulfilled his responsibility as husband and father of the child-to-be, as he goes for the census to Bethlehem. A man of action and not a man of words!

Because of this silence, he was able to hear God's voice and discern his will for the Holy Family. In an age of noise and many words, Joseph reminds us that if we wish to hear God's voice, we must quiet our hearts, and enter into silence, and this

lockdown was/is an opportune time.

St. Joseph is a man of deep prayer. This is revealed in his belief in the angel's message. He is a man of self-control and understanding. A husband to Mary, yet he understands the plan of God and respects Mary's chastity. For as a husband, to consummate the marriage was his right, but I think he was called to remain chaste and faithful to his one and only sacramental wife, "until she bore a son" (Matthew 1:25).

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As a carpenter, when Jesus was young, Joseph must have involved him in his ministry. Simple things like lifting the chair, the hammer and nails, or holding one end of the wooden piece. He is inviting us to get the children involved in family chores, teaching them how to wash their own plates, and how to clean and sweep the house — both the boys and the girls.

Teach them to anoint their body with the sign of the cross when they wake up, and to thank God — and without forgetting to fold their bedcovers.

As head of the family, he saw to the finance and other support he needed to strengthen his family; he could not give them luxury, but probably made a decent living. He knew he could never compete with his wife and son, knowing their sanctity, yet with humility he shouldered the responsibility entrusted to him.

On Dec. 8, 2021, Francis brought the curtain down on the Year of St. Joseph, which had challenged us to meditate on his attributes. And, certainly, to emulate and hail him by being radical witnesses of hidden/silent acts of mercy?

St. Joseph, the father in the shadows, who portrayed a hidden fatherhood, encourages us to learn to live as the pope describes him and attributes seven ways in how he shadowed Jesus with a father's heart.

The closing of the year gave us time to celebrate the birth of Jesus more radically, by a soul searching of our own hearts. We are invited to live in communion, participating wholeheartedly in sharing the joy of Christmas and listening to the groaning of the Earth — those with whom we live, others and creation — to fulfil the mission.

Empowered to experience the joy deep within when faced with uncertainties, trusting in the providence of God, and deepening our life of faith to overcome our fear of the deadly new variants of COVID-19, we will wrestle against rulers of the world and spiritual wickedness, taking the armor of God, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, that is the word of God (Ephesians 6:11-20).

In 2022, let's keep a watch over our heart (Jeremiah 17:9-10), make an offering of ourselves as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1), and have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:5).