

Fr. Carter Griffin homily for the Gold Mass
St. Joseph's Church on Capitol Hill
March 19, 2018

The Courage of Saint Joseph

Some might think that Saint Joseph has little to say to us today. And indeed there are many differences. He lived in Palestine two thousand years ago; we live in Washington, DC today. His life was hidden; yours and those you serve are often very public. His vocation was to head the Holy Family; ours, isn't! But all these considerations, I believe, miss the point. Saint Joseph has much to teach us – all of us – not because of his unique role in salvation history, but because of his uniquely credible example of virtue and holiness – and that applies to all of us.

There are many qualities of his that we could meditate on – his docility to God, his prayerfulness, his purity of life, his hard work on behalf of his family, his humility. But there is another virtue on which I would like to reflect with you today – it is his courage. It took tremendous courage to accept the responsibility that God had placed on his shoulders, and the angel knew this when he said, “*do not fear* to take Mary as your wife...” It took courage, in that terrible night in which Joseph was awoken by the angel in the middle of the night to whisk his family away to Egypt before the bloodthirsty Herod caught up to them. It took courage, once in Egypt, to return to the Holy Land where there were still those who wanted to take the Child's life.

But why reflect on this courage? Because it is a prerequisite for all virtue, and uniquely for the virtues that you exercise in public service. When I was parochial vicar at St. Peter's on Capitol Hill, I grew to admire and respect especially the “back office” work of so many who assist those in the Congress. The great comedian George Burns once said that “it's too bad the only people who know how to run the country are busy driving cabs and cutting hair.” I would only add “and serving on congressional staffs!” There are so many good people like yourselves, serving our country well, right here in these parish boundaries.

You do what you do in order to make a difference in the world. And what is the essential ingredient to making a difference in the world? Not your political convictions, though those are important. Not your talents, however significant they may be. Not your professional skills, as necessary as they are. What makes the greatest difference in the world, without question and without exception, is holiness – becoming faithful and committed disciples of Christ. Speaking to the young people at World Youth Day some years ago, Pope Benedict XVI said that “only through the saints does true revolution come!” The deep revolution, lasting and genuine renewal.

In other words, if we really want to make a difference in the world, we start by making a difference in ourselves. It is only through holiness that our lives will be filled with the peace,

the conviction, the authentic goodness, the joy that alone moves hearts. As Mother Teresa said, “Holiness is the one argument the world cannot refute.”

And that brings us back to courage. Because increasingly, given all the trends today, it will take courage for each of us to remain faithful to the Gospel in the times ahead, to become the saints God wishes us to be. Saint Joseph’s courage in the midst of all the trials he faced can be a beacon of light for us, a witness and a source of strength. We can go to him when we feel overwhelmed, and he who is the “terror of demons” will drive away all fears – and give us courage. Courage to stand up for what is right, for what is good – when everyone around us has run for cover. Courage to protect the underdog, the vulnerable, the weak and the poor, standing by the one who needs our protection – when no one else does. Courage to cope with the trials and sufferings that God permits in our lives, even when we don’t understand them. Courage to live an upright, moral life, to be okay with living differently as Catholics and as followers of Christ.

What the Church teaches is more and more counter-cultural in an increasingly secular and individualistic culture. Standing up for what is true, good, and beautiful will take courage, the courage born of a vibrant interior life of union with God – like St. Joseph. Chesterton said that “only a living thing can go against the stream.” We must be among those around us most fully alive in grace, so that we can swim against the current when necessary. These are times for saints; for those of you serving us in the public realm, sanctity is what we need most from you.

Saint Joseph is a model of courage for each of us, but especially for those of you who are faced, like Joseph himself was, with the challenge of remaining faithful to God when so much seems to be working against you. And like St. Joseph, your courage will pave the way for a life of genuine holiness which in turn will help ignite a revolution, a revolution of grace that will truly change our country and the world, one soul at a time, to the glory of God, who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.

Fr. Carter Griffin