

## ST. JOSEPH: MODEL OF CREATIVE COURAGE

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My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

I'm sure you know that the most popular book written by St. Josemaria is *The Way*. And as you probably know, it has a series of 999 aphorisms or short phrases that he put together in a number of chapters to help young people and old people develop their interior life. It's kind of a guide and it is meant to be, of course, helpful for the interior life. And well, I would say the content itself was not particularly new, but it was really written in a pithy way that helped a lot of people. And it's gone through many editions and translated into many, many languages. Last I heard there was even a translation into Braille, right, so- which speaks of its practical usefulness. Now, you'll notice in many elevators next to the floor button, there will be always a Braille code, you know, number one in Braille, number two in Braille, because for the blind, for them to be able to choose the right floor to get to their destination is very important, and so that's a practical help. Otherwise, well, they would be certainly hampered in getting to their destination.

But some indication of the purpose of this book by St. Josemaria can actually be seen in the prologue. I usually skip prologues, but in this case, it's very short, it's not even a page, and it gives us a good idea of the purpose of this book. I'll read it to you now, and it's just the last line that I want to focus in on. This is what he says... he says, "Read these councils slowly, pause to meditate on their meaning. They are things that I whisper in your ear as a friend, as a brother, as a father. We shall speak intimately, and God will be listening to us. I'm going to tell you nothing new. I shall only stir your memory so that some thought may arise and strike you and so your life will improve and you will set out along the way of prayer and of love. And in the end, you will become a soul of worth." That's the last phrase, you will become a soul of worth.

It's hard to translate soul of worth from the Spanish, like if you if you know Spanish, the original Spanish is *y acabas por ser alma de criterio*, which kind of sounds kind of different, *alma de criterio*, it's apparently- he added this phrase in the Burgos edition, sort of added it later, but it means well, a soul of good criteria, a soul of good judgment, or prudent judgment or mature understanding. Well, the edition that I have in English says *soul of worth*, but I guess that it's a good enough translation, I suppose. But it means that he is addressing those who have already received the basic catechesis of

the faith, but the soul of worth or *alma de criterio*, or soul of criteria is, as they say, it's a hapax legomenon, meaning, it's a word that means that it's only used once in the author's work. That's what hapax legomenon means, so only appears once. And now, even though it's appeared- only appears once as a phrase, it does guide what he's dreaming about for you and for me, when we read *The Way*, that we become souls of worth, or souls of good criteria, that we make good decisions. And for that we need to be guided in some way.

And well, I read recently an article about a software engineer from India who is browsing through a books- books in a bookstore, and he came across *The Way*, so he said it's interesting, I'll buy this and he bought it. And as he read it, he said he didn't quite understand it. And he- and he felt that like many other books that he had in his home that he just put it aside. But then some years later he was diagnosed with kidney failure and he had to undergo a kidney transplant, which his wife, you know, affectionately offered her- her kidney. And, you know, he was- she was very loving to him in that way, of course, and sacrificed, but during his convalescence, he gave upon St. Teresa of Avila's autobiography. And at first he said he found this book also difficult, but he did notice that she insisted on the importance of spiritual direction, you know, of letting itself be guided. And then he came across *The Way* again and he read that introduction about becoming a soul of worth, and now suddenly became to understand these points, that there should be a guide for him, that he could become a man of sound judgment, a guide, and- and that- that he was now able, really, to profit during this difficult moment in his life. And he took a lot of these points much more to heart now, really seeing them as a guide. So, well, facing this rather dramatic health situation and lots of time to reflect, he was humble enough to let it- let himself be guided through this valley of his life. And he could thereby be, as we say, a soul of worth, a soul of good criteria, or simply, we could say in a more general sense, a man truly imbued with a real sense of prudence, this virtue of prudence.

Now, sometimes we imagine prudence, and this is what we want to reflect on now, the virtue of prudence in particular, how we see it in somebody like St. Joseph, but sometimes we see prudence as something that just limits us and leads us to be overly careful and even fearful of certain actions. But that's not really what prudence is, you know, there are many acquired virtues and good habits that we acquire through repeated effort. And, you know, just repeated effort to do what is right. Like, for example, like the- to say the truth, you know, when we say the truth, that is a virtue of veracity. Or, like- like- if we- if we have this habit or this ability to put up with very trying situations, well that's- that's patience, the fruit of patience, or the habit of moderation in food and drink. Well, that of course, is- is temperance, it's- but prudence, what is that exactly? Is it simply wise decisions? Well, it's- it's- traditionally, prudence is the virtue that guides all others. I think it was St. Thomas Aquinas who said it is *auriga virtutum*, or the charioteer of all the other virtues, like- like a driver of the bus.

Imagine having all the best virtues in your bus— we have justice, we have temperance, we have fortitude, we have courage, and then the bus stops and kindness gets on, and then generosity gets on, another part of the road, detachment pops in there, and then fairness comes in and gentleness and gratitude and honesty and integrity. And then, at the very end, cheerfulness hops on and then of course, you add to that the spirit of service and modesty and optimism and peace and perseverance, and, man, that's an amazing bus full of all those amazing virtues. And— and then imagine that also reliability comes in there, order comes in, trust— that— that would be an amazing school bus of virtues in our life if we had all those things. But what— what if there was nobody to drive that bus and well, you would just not go anywhere, no matter how many good virtues you had. That's why the driver of the bus is prudence. It knows where to take all those actions and when to really, let's say, when to live them. And it manages the speed, the direction, the distance, gets all those virtues to their end. And so, it's not that they don't have to be lived at sometimes and other times they are lived, it's just that they're properly guided. That's why we say that prudence is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good, and that's what St. Josemaria wanted that— that we be able to discern really what is our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right thing and also to choose the right means of attaining it.

Imagine there is the best decision right here and now. We have to decide, therefore, what is my best decision in this circumstance of my life. Well, we have to study or we should not study, we have to rest or go to bed early or call my parents or, you know, whatever it may be, we need prudence. And so it's what St. Thomas called *recta ratio agibilium*, the right reason in actions, it's a beautiful description. So, it is therefore the virtue by which practical reason dictates what should be done in every case in moral order because not everything that could be done should be done. Not what— we can't just do what feels good or that's not what is a— that was not necessarily the best thing to do. And at times it means I have to do what I don't really feel like doing but that's the best thing at that moment. And maybe I don't feel like getting up but that's what I have to do, that's the most prudent thing.

So it is really a beautiful virtue because it— it has as its object to dictate to us, to guide us in all those particular cases, specific cases, not in generalities, like what Our Lord says in St. Luke. He says, "For which of you when he wants to build a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it. And otherwise, when he has laid the foundations and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him saying, This man began to build but was not able to finish." Well, St. Josemaria commented that, Here's a man who started to build and was not able to finish. A sad commentary, he said, if you— if you don't want— never to be made about you, for you possess everything necessary to crown the edifice of your sanctification, the grace of God, and your own will." And we do indeed want to crown the edifice of our sanctification because we want to be saints and prudence guides us there, in guiding us how we should act, how to build that tower.

And we think of St. Joseph, now, he too had a tower to build. In fact, it was entrusted to him as the head of the family. And he too, well, he let himself be guided by the angel. And thanks to the intervention of an angel in his dreams, he understood that there was a danger and he had to act. And as Pope Francis said, he received his mission in dreams, but he was hardly a dreamer. A dreamer is one who is not really in reality, he does not know himself. He has kind of a distorted sense of reality.

You probably know that there's a tradition of paintings of the Holy Family, or of the Nativity scenes, that show the Blessed Mother with the child, right. And then Joseph is often shown off- off in a corner somewhere. And often he is shown with his head leaning on his hand, and it's a gesture that is meant to suggest that he's asleep. And some paintings show an angel practically falling out of the sky about to warn him from above. I mean, the idea being that he's asleep, and, you know, but we know he received those dreams and the angel spoke to him in those dreams, like when he saw Mary pregnant, and also to warn him against the danger of Herod who wanted to kill the child. Yes, he received those warnings in a dream, but sometimes, I don't- I don't know, I think that sometimes that sleeping is more kind of aligned to prayer, to a kind of discernment than actual sleep. I mean, I'm sure he was sleeping, but I like to see it as a form of discernment because, after all, when a dream changes the course of your life, well, that means you've been paying attention. At least he prayed a lot, or pretty deeply after he got up from that dream. I mean, after all, if he had not left Bethlehem after that dream and he was told that there were those who wanted to kill the child, well that would have been the end. He was protecting all Holy Family.

This was- he was like a- like a goal keeper in soccer. He was protecting the goal so that no- nobody could kick the ball past him. And like good goalkeepers in soccer, he had speed and he had agility. It is amazing to watch them sprinting off their lines to make a clearance or rushing out to dive in to save the ball, right? It's amazing how- to see- when we see these goalies do this. And of course, the top goalkeepers are always very fast because they have to protect that opening. They cannot let the ball pass by. That's their- that's their mission, that's their job. And that was the job of St. Joseph, he had to protect the Holy Family. So he made up his mind and immediately got their things when the angel spoke to him. He prayed about this, presumably, and then he got all their stuff and said, Okay, let's get out of- we get here, this is dangerous, we cannot stay here. And even though this meant a lot of lack of comfort, and, you know, we tend to maybe romanticize this story, but it wasn't- been quite difficult, just as it was quite difficult, earlier on, when he arrived in Bethlehem and all the rooms to the inns would full and had no place. And so, like he was- he was thinking, Okay, well, we're gonna stay. Okay, okay, we're gonna stay in this- in this- in this stable here. And he would have set it up as nicely as he could, that- that was really prudence in action. And with that, or when- when he found out about Herod, I don't think he was filled with rage or anger toward Herod. He

just understood that this was part of the greater plan of God's providence, and that he, in this providence, was going to be the protector.

Have you ever felt rage or anger at things that are wrong in- in our country or in the world? Or rage or anger at politicians, or just, I don't know, terrible things that happen in the world that you hear about on Twitter or on the news? Is that- is that really what Our Lord wants from us, this- this rage at what's going on? By being protector, Joseph ended up really making a best practical decisions. And the expression that Pope Francis used was, in several instances, he used the expression about Joseph that he was creative in his courage, or he was creatively courageous. He- he said this in *Patris Corde*, the encyclical letter on St. Joseph. And he said that- this is what I'm quoting now from the encyclical letter: "If the first stage of all true interior healing is to accept our personal history and embrace even the things in life that we did not choose, we must now add another important element, creative courage." And that's how the Pope describes St. Joseph, having creative courage. And he continues, he says: "This emerges especially in the way we deal with difficulties, in the face of a difficulty. We can either give up and walk away or somehow engage with it. At times, difficulties bring out resources we did not even think we had."

See how difficulties and hardships and contradictions, well, we see how they help us to reframe, they help us to see this as an opportunity of growth. This is what the Holy Father is saying how we engage with those things. Otherwise, if everything went well, that would mean that we would not be able to engage all those resources that we really do have, among them patience. So Pope Francis mentions two instances of this creative courage. This is a quote from that letter again. He says, "Joseph was the man chosen by God to guide the beginnings of the history of Redemption. He was the true miracle by which God saves the child and his mother. God acted by- by trusting in Joseph's creative courage. Arriving in Bethlehem and finding no lodging where Mary could give birth, Joseph took a stable and as best he could, turned it into a welcoming home for the Son of God to come into the world. Faced with imminent danger from Herod who wanted to kill the child, Joseph was warned once again in a dream to protect the child and rose in the middle of night to prepare the flight into Egypt." And that's from that letter. It's a beautiful way of articulating providential role of St. Joseph.

We ask you now in our prayer, Lord, show me- show me where I can live that creative courage in my life, where can I live it within the next weeks? And like Joseph, we have to find solutions to difficult situations, solutions to- how to deal with difficult people in my life or things in my job. And Joseph does this, we know about it, even if he doesn't actually utter a single word in the Gospel, well, at least no word of his is recorded, and so what this silence suggests, of course, is that he acted, but the fact that he was so silent and never said anything actually led- led many artists to kind of fill the void with their paintings or even their sculptures, so that, you know, in their way they could reflect

on what he was maybe like, just by visually representing him. And there's a vast tradition of paintings and artwork about where St. Joseph appears. And there's a great book now out by Elizabeth Lev who is an art historian working in Rome. And she's written a new book out called *The Silent Knight*, K-N-I-G-H-T, and it's a beautiful account of the history of art representing Joseph. I really recommend this book, it's what- quite wonderful.

I am, well, separately, I know that Michelangelo, he considered himself fundamentally a sculptor, and he would say that, you know, in front of a block of marble, the figure inside is like captured, and that figure that he was going to sculpt would kind of speak to him and ask to be freed from the confines of that block. And he would really feel those fingers speaking to him. That's why, in some ways, he didn't really like painting, even if he produced the Sistine Chapel, because he was commissioned by Pope Julius II to do that, but he said, I feel they're not speaking to me, they- they remain silent. Raphael, on the other hand, loved that silence. He said that it's- it's the- it's the essence of painting, that it's silent, that it not so much speaks to you, but it represents what you want through silence. But just as artists produce brilliant works within the confines of a canvas or a panel or a marble block, so Joseph, within his own limitations, participated in the greatest artistry of all- the work of salvation. He- he was, of course, a key figure in that.

So Michelangelo, for example, he would stare at this inert block, he would gaze at it, and he would listen, can I hear something? And he would be like David with a slingshot, or the cry of an angel, or even the cry of Nicodemus, and then well, that- that voice that he would hear would become a beautiful figure. Well, I think Joseph too, he would think- he would- he would reflect and he would listen. He too made a masterpiece in some ways. Like he would listen to the voice of God in his circumstances and then he acted and he made a masterpiece. He saved the Holy Family, he protected them against the onslaughts of the devil, trying to impede- devil, who was trying to- to impede his protective work. So for us to have prudence like St. Joseph, it means we have to pray, we have to reflect, we have to discern, and we ask that ability to Our Lord now.

St. Pius X would say, when he was asked about something, he would often say, Let me think about it first. He wouldn't answer right away. He'd just say, Let me think about it. Now, I've heard people say to me when I would ask them for a favor, they sometimes would say, Let me think about it. And that wasn't necessarily an expression of prudence or discernment, but maybe a feeble way of saying *no* because they don't want to do anything about it right that- that moment, you know, I've heard people say that. But we say that four eyes are better than two, so in our decisions, we must, yes, think through it, but we also have to ask the eyes of others, that vision of others to help inform us, to be guided and to remember that he who decides rapidly often repents rapidly. So, I think Joseph let himself be guided, certainly by the angel, but also by the voice of God in his prayer. He must have had a deep prayer and he must have contemplated the child and the Blessed Mother.

Well, Cardinal Merry del Val, when he was speaking about Pius X, said that when he had to make an important decision, Pius X would always look at a crucifix as though kind of seeking confidence and inspiration from Him. And in doubtful things he would say, always better to wait and He will help us decide. So guidance of wisdom is why we do things, not just how to do things, not just the mechanics of doing things. You have to know why we're doing them. And that way each of our actions will be directed to an end. And so we can ask Our Lord to help us be more reflective, to take a step back, where am I heading here?

I mean, there was one medieval sculpture that I always liked. The sculptor is a French sculptor, his name was Gislebertus, from from the 12th century. And he was known for his large sculptures on the tympanum of some cathedrals in France, but especially the Cathedral of St. Lazare, in Autun, in France, and he's probably the first sculptor in the Middle Ages to actually clearly have signed his work. And I particularly like the capital that he sculpted in St. Lazare, you know, on top of a column, you have a capital, and you have Corinthian capitals, you have Doric capitals, and so forth. But he actually was commissioned to paint, not- not to paint but to sculpt capitals that represented scenes of the life of Christ. And one of them there is a flight into Egypt. Now, a capital is a very narrow space, there's not much room there. It's almost like triangular, right. But this one shows Joseph gallantly leading the Holy Family but he is dressed as a medieval knight. He's wearing armor, he's got boots, he's got a helmet plus a sword instead of a staff. And there he is, you can see him, he's agile, he's alert, and he really evokes the finest virtues of the age of chivalry. And he is courageously leading that family, again he's creatively courageous and is leading them to safety during the tumult of Herod's rage. But he looks serene, he looks calm, and he's really doing the right thing and without a hint of bitterness or anger. Joseph was prudent, he was effective, as especially when March 19 rolls around, or even after, we can invoke him in a special way so we too learn from him and learn to live by that beautiful virtue of holy prudence.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations you've communicated to me in this meditation. I ask your help in putting them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.



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