



**Brothers of  
the Christian  
Schools**



# **Joseph of Nazareth**

**Carmelo Bueno Heras, fsc**

# 1. Frontispiece or foreword

Several months have already passed since 8 December 2020. Among the thousand world events that took place on that day, there is one that has occupied the tasks of several of my contemplative times. This event is the 'Apostolic Letter PATRIS CORDE' of Pope Francis and the 'Decree for the YEAR OF SAINT JOSEPH' from the See of the Apostolic Penitentiary in Rome.

On the occasion of this event and since then there has been a special twelve-month year dedicated, both in the ecclesial and Lasallian family, to 'contemplating Joseph of Nazareth'. I am sure that in 'the worldwide home of La Salle' an immense multitude of people have already read the Papal Letter more than once. I know that this is so.

As one of this multitude I have also read these documents and wish now to share the extent of my critical reflection, which I have just titled very intentionally 'Joseph of Nazareth'. I am invited to do so by the first expression of the Letter with its reference note: "*With a father's heart: that is how Joseph loved Jesus, whom all four Gospels refer to as **the son of Joseph***". And in note number 1 I read: "*Lk 4:22; Jn 6:42; cf. Mt 13:55; Mk 6:3*".

It was precisely this first note of the spark that first ignited me from within and began to enlighten me. All four Gospels speak to me of Joseph and of this Joseph as the father of Jesus. At no time in the Gospel is there any mention of either St. Jesus of Nazareth or St. Joseph or St. Mary. For the time being I am only underlining this fact, which justifies part of the title of these lines.

Already involved in the elaboration of these reflections on the father of Jesus, I read one of the latest texts published by the biblical scholar Rafael Aguirre of the University of Deusto, and from it I transcribe some words that I hope will serve as an apt context for 'imagining' that home of Nazareth in the first century of our history:

*"We know the names of his father, mother, brothers and sisters (Mk 6:3). He was a native of Nazareth, a small town in Lower Galilee, very close to the capital Sepphoris, a city through which important roads passed. Jesus was brought up in a deeply Jewish and religious family environment, but in a region that was busy and open to Hellenism. The brutal repression of the Roman legions against Judas Galileo in 4 B.C. must necessarily have come to Nazareth; it happened when Jesus was a child and marked the memories of a generation: "That was two years before the Romans"; "... after the Romans". In this environment Jesus grew up" ('Jesus and his life in the Roman Empire', **Reseña Bíblica 109/1-2021, Ed. Verbo Divino, p. 29**).*

I notice that our biblical scholar quotes Mk 6:3, the last of the references in the first note of Francis' letter. This observation inspires me for the task which has already begun and which will only seek to reread and comment on the four Gospel quotations in their order of edition: Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. I believe that they open up a way of accessing the person of Joseph, the father of Jesus. On the firm rock of these four approaches, it will be possible to build the structure of the house that has been announced to us as the Gospel of Joseph, the good news of his person in his story. This may not be a lot of information, but it is the foundation or the roots of his full humanity.

## 2. According to Mark 6:3: A large family from Nazareth?

The common sense of every person who reads this verse will tell his neurons that it is convenient to read, at the very least, the text in its context, **Mk 6:1-6**. And I add that it would not be out of place to

read also the not very long text of **Mk 3:20-34** which speaks of the presence of Jesus in his house in Nazareth and with his family, although curiously there is no mention of the presence of his father Joseph. Perhaps, I think to myself, Joseph was at that time one of the family who thought that his son 'was losing control, was deranged or out of his mind' (3:20). Could it be true that this Joseph of the first Evangelist, Mark, came to think that his son Jesus was mad or was behaving like one of the false prophets of his sinful people of Israel? Probably.

I return to **Mk 6:1-6**. Once again Jesus and his companions are in Nazareth, his town, his land, his homeland. It is the Sabbath. It is the day to go to the synagogue according to the Law of the Temple Religion. I would like to imagine that Joseph and the followers of Jesus went to the synagogue in Nazareth on that Sabbath. And I would also like to imagine that Mary and the many women following Jesus (as indicated in **Mk 15:37-41**) also went to the synagogue on that Sabbath, even though they were in the space reserved and set aside exclusively for women.

Those people and on that Sabbath listened to the teaching of the Jew and lay Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth. What did he teach on that occasion? What did he speak about? What 'homily' did he deliver? What text of the Law of Moses did he explain? What prophet, major or minor, did Jesus draw inspiration from? Did no one take note of it? No one will ever know, but it seems to me that he might have done something similar to what Mark tells us in **1:21-28 or 3:1-6**. Or perhaps this Jesus of Mark did what **Luke 4:14-30** tells us. I will speak about this text later on. After having read these three texts, I recognise that I can identify with the reaction of those present, as we read in **Mk 6:2-6**: "Where did Jesus of Nazareth get the way to speak and act like that? Who taught him these sayings and deeds?"

I add a couple of questions to my contemplation and invite them to be the subject of some critical reflection during this time of the Year of saint Joseph. I do not imagine these questions myself, I read them in the text itself as good news: ***Is not Jesus 'the tecton', son of Mary and brother of his brothers and sisters? Did Joseph and Mary of Nazareth form a large family?***

I will point out and end this encounter with the Gospel quotation from Mark. I have noticed, as a reader, that in none of the texts of this first Gospel is Joseph mentioned as the father of Jesus and his brothers and sisters and as the husband of Mary. This silence is the reason why Mk 6:3 occupies the last place in the quotations in note 1 of the Letter. But this silence of the Gospel is so resounding that it must mean something. I wonder and we wonder about it. Dare to share with whomever you wish what you hear in your silence.

### **3. According to Matthew 13:55: A small Galilean and lay businessman?**

***Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary?*** The Evangelist Matthew in his account of **13:53-58** transcribes 'almost' verbatim the message we have seen earlier in Mark's Gospel. I notice a difference that seems to me to be very significant. The 'tecton, faber, worker-carpenter' is no longer the Jesus of Nazareth of Mark, but his father. A father who has no name, though his mother has a name. For this reason, this quotation is the third in the footnote of the papal document. For how many years and centuries has the Gospel of Matthew been read in the Church? The importance of Mark's account has only been emphasised since the second half of the 20th century. I believe it is here, in **Mt 13:55**, that the image that Joseph of Nazareth was a carpenter in his carpenter's shop and specialised in planing the skin of wood takes root.

In this text of Matthew, we recognise that his Jesus of Nazareth also teaches in the synagogue of his homeland, Nazareth. As an attentive reader of Matthew, I note that this teaching in the synagogue

takes place after having proclaimed the third discourse, that of the parables, which the Evangelist puts in the mouth of his Jesus (**Mt 13:1-52**). I would like to think that in the synagogue of his people he also told the same parables which spoke of the reign of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

**The kingdom they speak about never resembles a temple, some rites or a religion.** On the contrary, it relates to the reign of sowers, of seeds, of a baker, of merchants, of fishermen.... I would like to think that these things of the work of the earth, of the household, of trade and of the sea were very familiar to Jesus himself, and especially to his father, whose name was Joseph, as Matthew wrote in **1:16**. This language, put into the mouth of Jesus by his Evangelist Matthew, to speak of the 'things of God and his Kingdom', seems to me very suspiciously provocative! Who was the provocative, Matthew the Evangelist or Jesus of Nazareth himself, son of Joseph and Mary?

In that large family household of Nazareth 'tecton-faber' Joseph, was he not the self-employed worker or small businessman, who attends to all kinds of needs of the people of the village of Nazareth and those of Capernaum, Magdala, Tiberias... who live on the resources of the Lake of Galilee? And, I can't stop imagining this Joseph and his sons and other hired people working in the hundreds of repairs and maintenance of streets and houses of Sepphoris, the capital of Lower Galilee! If only we dared to recover this hard-working Joseph (and his Jesus) and we would decide to share the thousand images of his tasks, technical services or projects that come to our mind! Hopefully!

I quoted **Mt 1:16** above. I must also pause for a moment at **Mt 1:18-25**. I find myself here and now as a reader of a text that biblical scholars call the 'Infancy Narrative', a literary genre appropriate for presenting the origins of a person considered important so that his memory may live on and always be resurrected. In this sense, the narrative of **Mt 1:1 to 2:23 recounts** the origins imagined by the Evangelist about his Jesus of Nazareth whom he considered as the new Moses of the Law and the definitive David messiah-king of Israel, his people.

Luke will do the same in the first two chapters of his Gospel. He will tell us a very different story of the origins of his Jesus. In both accounts I have to imagine Joseph of Nazareth in very different ways. For our Evangelist Matthew the father of his Jesus of Nazareth must have had his roots in Bethlehem like David and experienced persecution and slavery like Moses in Egypt. Inspired by this data from Matthew it is not strange that in the ecclesiastical tradition the father of Jesus was **the righteous Joseph 'of Bethlehem'**. As a critical contemplative of the received Word, I hope I will not disturb anyone's creeds if I continue to stick with the image of **Joseph 'of Nazareth'**, as suggested to me by the narrating hand of the first Gospel, be it Mark or Mary Magdalene!

## **4. According to Luke 4:22: Joseph, husband and father, the most natural thing.**

The third Evangelist is Luke. In the first note of the papal writing Luke **4:22** takes the first place. This text supports the affirmation with which the document 'Patris corde' begins: 'Jesus, the son of Joseph'. I look up the reference in the Bible and immediately realise that I must read and meditate without haste on **Luke 4:14-30**. The story presents Jesus in Nazareth, on a Sabbath and in the synagogue. It seems that no one accompanies him, because he has not yet spoken of followers. But Luke does tell me what his Jesus did and said in that first evangelisation. Luke presents his Jesus as a wise rabbi who dares not only to proclaim the reading of 'the Law and the Prophets', but also to comment on it (interpret it) as the word of Yahweh, the God of the Law, the Prophets and the Sabbath. It is only at the end of the event that it becomes clear that this Jesus is definitively sentenced. And it is in this event that it is stated with evident surprise that Jesus is the son of Joseph. Nothing is said of the 'tecton' or of the son of the 'tecton'. Nothing is said of his mother or of his large family as seen in Mark and Matthew.

Of this 'Joseph', the father of Jesus, he wrote **Lk 3:23** (and also a little earlier in **2:33** and before that in **2:4**). It is worthy to read these verses of Luke and, at the same time, to remember the one already read in **Mt 1,16**. Can I ask myself now who was Joseph's father? Luke's Heli? Matthew's Jacob? This type of data from the Gospel text, among others, alerts us to the symbolic-theological character of the accounts of the so-called infancy of Jesus (Mt 1-2 and Lk 1-2), which advises us not to take them or affirm them as data from the real history of the events narrated. This infancy of Jesus imagined by the narrator Luke is inspired by the story of Daniel 9, where it is announced when the Messiah, the liberator of Israel, will finally arrive.

I must now add a useful fact for some purifying reflection on the experience of faith in Jesus. We are not told in any of the Gospels who were the parents of Joseph of Nazareth. In fact, we read that he had two fathers and we should not take this as historical. On the other hand, who does not know the name of the parents of Mary of Nazareth, although the Evangelists do not tell us either? Innocent curiosities of popular and devotional religiosity, very much to the taste of preacher pastors who are more concerned with Religion than with Evangelisation?

From the very beginning of his account, Luke announces that he has documented rigorously all that refers to his Jesus of Nazareth (**Lk 1:1-4**). According to this intention, I find it suspicious that this narrator tells us nothing about Joseph apart from what is said in **4:22** and apart from the other three expressions of the infancy story: 'His father and mother were amazed' (2:33), 'His parents went to Jerusalem each year' (2:41) and 'His mother said to him, son... your father and I... have been looking for you' (2:48). But can I think that in this resounding silence of the researcher Luke is saying the most important thing about Joseph: Husband and father. The most natural thing.

## 5. According to John 6:42: Joseph of Nazareth

The fourth and last Gospel of our Bible is John. This Gospel seems to have been written in the last decade of the first century. It also contains the explicit statement that Jesus is the son of Joseph: "*The Jews murmured about him [Jesus] because he said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven, and they said, 'Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph? Do we not know his father and his mother? Then how can they say, 'I have come from heaven?''*" (**Jn 6:41-42**). This is all that John's Gospel tells us about Joseph of Nazareth. I understand here that Joseph is husband and father. The mother and wife have no name in this text, neither in **Jn 2,1-11** nor in **Jn 19,25-27**. This Evangelist never tells us that the mother of Jesus was called Mary. This is the fact. Interpretations will depend on his readers.

Nothing more needs to be said about this only piece of news about Joseph in this Gospel. However, my contemplative and critical sense invites me to dwell on the literary and theological context in which the Evangelist has put in the mouth of 'the Jews' the claim that Jesus of Nazareth was the son of Joseph, and also the claim that the father and mother of Jesus were well known in that Galilean region of northern Israel.

The context I am talking about is the full account in the sixth chapter of John. Its message is one of the key interpretations of what we call 'eucharist' in the Christian tradition. It seems that this Evangelist tells here what we would have liked to find and read in his thirteenth chapter which speaks of Jesus' last supper with his followers. In this sixth chapter we are told of 'the eating'. In the thirteenth chapter we will hear about 'the washing of the feet'. Both gestures are 'these provocative'. Let me stop here without being rushed.

In this sixth chapter John announces that we are at the celebration of the Passover which recalls the meal of the families of Israel in Egypt on the night of the beginning of the departure from slavery to-

wards the freedom that will be reached with the crossing of the Sea and the arrival in the Land promised to them by their God Yáhweh. How can we forget these facts while reading **Jn 6:1-24**? That supper of Israel is no other reality than the multiplication of the loaves and fish, whether like that or not (**6,3-15**). That passage of Israel through the Red Sea is no other situation than Jesus' walk on the waters of the Sea of Galilee (**6,16-24**).

It is possible that these parallels may seem suspicious to more than one reader. That is why the continuation of the account in **Jn 6:25-71**, which is a lengthy dialogue between Jesus of Nazareth and the very large assembly gathered on the western shore of Lake Galilee, should be read carefully. This event may have occurred only in the mind of the Evangelist, but it is worthwhile for readers to pause and look at it critically. It is at the heart of these dialogues that the Evangelist has put the denouncing statement about Jesus of Nazareth into the mouth of the Jews (the religious authority of Israel). **For whom was this Jew, Galilean, layman and provoking?** It was well known that his father and mother were from this land of Galilee, Nazarene. Was it not known that they had antecedents and ancestors of messianism and lordship? My neurons whisper to me that those 'Jews', from their authority, are proclaiming that Jesus of Nazareth is the son of his father, Joseph of Nazareth, and his mother, Mary of Nazareth.

I have added the adjective '**provoking**' for Jesus: was it not provoking to imagine, as this John does, that his Jesus would call to 'eat the Jewish Passover' in the open air, in broad daylight and in a multitudinous way, something that was to be celebrated, by command of Yáhweh God himself, at night, ritually and in the family? I believe that this 'being provocative' fits like a glove to the being, saying and doing of Jesus of Nazareth. I believe that this was well understood by this fourth Evangelist who dared to proclaim loudly, clearly and redundantly that his Jesus of Nazareth was the 'I am' that the creed of the Jewish Religion reserved, exclusively, for his Yáhweh God of the Temple, of his Priesthood and of his Law.

## 6. The story continues

The attentive critical reading of the Good News stories about Jesus of Nazareth allows me to trace and recover the humanity of his Joseph of Nazareth, husband, father of a large family and worker in his small business in the social services of his time. I hope that these evangelical evocations will continue to invite me to evangelise the so many devotional traditions of pastoral preaching not only about St Joseph, but also about St Mary, the Mother of God. Restoring the Jesus of history involves restoring Mary and Joseph of Nazareth, his mother and father. From this conviction, I sense, by way of example, that the imagery of religious art has a splendid future ahead of it: how I would like, among other contributions, to see images of Mary with her Joseph in that natural, human, large and hard-working family of Nazareth and their land of Galilee, Samaria, Judea and Jerusalem!



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