

SAINT JOSEPH PRAY FOR US



WITH A FATHER'S LOVE

Mgr Peter Fleetwood



Front cover:

An icon of St Joseph, written by Martin Jarvis for Our Lady of Fatima Parish, White City, to mark the Year of St Joseph.

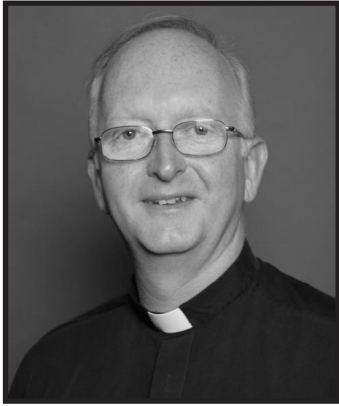
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With a Father's Love

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FOREWORD



On 8 December 2020, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Pope Francis launched the Church on the Year of Saint Joseph, a Year that reaches its climax on 8 December 2021. The Pope accompanied this with an Apostolic Letter, *Patris Corde – With a Father's Heart*, marking the 150th Anniversary of the Proclamation by Blessed Pius IX of Saint Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church. This Year has a special resonance for us in the Diocese of Westminster. On 10th December 1898, at the

request of Cardinal Vaughan, Saint Joseph was added as a Patron of this Diocese. This patronage was appropriate since, as Vaughan noted, "the Church itself is an expansion of the Holy Family." In the Diocese today we celebrate in a particular way the eight parishes and thirteen schools who claim Saint Joseph as their principal Patron, the seven parishes and two schools for whom he is co-Patron, and the two parishes (and Cathedral of the Ukrainian Catholic Church) and two schools dedicated to the Holy Family. In addition, we want to celebrate the work of St Joseph's Pastoral Centre in Hendon, of St Joseph's Hospice in Hackney, and of Caritas Bakhita House, under the patronage of St Josephine Bakhita. She is "Joseph" too.

In this new faith-sharing resource for small communities, specially produced as we journey through this Year of Saint Joseph, Mgr Peter Fleetwood takes us on a journey through Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter. In a very personal way he explores the themes the Holy Father gives us, and so opens up new and fresh ways of understanding Saint Joseph – and of understanding ourselves too.

I am deeply grateful to Mgr Fleetwood for preparing this rich resource for us. As a long-serving priest, he writes from a father's heart and with a father's love. As Pope Francis writes at the very end of *Patris Corde*, "We need only ask Saint Joseph for the grace of graces: our conversion."

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Chris Vipers". The script is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline.

Fr Chris Vipers
Director of the Agency for Evangelisation
Diocese of Westminster



AUTUMN FAITH SHARING RESOURCE 2020

With a Father's Love

Six weekly group sessions based on the *Patris Corde*, the Apostolic Letter by Pope Francis for the Year of Saint Joseph.

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FAITH SHARING IN A SMALL COMMUNITY

For some of you, these practical points will be well known, but for others, they will be new. To new members of the small community, we offer a big welcome, and to returning members, welcome back. Take time to read these few pages – they will be of great benefit.

GATHERING as a small community to share prayer, life and faith is an important part of parish life. This is a sacred time. It is important that you take the time to get to know one another. Always make room for the introductions of anyone new, and to ask one another how you are and what has happened since you last met.

HOSPITALITY and environment are very important. You should meet in a reflective atmosphere with as few distractions as possible. It would be helpful to have a central focus, such as an open Bible and a candle.

TIMING is important. The suggested time for each session is 90 minutes (see page 7 for the structure of the meeting). Each session will have a balance of prayer, sharing experience, exploring scripture, reflection and talking about how we are living our faith.

PRAYER will take different forms; we will make a suggestion for a Psalm or another opening prayer. You can make other suggestions, too, as it is helpful to try varied ways of praying, such as playing some religious music. Ordinarily, it is good to have about 15 minutes of prayer. Silence is an important part of the process, so don't be afraid to pause during your prayer time or, indeed, during the reflection time for some quiet.

EXPERIENCE is essential to our spiritual life. During the session, we need to reflect on our real experience. Then we listen to Scripture. As you reflect, ensure each person who wants to talk is given an opportunity to share. No one needs to talk unless they want to, and no one person should dominate the conversation.

RESPOND Each week we have the opportunity to respond. It may be a good time to assess our priorities and see how we are living our faith in the totality of our lives: in our families, in our relationships, in our work. We may not need to do more; we may need to do less. This is the time to look at how we are living the values of Jesus and perhaps to identify new behaviours and attitudes.

WHAT IS THE LEADER OF YOUR GROUP EXPECTED TO DO?

Each community will have its own leader. A leader is not someone with all the answers who is there to put everybody else right. He or she is a fellow participant but with the particular responsibility of facilitating the community by:

- 1 Preparing ahead of the session and creating a warm, accepting and open environment.
- 2 Guiding the group and keeping it on track through the faith sharing process each week.
- 3 Sharing the various tasks among the members of the group.
- 4 Listening and, if necessary, asking questions to keep sharing moving.
- 5 Ensuring that each participant has the opportunity to speak.
- 6 Encouraging members to see the meeting not as a discussion group, but as an opportunity for sharing in which they might grow in faith.

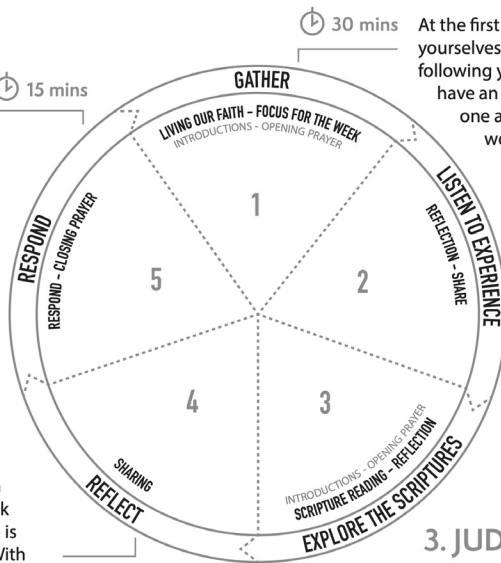
5. ACT

Our sharing would not be complete without deciding how to put our faith into practice. With a reflection from Pope Francis, you will be invited to respond to what you have heard in the session.

15 mins

4. REFLECT

This is an opportunity to reflect on 'our story' - God's story and your own story - and how to link the two together. What is the meaning for you? With the help of a reflection and questions, you will have the opportunity to share.



1. GATHER

At the first meeting, introduce yourselves to each other. Thereafter, following your opening prayer, you will have an opportunity to catch up with one another, and share how last week's session influenced you.

2. SEE

This part of the session is about 'your own story' and how it relates to the theme of the session. Having listened to a short reflection, you will be given the opportunity, with the help of questions, to share your own experience.

3. JUDGE 45 mins

This part is about exploring 'God's story' in scripture. Having listened to the scripture reading you will be invited to reflect on what you have heard.

SESSION ONE

OPENING PRAYER

Hail, Guardian of the Redeemer, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary. To you God entrusted His only Son; in you Mary placed her trust; with you Christ became man. Blessed Joseph, to us, too, show yourself a father and guide us in the path of life. Obtain for us grace, mercy and courage, and defend us from every evil. Amen.

*from Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter on the
Year of St Joseph, Patris Corde, 8 December 2020.*

LISTEN TO EXPERIENCE

In these six meetings, you will hear excerpts from the Apostolic Letter *With a Father's Love*, with which Pope Francis introduced the Year of Saint Joseph in December 2020. If you have not already read it, some of what you hear may encourage you to read it for yourself. You will not be wasting your time. In the introduction Pope Francis wrote:

“After Mary, the Mother of God, no saint is mentioned more frequently in the papal magisterium than Joseph, her spouse. My predecessors reflected on the limited information handed down by the Gospels in order to appreciate more fully his central role in the history of salvation.”

In the rest of these sessions, you will be asked to listen to someone else's experience, but today the question is how much Saint Joseph is part of your Catholic experience. Does he have a place in your

life of prayer, for example? Is he just a figure in the background of the story of Jesus, or does he stand out in some way? Do you know him? Let us look at the ways the Church has made Saint Joseph part of her life; the questions at the end of this introduction are meant to spark off a discussion about how you and the people here with you have encountered Saint Joseph, if indeed you have.

Although Pope Francis says that “Saint Joseph has always been venerated as a father by the Christian people”, in the Western Church things took off relatively slowly. There was a feast dedicated to him in the late fifteenth century, but it was really in the nineteenth century that devotion to Saint Joseph became widespread. In 1847, Pope Pius IX spoke of him as patron of the whole Church, and then in 1870 he declared him the Patron and Guardian of the Universal Church. The current Year of Saint Joseph is a commemoration of the 150th anniversary of that declaration. Nowadays, most prayer-books include prayers to Saint Joseph. There is a tradition of celebrating a Mass in his honour every Wednesday, and many Catholics dedicate the month of March to him. He is known as the patron of workers, the “Guardian of the Redeemer” and the patron of a “happy death”. Many of us were taught to pray for Saint Joseph’s intercession when death is approaching, either other people’s or our own. If you read the Pope’s Apostolic Letter *With a Father’s Heart*, you will discover much more, but it should be clear already that Saint Joseph has a place of honour in the hearts of many Catholics. What about you?

QUESTIONS

- 1 What place does Saint Joseph have in your heart, in your faith, in your parish, in your home life?
- 2 What do you know about Saint Joseph? Where did you learn about him?

EXPLORE THE SCRIPTURES

All four Gospels refer to Jesus as the “son of Joseph”:

Luke 4.22: All spoke highly of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They also asked, “Isn’t this the son of Joseph?”

John 6.41f: The Jews murmured about him because he said, “I am the bread that has come down from heaven”, and they said, “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph?”

Matthew 13.55: “Is he not the carpenter’s son?”

Mark 6.3: “Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary...?”

REFLECTION

Every document coming from a Pope has its place in history. None of them appears just because the Pope thinks it would be a good idea to write a document. The opening prayer for this meeting – which will be used in all six meetings – is taken from an Apostolic Letter Pope Francis wrote to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of Saint Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church by Blessed Pius IX. It is called *Patris Corde*, “*With a Father’s Heart*”, words which set the tone for the whole Year of Saint Joseph. Just as importantly, the Holy Father wrote the letter at a time when the COVID-19 epidemic was wreaking havoc all over the world, a time when the Church and the whole world surely needed protection from heaven. Pope Francis had made an extraordinary gesture earlier in 2020, when he asked people to join him virtually in an act of prayer, which you may have seen on television. His *Meditation in the Time of Pandemic* was televised from the plateau in front of Saint Peter’s Basilica, and there are haunting images of the Holy Father on his own in driving rain in front of the most famous Catholic building in the world. Striking images, but some of his words are equally striking and worth hearing again, words he repeated in his Apostolic Letter, when he recognised the contribution made

“by ordinary people, people often overlooked. People who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines, or on the latest television show, yet in these very days are surely shaping the decisive events of our history. Doctors, nurses, storekeepers and supermarket workers, cleaning personnel, caregivers, transport workers, men and women working to provide essential services and public safety, volunteers, priests, men and women religious, and so very many others.”

He praised not only their generosity, but a willingness to work patiently, spreading “not panic, but shared responsibility”, in many cases, praying and encouraging others to pray. “Each of us can discover in Joseph – the man who goes unnoticed, a daily, discreet and hidden presence – an intercessor, a support and a guide in times of trouble.”

For four years, ending with the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was one of the priest chaplains at a big hospital in Liverpool. I suppose everyone in a hospital chaplaincy team develops her or his own style. I would often sing hymns with people who were barely conscious, if at all. I often recited a prayer to the members of the Holy Family, which I learnt as a child. It goes like this:

**Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul.
Jesus, Mary and Joseph, assist me in my last agony.
Jesus, Mary and Joseph, may I breathe forth my soul
in peace with you. Amen.**

Amazingly, even dying people would mumble or move their lips when they heard those words, which they might not have heard for years, but which were still lodged somewhere in their memory. One thing hit me over and over again in those four years. What was familiar to older people, even if only vaguely, was usually totally new to younger people. On dark, difficult days, I wonder what it will be like ministering to the sick and the dying when those who remember lots of prayers are gone. One aim of this reflection is to encourage you to discover some prayers to Saint Joseph. For many, prayers to the saints are not part of their vision of life as a Catholic. Can we ever recover that feeling of the closeness of Saint Joseph and other saints? For a start, here are the invocations from the Litany of Saint Joseph, some of which were added earlier this year by Pope Francis.

They are addressed to Saint Joseph; the reply to each is: **Pray for us.**

**Illustrious Son of David R.
Light of Patriarchs R.
Spouse of the Mother of God R.
Guardian of the Redeemer R.
Pure Guardian of the Virgin R.**

Provider for the Son of God R.	Model for workers R.
Zealous Defender of Christ R.	Glory of family life R.
Servant of Christ R.	Guardian of virgins R.
Minister of Salvation R.	Cornerstone of families R.
Head of the Holy Family R.	Support in difficulties R.
Joseph, most just R.	Comfort of the sorrowing R.
Joseph, most chaste R.	Hope of the sick R.
Joseph, most prudent R.	Patron of exiles R.
Joseph, most brave R.	Patron of the afflicted R.
Joseph, most obedient R.	Patron of the poor R.
Joseph, most loyal R.	Patron of the dying R.
Mirror of patience R.	Terror of demons R.
Lover of poverty R.	Protector of the Holy Church R.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1 What, if anything, have you learnt about Saint Joseph today?
- 2 Would you be able and willing to pass on what you learn about Saint Joseph (to children, grandchildren, school pupils, or anyone else)?

POINTS FOR ACTION

- 1 Some of you will have prayed litanies frequently when you were young, and some of you may still pray different litanies enthusiastically, but others will not be at all used to them. Have a look at the Litany of Saint Joseph, which addresses him in many different roles. Some will appeal to you more than others. Find three of them which you particularly like (some you may dislike: it is allowed to express preferences!). Write them down and use them in your prayer between this meeting and the next. This will bring Saint Joseph into the forefront of your imagination, and asking him to pray for you may bring him closer to you, and you closer to him.

- 2 A boy in my class at school was in the same year at seminary, and we were ordained deacons and priests together. He became a Vatican diplomat, and is now the Vatican's 'foreign minister'. When he started his new job, I asked him how often he meets Pope Francis. "Once a week," he said, "on a Wednesday evening." I asked him what the Pope is like, and his answer was a single word: "courteous." I thought about it and said, "is he anything like those Jesuits who taught us at school?" He said, "Yes. Exactly like them." They were of a generation when Jesuit novices were asked to write their own prayers. It was meant to help them gain confidence in talking to God, and anyone who reads the documents Pope Francis has published will have seen that he sometimes ends with a prayer he himself has written.

His training has never left him, and my suggestion to you is to try your best to get into that habit. Take some paper and a pen or pencil with you when you go to pray. If it seems important to pray about something, why don't you try to put it into words? You need never share it with anyone, but there could come a time when you realise that what you managed to put on paper could help someone else who is struggling to pray. You would be doing them an amazing service. Your own spiritual confidence will be boosted, too.

CLOSING PRAYER

Oh, Saint Joseph, whose protection is so great, so strong, so prompt before the throne of God, I place in you all my interests and all my desires. Oh, Saint Joseph, do assist me by your powerful intercession, and obtain for me from your divine Son all spiritual blessings through Jesus Christ, Our Lord, so that, having engaged here below your heavenly power, I may offer my thanksgiving and homage to the most loving of Fathers. Oh, Saint Joseph, I never weary contemplating you and Jesus asleep in your arms. I dare not approach while he reposes near your heart. Press Him in my name and kiss his fine head for me, and ask him to return the kiss when I draw my dying breath. Saint Joseph, patron of departing souls, pray for us. Amen.

Prayer discovered more than 1900 years ago.

SESSION TWO

OPENING PRAYER

Hail, Guardian of the Redeemer, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary. To you God entrusted His only Son; in you Mary placed her trust; with you Christ became man. Blessed Joseph, to us, too, show yourself a father and guide us in the path of life. Obtain for us grace, mercy and courage, and defend us from every evil. Amen.

*from Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter on the
Year of St Joseph, Patris Corde, 8 December 2020.*

LISTEN TO EXPERIENCE

What I am going to share with you now will surely be criticised. I want to describe an encounter I had with a mother in a town called Widnes. I spent two and a half (mostly) happy years there as parish priest of a small parish which no longer exists. Half of the homes in the parish were private, and the rest were council-owned, including Poet's Corner, basically the local "sink" estate, with streets ironically named after some of Britain's best pastoral and romantic poets. One morning, I opened the door to a middle-aged lady from that estate; she looked really tired and had fading bruises all over her face. I asked her to come in and sit down. "I've come to pay for two Masses, Father." I know that's bad theology, but it didn't seem like the time or place to discuss that. We sorted out the Mass requests, and I said, "I've got to ask you. Did you walk into a cupboard?" That was the local expression for being thumped by your husband. "No, Father. It's my son. He's taken everything he could move out of the

house, so I've hardly anything left." I asked if he was desperate for money for drugs. He was. I asked if she would be safe when she went home. "Oh, he's not there, Father. He's in prison. I was in court last Friday when he was sent down." I asked her how she felt about that. "Oh, he's in the best place, Father, but I cried when I saw him go. I'm his mother." As you can imagine, I was struck dumb. In that last remark, she taught me more about being a mother, or a parent, than I had ever known before. I hope the fact that I have told you this true story about a mother does not distract or annoy you. I am focusing on the depth of love all good parents feel for their children, even the most wayward among them.

QUESTIONS

- 1 If you have, or had, a good relationship with your father/mother, what is most precious to you about him/her?
- 2 If you are a father, or a mother, or you have been responsible for someone's upbringing, what do you think you 'got right'? Do you have any regrets (reply only if you feel it's appropriate to share it with others)?

EXPLORE THE SCRIPTURES

In Joseph, Jesus saw the tender love of God:

Psalms 103.13: As a father has compassion for his sons, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.

In the synagogue, during the praying of the Psalms, Joseph would surely have heard again and again that the God of Israel is a God of tender love:

Deut 4.31: The Lord, your God, is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you

Psalms 78.38: God, being compassionate, forgave their sin; he did not utterly destroy them. Time and again he turned back his anger, unwilling to unleash all his rage.

Psalms 86.5: Lord, you are good and forgiving, most merciful to all who call on you.

Psalms 111.4: Gracious and merciful is the Lord.

Psalms 145.9: The Lord is good to all, compassionate toward all his works.

Jeremiah 31.20: Is Ephraim not my favoured son, the child in whom I delight?
Even though I threaten him [...], I must show him compassion.

REFLECTION

Some of what Pope Francis wrote in his apostolic letter for the Year of Saint Joseph makes me think he must be very close to a good number of families. People often think celibate Catholic priests cannot possibly know anything worthwhile about family life, but, precisely because they are not tied down to a particular family, they are often introduced into families and accompany them through all sorts of events, joyful and distressing. Section 7 of *Patris Corde* seems particularly insightful. Pope Francis makes the point that “fathers are not born, but made”, and there is a lot to learn. We will come back to this point, but there is no harm in that.

The vision that Pope Francis offers reminded me of a Jesuit priest who came to our school to give us a retreat. He shocked me when he said that he thought his job was “to become obsolete”; his explanation is probably the real reason why I went to seminary and tried to discover if I had a vocation. He explained what he meant by saying that his superiors would send him somewhere for a few years, normally 5 or 6 years at a time. If, by the time he left, the people were not obviously much more comfortable in the presence of God, if they had not learnt how to pray better, he reckoned he had failed. He was trying to help ordinary believers stand on their own two feet spiritually, not always relying on “Father” but having the courage to pray themselves - to have developed the confidence that comes from being God’s friends. Here is a paragraph written by Pope Francis that could have been written by that wise Jesuit, Father Patrick:

“When fathers refuse to live their children’s lives for them, new and unexpected vistas open up. Every child is the bearer of a unique mystery that can only be brought to light with the help of a father who respects that child’s freedom. A father realises that he is most a father and an educator when he becomes ‘useless’, when he sees that his child has become independent and can walk the paths of life unaccompanied.

When he becomes like Joseph, who always knew that his child was not his own but had been entrusted to his care. In the end, this is what Jesus would have us understand when he says: 'Call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven' (Matthew 23,9)".

Good parents don't own you. They love you, even when you break their hearts.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1 From the little we know about him, what do you think we can learn from Saint Joseph about being a father or a good parent?
- 2 If you could put yourself in Saint Joseph's shoes, how would you feel about Mary's revelation that she was expecting a baby?
- 3 How do you think Saint Joseph felt about Jesus staying behind in Jerusalem after the pilgrimage, and about Jesus' strange 'explanation'?

POINTS FOR ACTION

- 1 In 1997, the Archbishop of Glasgow, Cardinal Thomas Winning, invited any woman (believer or not) who found herself in difficulties because of a pregnancy to ask for help. Money flowed in and the scheme worked well. It was a very practical way of supporting unmarried mothers. Not all "pro-life" organisations work that way. Is there any way you think we, the Church, could offer practical help apart from picketing abortion clinics?
- 2 Catholic women are supported by national organisations with spiritual and social help. Is there any mileage in organising local support for Catholic fathers? What do Catholic men say they would appreciate?

CLOSING PRAYER

Grant, we pray, almighty God, that by Saint Joseph's intercession your Church may constantly watch over the unfolding of the mysteries of human salvation, whose beginnings you entrusted to his faithful care. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

*Collect from Mass on the Feast of Saint Joseph,
husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary*

SESSION THREE

OPENING PRAYER

Hail, Guardian of the Redeemer, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary. To you God entrusted His only Son; in you Mary placed her trust; with you Christ became man. Blessed Joseph, to us, too, show yourself a father and guide us in the path of life. Obtain for us grace, mercy and courage, and defend us from every evil. Amen.

from Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter on the Year of St Joseph, Patris Corde, 8 December 2020.

LISTEN TO EXPERIENCE

For several years, I taught philosophy to seminarians in Saint Mary's College in Oscott, to the north of Birmingham. Getting students to ask questions could be hard work, but one day a student asked how we could know if visions or apparitions are true. I thought I was being helpful when I replied that the famous *Penny Catechism*, which was used when I was at primary school, were very helpful on this topic. I mentioned a phrase that has never left me, which said that we were forbidden to trust in “charms, omens, dreams and suchlike fooleries.” I hadn't got to the end of the phrase when three students were leaning over my desk with their faces inches from mine, shouting, “God speaks to us in dreams.” The three were all lively members of the College charismatic prayer group, so, on reflection, I shouldn't have been surprised. I suspect the student who asked the question probably wanted to provoke exactly that reaction from his classmates. The three were

definitely thinking of dreams in Scripture, including Saint Joseph's dreams, but they were also convinced that God still uses dreams to communicate with people. I have since checked on the *Penny Catechism*; the words I remembered are from question 182, about the first Commandment: "Does the first Commandment forbid dealing with the devil and superstitious practices?" The full answer is: "The first Commandment forbids all dealing with the devil and superstitious practices, such as consulting spiritualists and fortune-tellers, and trusting to charms, omens, dreams and suchlike fooleries." My point was that the Church was trying to help us not to be led astray or "taken in" by things that should have no power over us. I was in no way questioning Scripture's revelation to us that God sometimes spoke – or perhaps even still speaks – through people's dreams. It would be good to meet those students again and discuss the issue more calmly. I think they're all priests now. As an aside, you should know that seminarians today often censure their teachers or put them right. Things are very different now from the way they were when I was a seminarian!

The brothers of the Joseph we meet in chapters 37 to 50 of Genesis called him "the dreamer" or "the man of dreams", depending on which translation you read. But that man of dreams was also a man of action, who became the king's adviser and was influential enough to decide the fate of his own brothers, who had sold him into slavery. The Joseph who looked after Mary and Jesus was also a man of dreams, and his dreams inspired him to act decisively, too, to keep them safe.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Do you believe that God can speak to people in dreams?
- 2 How easy would it be to put your trust in God and make big changes in your life the way Joseph did, because that was what God asked of him?

EXPLORE THE SCRIPTURES

Saint Joseph's four dreams are all mentioned in Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew 1.19-20: Joseph, her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of

the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her”.

Matthew 2.13: When they had departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him”.

Matthew 2.19-20: When Herod had died, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead”.

Matthew 2.22: But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go back there. And because he had been warned in a dream, he departed for the region of Galilee.

REFLECTION

Some of you will have seen the 1981 film *Chariots of Fire*, about a Scottish Protestant missionary, Eric Liddell, who refused to run in the 100 metres race at the Paris Olympic Games in 1924, because it was on a Sunday, the Lord’s Day, but won the gold medal in the 400 metres race. There is much more to his life. He later went to China as a missionary, and was interned by the Japanese in 1943. He worked very hard to help his fellow-prisoners, setting up a “school”. One of his pupils, Stephen Metcalfe, said this: “Liddell gave me two gifts: one was his worn out running shoes, but the best, was his *baton of forgiveness*. He taught me to love my enemies, the Japanese, and to pray for them.” Liddell decided early on in his time in the camp that some of Jesus’ words in the *Sermon on the Mount* were a personal challenge to him: “love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.” Easier said than done, isn’t it? The first time I heard Vietnamese Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen van Thuan speak in public, I was moved to tears by what he said about the 13 years he spent in prison. So were most of the people in the room. He told us

he resolved not to hate his Viet Cong prison guards, but to love them. It made no difference for a long time, but after a while he noticed the attitude of the guards changing. To cut a long story short, at the end he held up his pectoral cross, which looked very strange, and told us the guards made it out of scraps of metal and barbed wire, and presented it to him shortly before he was released. When he stopped speaking, there was a long silence, then applause and a standing ovation. It was a bit harder to be equally moved the second, third and fourth times I heard the story, but I struggled with my cynicism and overcame it. I was in the presence of a saint.

God sometimes asks a lot of us, often in the all too familiar words of the Gospel. After hearing Gospel stories a few times, we can become deaf to them, but here we have two men who reacted the same way to a radical challenge in the *Sermon on the Mount*: “love your enemies”. To say I find that difficult is an understatement. I find it impossible most of the time. I am glad Pope Francis put so much emphasis on Saint Joseph’s ability to accept God’s challenges, which came to him in dreams. He took them seriously and trusted God, just like Eric Liddell and Cardinal Van Thuan. Why do I find that so hard?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1 Do you think God has ever tried to tell you something important or life-changing? Would you be willing to share your thoughts on that?
- 2 How easy would it for you to accept the “baton of forgiveness” that Eric Liddell wants to hand on to all of us?
- 3 Have you ever regretted not doing something you thought God was asking you to do? What difference has that made to your life? How might things have been different?

POINTS FOR ACTION

- 1 The closing prayer today was written in 1889. The language has been slightly updated, but why not have a go at re-writing it, expressing Pope Leo's thoughts in your own words?
- 2 If we pray the Lord's Prayer seriously, we should be ready to forgive people who have offended us, before asking God to forgive us. Is there anyone who has done you wrong, whom you have never been able to forgive? Is it time to make sure you don't move on from this life without sorting it out? This may be the best opportunity you have ever had to find a way of forgiving the one who has hurt you the most, or hurt someone you love. Ideally, we should forgive them directly, but surely God will accept a genuine change in our hearts. If we really want to forgive, we are more than half way there!

CLOSING PRAYER

O most watchful guardian of the Holy Family, defend the chosen children of Jesus Christ. O most loving Father, ward off from us every contagion of error and corrupting influence; O our most mighty protector, be kind to us and from heaven assist us in our struggle with the power of darkness.

As once you rescued the Child Jesus from deadly peril, so now protect God's Holy Church from the snares of the enemy and from all adversity; shield, too, each one of us by your constant protection, so that, supported by your example and your aid, we may be able to live piously, to die in holiness, and to obtain to eternal happiness in heaven. Amen.

Second part of Pope Saint Leo XIII's Prayer to Saint Joseph.

SESSION FOUR

OPENING PRAYER

Hail, Guardian of the Redeemer, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary. To you God entrusted His only Son; in you Mary placed her trust; with you Christ became man. Blessed Joseph, to us, too, show yourself a father and guide us in the path of life. Obtain for us grace, mercy and courage, and defend us from every evil. Amen.

*from Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter on the
Year of St Joseph, Patris Corde, 8 December 2020.*

LISTEN TO EXPERIENCE

A few years ago, I was asked to take part in an episode of the BBC programme *Beyond Belief*. It was dedicated to a book called *Born Bad*, written by an Australian who I think is a “former” Catholic. The book was all about original sin, and he hoped the book would encourage the Catholic Church to abandon its teaching about original sin. There was a problem with the book, as far as I could see. The author had explained that Saint Augustine had invented a theory about original sin which meant that we are born with the weight of the sin of Adam and Eve on us. He said, quite rightly, that it was not the Catholic Church, but Calvinists, who adopted this theory in its most dramatic form. But he wanted the Catholic Church to back down on its insistence that we are all born bad. I said that I have never heard anyone in a Catholic church, school or family say that children are “born bad”, and that really he ought to address his suggestion to Calvinist Protestants. I told him and the others who were taking

part in the discussion that the Catholic Church puts forward a very positive view of the human person, and suggested that the negative view is very much a part of the Puritan culture which has dominated Britain since Cromwell's time. Puritanism, as far as I can see, is so focused on our sinfulness that it encourages us to feel guilty and to do all we can to cast the spotlight on other people's failings. Look how successful the papers are when they dish the dirt on a celebrity. We grow up with a dread of being found out and humiliated by a jeering crowd.

Pope Francis offered a completely different approach in his letter about the Year of Saint Joseph. He suggests that we can learn from Saint Joseph to look upon our weaknesses with tender mercy. I think it's worth quoting one paragraph in full:

"The evil one makes us see and condemn our frailty, whereas the Spirit brings it to light with tender love. Tenderness is the best way to touch the frailty within us. Pointing fingers and judging others are frequently signs of an inability to accept our own weaknesses, our own frailty. Only tender love will save us from the snares of the accuser. That is why it is so important to encounter God's mercy, especially in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, where we experience his truth and tenderness. Paradoxically, the evil one can also speak the truth to us, yet he does so only to condemn us. We know that God's truth does not condemn, but instead welcomes, embraces, sustains and forgives us".

QUESTIONS

- 1 Where does tenderness fit into your image of God or the Church?
- 2 Has anything made you think you're just not good enough in God's eyes? Think hard about how much it is appropriate to share with others.

EXPLORE THE SCRIPTURES

The parable of the prodigal son.

Luke 15.17-20: Coming to his senses he thought, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger...' So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught

sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.

The story of the woman caught in adultery.

John 8.7-11: When they continued asking him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her'. Again he bent down and wrote on the ground. In response, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders. So he was left alone with the woman before him. Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no-one condemned you?' She replied, 'No-one, Sir'. Then Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go; from now on do not sin any more'.

REFLECTION

One of the British television programmes I see in the Faroe Islands is *QI*, in which Sandi Toksvig invites celebrities to make fools of themselves by answering questions on chosen topics. One episode was on procrastination, and she asked her guests why they thought we put things off so much. One of them gave a reply which could be spot-on. She said we put things off because deep down many of us are perfectionists; we judge ourselves by ridiculously high standards that convince us we can never do a job well enough – so we keep putting it off and distracting ourselves. When we are not satisfied with ourselves, that often spills over into harsh judgments of other people. If we give in to the temptation to shine the spotlight on other people, to avoid being criticised or judged ourselves, there is no room for that tenderness we read about in that paragraph I quoted from Pope Francis' Letter for the Year of Saint Joseph.

I think the Pope is absolutely right about that, and it could be a wonderful liberation from self-criticism and self-doubt if we decided to see ourselves more tenderly. I'm sure that would allow us to be tender to other people, too. So much "doom and gloom", or "hell fire and damnation" really comes not from the Gospel but from a bleak view of ourselves that has come to us from somewhere else. Remember the title of Pope Francis' first Encyclical Letter: *The Joy of the Gospel*. Be honest: were you brought up to be a joyful

Catholic, or have you inherited some of the gloomy stuff? I'll finish this reflection by quoting words from a song called *The Gift* by Annie Lennox: "Take this gilded cage of pain and set me free; take this overcoat of shame – it never did belong to me." We're far from perfect, but we weren't born bad. When God made us, He did a good job. The "overcoat of shame" doesn't belong to you or to me. It never did.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1 What do you think happens to children who die without being baptised?
- 2 What do you think it means to be saved, or to go to heaven, or to be with God eternally?
- 3 How do you convince your children, or people who doubt their own worthiness, that God is good?

POINTS FOR ACTION

- 1 I once suggested putting a sign up outside our church, saying, "Sinners' club. Come and join us at 10am any Sunday." It didn't go down very well, but I wonder if you can dream up a way of encouraging people who think they're beyond God's forgiveness to come home?
- 2 Tenderness is not a fashionable quality in our culture. Yet it is vital as a way of humanising relationships. How can we 'sell' the need to be tender?

CLOSING PRAYER

Gentle Joseph, God is captivated by the quality of your heart. Your entire being is focused on doing his will. With Mary and Jesus, you answer the Holy Spirit's call to build a better world. With one heart, we join you in saying: "Here we are, Lord, your will be done! Your kingdom come nearer to us!" Keep the hope of a new world alive in our hearts. Inspire us to speak words of tenderness to awaken the love of hearts. May we draw the energy for our actions from the source of all Love so our faces may shine with the freedom of the children of God. Amen.

SESSION FIVE

OPENING PRAYER

Hail, Guardian of the Redeemer, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary. To you God entrusted His only Son; in you Mary placed her trust; with you Christ became man. Blessed Joseph, to us, too, show yourself a father and guide us in the path of life. Obtain for us grace, mercy and courage, and defend us from every evil. Amen.

*from Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter on the
Year of St Joseph, Patris Corde, 8 December 2020.*

LISTEN TO EXPERIENCE

Part of my first assignment as a priest was to be the chaplain in a Catholic high school, where there were 1,250 children from 11 to 16. I was scared at the beginning, but soon became part of the furniture and really loved the work. A priest in such a position is not there just for the children, and one day one of the women in the office, a good solid Catholic with three children in the school, asked me why she still had the faith of a child. When I asked her who she thought was responsible for that state of affairs, her face drained, and she suddenly said, "It could be me." I was so pleased I didn't have to say it. I asked her if she had ever opened a book about her religion since leaving school. No. Had she ever had a chat with anyone – even her husband – about their faith? No. Did she ever read the Bible? No. And yet she was one of our most dedicated and 'happy' believers. Ever since then, I have wondered how to help people to bridge that gap between their uncomplicated childhood faith

and the complex realities of life which we all learn to handle – why do we not spontaneously do the same with our spiritual life? Maybe I have expressed myself in a clumsy way, but I am sure there will be many people in your lives who are in the same boat.

QUESTIONS

- 1 How much are you simply “resigned to your fate”, accepting everything that comes your way?
- 2 Have you been good at seizing the opportunities you have had to serve God and your neighbour?

EXPLORE THE SCRIPTURES

Matthew 2.13: When they had departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him.”

Matthew 2.19-20: When Herod had died, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.”

REFLECTION

Over forty years ago a young priest came back to our diocese from a period of study in the United States of America. I can no longer remember what the occasion was, but as Father Vincent Nichols addressed us, he said something that instantly made sense to me and has remained with me ever since. He asked us to be very careful about saying things beginning with the word ‘we’; he suggested it was usually much more honest to say ‘I’. You’ve probably experienced a strange feeling of being an outsider when people say ‘we think such-and-such’ or ‘this is how we do things’. Straightaway, you’re aware you’re not really part of the club. You don’t quite belong. More important than that, though, as individuals, we often don’t have the right to speak for other

people, and it is very bold to suggest that we do. Still more important, if I really believe something and it's something I want to share with others, it is always more honest for me to say exactly that: 'I think this or 'I believe that. By admitting that I speak only for myself, I am recognising my limits and I am being absolutely honest and open. But the odd thing is that, when I started putting into practice what Father Nichols suggested to us that day, I suddenly felt a lot more confident and sure of things. On the one hand, I was trying not to make people feel excluded from some inner circle, and on the other hand I was taking responsibility for the things I said; I wasn't hiding behind other people or an organisation. Father Nichols didn't say we should never say "we", and that's not what I mean, either; but he helped me to learn to trust myself and to be brave enough to make it clear that what I was saying was often just my own opinion.

Pope Francis sees Saint Joseph as someone who was able to face up to difficult situations and respond to them. He didn't find excuses or avoid challenges, but somehow found a way of trusting that God was with him to guide and protect him; as Pope Francis suggests, he sometimes discovered that serious difficulties brought out inner strengths that he didn't know he had. He even writes that "God acted by trusting in Joseph's creative courage", and he gives us several examples. He turns it around by asking us to consider whether we are "protecting Jesus and Mary" as Joseph did. Jesus came into the world as a child who was more vulnerable than most, especially when Herod set out to find and kill him. Even in such a potentially nasty situation, God and Mary were both able to trust Joseph, who showed strong faith but also an amazing love and concern. That is why he is invoked as "protector of the unfortunate, the needy, exiles, the afflicted, the poor and the dying". Pope Francis encourages us to cultivate a similar love and concern for the child and his mother, "to love the Sacraments and charity, to love the Church and the poor", because "each of these realities is always the child and his mother."

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1 What do you think the Church should do about "the unfortunate, the needy, exiles, the afflicted, the poor and the dying"?
- 2 Who in the Church do you think is responsible for this love and care?
- 3 On what occasions have you either taken - or failed to take - the initiative in your life as a Catholic Christian?

POINTS FOR ACTION

- 1 From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has asked us to avoid the temptation to spend our energy on ourselves as the Church, but to look beyond the church door out into the world. Look at your own parish or community and do a health check. Is it a force for good in the neighbourhood or area? Make a list of the ways your parish or community makes a difference to “the unfortunate, the needy, exiles, the afflicted, the poor and the dying”. In what ways are you all “protecting Jesus and Mary”?
- 2 Be really honest now! Do you experience Mass as an escape from the problems that bombard you through the week? There’s nothing wrong with that, but is there any way Mass and Holy Communion give you strength to go back and face those problems with joy and hope? At the end of Mass, do you feel, “Oh, well. That’s over until next time” or do you feel ‘empowered’ or ‘energised’ in any sense?

CLOSING PRAYER

O God, who in your inexpressible providence were pleased to choose Saint Joseph as spouse of your most holy Mother, grant, we pray, that we, who revere him as our protector on earth may be worthy of his heavenly intercession, who live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

from the Litany of Saint Joseph.

SESSION SIX

OPENING PRAYER

Hail, Guardian of the Redeemer, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary. To you God entrusted His only Son; in you Mary placed her trust; with you Christ became man. Blessed Joseph, to us, too, show yourself a father and guide us in the path of life. Obtain for us grace, mercy and courage, and defend us from every evil. Amen.

from Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter on the Year of St Joseph, Patris Corde, 8 December 2020.

LISTEN TO EXPERIENCE

About 40 years ago, I was in Belfast for a friend's wedding, and was invited to stay in the family home. On the morning of the wedding, I was sitting on the step of the door at the side of the house polishing my shoes. At a certain point, my friend's father came and sat next to me. He looked strangely sad, so I asked him what was the matter. He started to cry and said "I'm losing my daughter today." If I had had any sense, I would simply have listened, but thought I was being helpful, when I said "but surely, this is the day you and Peggy have helped her prepare for. You've educated her to be a strong woman who knows her own mind, and the day has to come when she steps out and begins to live her own life. Isn't this what you want for her; a chance to build her own family?"

People often speak not only literally, but also figuratively, of breaking the umbilical cord between a mother and her children; something similar was going

on between Gerry and his daughter on the day of her wedding. I should probably have kept my words to myself, because he was going through a moment of very understandable bewilderment. His relationship with his daughter was never going to be the same again. Little did he know how much she would do for him for the rest of his life, especially after his lovely wife died. All the same, I should have indulged him in his moment of misplaced grief, and kept my wise words to myself!

I think we both learnt a lot that morning. Gerry was a strong father and a good guide for all his five children. You could be forgiven for thinking that the way he spoke about 'losing' his daughter showed him to be a possessive father; but he would have been horrified at that idea. He was much more like the quiet man in the shadows described by Pope Francis in his Apostolic Letter. I just mention this incident on his daughter's wedding day to raise the question of possessive parenthood, with all the potential dangers that come with the idea that 'my' child is just that, some kind of possession.

The challenge we shall see in a few minutes is to be a loving and effective father while having the freedom and the wisdom to stand back and let your children live and breathe an atmosphere of freedom, encouraging them to grow physically, spiritually and emotionally into free and mature men or women.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Pope Francis describes Saint Joseph as "a father in the shadows". What do you think about that image?
- 2 Can you share your memories about people who have worked in the background of your life or somebody else's?

EXPLORE THE SCRIPTURES

Luke 2.41-50: Each year his parents went to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, and when he was twelve years old, they went up according to festival custom. After they had completed its days, as they were returning, the boy Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Thinking that he was in the caravan, they journeyed for a day and looked

for him among their relatives and acquaintances, but not finding him, they returned to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the Temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, and all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished, and his mother said to him, "Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety." And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them.

REFLECTION

Pope Francis reflects in section 7 of *Patris Corde* on Saint Joseph as "a father in the shadows", a man who is quietly – in fact, silently – present in the life of Jesus. He thinks fatherhood can be understood not only in a biological sense, but also in the sense of taking responsibility for another person; he thinks this is the case even for priests and bishops. He makes a very important point, though, about the need for fathers (parents) not to be possessive. It is worth quoting a whole paragraph on this:

"Being a father entails introducing children to life and reality. Not holding them back, being overprotective or possessive, but rather making them capable of deciding for themselves, enjoying freedom and exploring new possibilities. Perhaps for this reason, Joseph is traditionally called a 'most chaste' father. That title is not simply a sign of affection, but the summation of an attitude that is the opposite of possessiveness. Chastity is freedom from possessiveness in every sphere of one's life. Only when love is chaste, is it truly love. A possessive love ultimately becomes dangerous: it imprisons, constricts and makes for misery. God himself loved humanity with a chaste love; he left us free even to go astray and set ourselves against him. The logic of love is always the logic of freedom, and Joseph knew how to love with extraordinary freedom. He never made himself the centre of things. He did not think of himself, but focused instead on the lives of Mary and Jesus."

It has always worried me to meet parents who live their lives through their children. I think their children live in fear, perhaps not cowering physically in a corner, but definitely constantly hearing echoes in their minds of threats from their parents, dictating every moment of their lives. The voices of possessive parents are always present in the minds of their children, who are never truly free. Compare that with what Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet said about Saint Joseph:

“Among the different vocations, I notice two in the scriptures which seem directly opposed to each other: the first is that of the apostles, the second that of Saint Joseph. Jesus was revealed to the apostles that they might announce him throughout the world; He was revealed to Saint Joseph who was to remain silent and keep him hidden. The apostles are lights to make the world see Jesus. Joseph is a veil to cover him; and under that mysterious veil are hidden from us the virginity of Mary and the greatness of the Saviour of souls. He who makes the apostles glorious with the glory of preaching, glorifies Joseph by the humility of silence.”

I had a friend who was a perfectionist, but I realised one day, when he failed to keep an appointment, that he was unable to live his own life. His mother was constantly telling him what she wanted his life to be and he never really escaped from that, even when he married. He excelled in his job, but was never genuinely free. His mother's voice echoed loudly at every turn in his life, and he was followed around by her unreasonable expectations. Out of the blue, his wife called to ask me to visit him in a psychiatric ward after a suicide attempt failed. The next time she called, it was to let me know he had done it again, and this time his life on earth was over. I found his funeral an excruciating experience, and even at his grave his mother's behaviour was appalling. She was never in the shadows. She was never silent. Her son was like a toy, a project. Never a free soul.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

In your answers to these questions, keep Saint Joseph's silence in mind.

- 1 How happy are you about being a quiet, unsung hero, or, if we are allowed to say it, heroine?
- 2 What is the difference between hiding our light under a bushel and being like leaven in the dough?

POINTS FOR ACTION

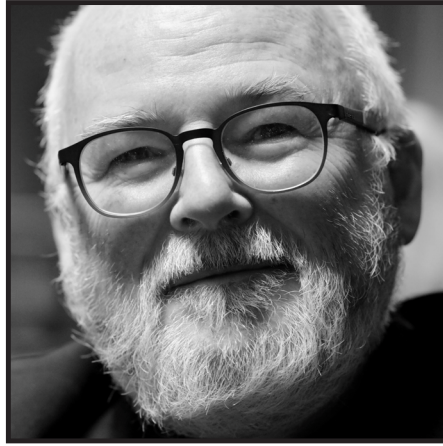
- 1 If your life has been dominated by a possessive parent, you may find that hard to forgive. Try to weave forgiveness into your prayers for anyone who has dominated your life unreasonably.
- 2 Remaining silent or standing in the shadows is not always good. What do you know about the accusations that the Catholic Church was too silent about the Holocaust? It is helpful to focus on the word “know”. This is not about opinions, so try this:
 - 1 Find out about the life of Blessed Titus Brandsma, a Dutch Carmelite.
 - 2 Find out what you can about *The Deputy*, a play by Rolf Hochhuth. It was fictional, but has come to be regarded by many as “Gospel truth” about Pope Pius XII.
 - 3 Look up the name Israel Anton Zoller, also known as Eugenio Maria Zolli, the chief rabbi of Rome who converted to Roman Catholicism in February 1945. Note that Pope Pius XII's baptismal name was Eugenio.

CLOSING PRAYER

I wonder if Joseph was still alive when Jesus taught his disciples the prayer we call the Lord's Prayer. It would be remarkable to hear the two of them praying together to God the Father, wouldn't it? Pope Francis has asked us to recognise that Saint Joseph's life was lived With a Father's Heart, and I'm sure he would gladly pray the prayer Jesus taught us.

Pray the Lord's Prayer together, each of you in the language in which you first prayed it. The sound of people praying together in many languages is not the Tower of Babel but the morning of Pentecost. It is a reminder that many of the people with you in church did not grow up in the same culture as you, but God has brought you all together and loves all of you, with all your different characters, your abilities and challenges, your likes and dislikes. Like a good father, God is able to love all of His children equally, so if you hear someone praying next to you in a language you don't know, try to rejoice and be glad that you are part of such a remarkable family.

Begin the Lord's Prayer in your own language when the person leading the group has said, “Now let us pray.”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Monsignor Peter Fleetwood was born in Liverpool and educated at parish schools and Saint Francis Xavier's College (Jesuits), then studied at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. He has been an assistant priest in one parish, parish priest in four, chaplain to large high school, and taught philosophy in the Gregorian University, and at Ushaw, the Beda, the Venerable and Oscott seminaries. He has also spent seven and a half years on the Pontifical Council for Culture, in Rome, and four and a half years as Assistant General Secretary to the Council of Episcopal Conferences of Europe in Sankt Gallen, Switzerland. More recently, he has spent three years as chaplain to Maryton Carmel in Liverpool and four years as one of the priest chaplains at Aintree Hospital. He now finds himself on loan to the Diocese of Copenhagen, as Parish Administrator at Our Lady in Tórshavn in the Faroe Islands.



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