

# YEAR OF ST. JOSEPH - PILGRIM CHAPEL

## *A Reflection on the Mosaic of St. Joseph*

The luminescent mosaic honoring the life of St. Joseph by the famed German artist Leopold Forstner (1878-1936) soon will grace our Shrine. Contemplating the life of St. Joseph through the mosaic, we discover the fecundity of his radical and life-long "yes" to God, his family, and his community. The enduring power of that "yes" today unfolds as we discover the deeper meaning of each of the scenes presented in the mosaic. Let me offer some preliminary observations.

**The central figure of St. Joseph with the Christ Child.** The imposing figure of Joseph holding the Christ Child on his lap occupies the central place of beauty and prominence. Joseph seems to hold out to the world this Christ Child while, simultaneously, protecting Him with his large hand covering the Child's midsection. For truly "a little child shall lead" us (*Isaiah 11:6*). Yet only those who, like this Child, learn to be "gentle and lowly in heart... will find rest for your souls" (*Matthew 11:29*). Joseph defends the Child's message against the accusations of naiveté and impracticality of the world-weary and jaded. Instead, he holds out "to those who labor and find life burdensome" (*Matthew 11:28*) the Child's promise: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives the One who sent me" (*Luke 9:48*). In fact, "truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (*Luke 18:17*). Joseph and the Child are central.

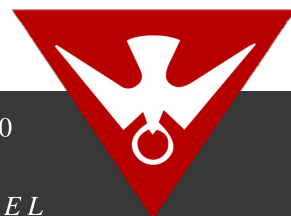
**A glimpse into heaven.** The whole mosaic seems to rise up out of the glory of the heavens that envelop it. Both at the feet of the central figure of Joseph as well as in each of the individual scenes, hints of that heavenly realm illuminated by the gentle light of countless stars are evident. We enter into the experience of this heavenly light not directly but through contemplating its Divine manifestation in the lives of Joseph, Mary, and the Child. The whole mosaic and each of its component parts both reveal and hide the fullness of the emerging mystery. Like the visionary John, we begin to sense "the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (*Revelation 21:2*).

**A vision abundantly fruitful.** Yet this vision is not fanciful but life-giving, life-sustaining and preeminently fruitful. The verdant green vines surrounding the central figure of Joseph and the Child seem to bud forth out of the mosaic and abound. They point to the fecundity of the mystery presented, its luxuriant fruitfulness. For right "through the middle of the street" of this holy city flowed the river and on either side of the river "the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" (*Revelation 22:2*). This vision is one of healing and hope for all peoples.

**The scenes and the pillars of the Shrine of St. Joseph.** "Shrines" are "holy places" where people come seeking God in a direct, intimate and personal way. They are a constant in both Scripture and tradition. To commemorate his encounter with God at Bethel, the patriarch Jacob "rose early in the morning, and he took the stone which he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it." He cried out, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, the gate of heaven" (*Genesis 28:17,18*). The Shrine of St. Joseph has been such a place of pilgrimage and holy encounter for almost a hundred years. As a "mission center," the Shrine also has consecrated "holy pillars." But these pillars are not of stone but of dedicated people of faith, "living stones ... built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (*1 Peter 2:5*).

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These "holy pillars" that consecrate the Shrine as a mission center to the glory of the Triune God are *spiritual and apostolic formation; peace and human rights; recovery, health and healing; and worship*. The mosaic represents four individual scenes from the life of St. Joseph: his marriage to Mary, the birth of Jesus, the presentation in the Temple, and the death of Joseph. In a certain sense, each of these scenes represents one of the foundational "pillars" of the Shrine as a mission center.

**Joseph's marriage to Mary:** *Spiritual and Apostolic Formation Pillar*. St. Joseph had to learn to discern God's Will in a dramatic fashion. His intended wife had betrayed him. She was pregnant, and he was not the father.

For such a violation, Mary could be stoned to death. But Joseph was a "righteous" man, a man who sought to know and do God's Will in his life (*Matthew 1:19*). So initially he decided on the more compassionate path of quietly divorcing Mary. However, through careful listening and discerning in prayer, Joseph came to understand his role: to be the foster father and the principal protector of this Child, the Anointed One, and His Mother. His mission became clear, a mission which informed and transformed the rest of his life. Spiritual and Apostolic Formation consists precisely in this: learning to discern God's Will amidst the circumstances and events of life, accepting the risks and consequences of following that divine call, and acting in justice and love no matter what the cost.

**Jesus' birth in Bethlehem:** *Peace and Human Rights Pillar*. Jesus comes among us vulnerable, weak, needing protection and care. The "Prince of Peace" (*Isaiah 9:6*) comes to restore unity and peace to all creation (*Isaiah 11:6*), "to gather into one all the scattered children of God" (*John 11:52*). His ardent prayer at the end of His earthly life was "that they may be one" (*John 17:11,22*). Whether the shepherds, unclean according to the Law or the Magi, strangers from a remote land and an unknown culture, Joseph and Mary receive them all with gratitude, honor, and respect. Soon after the Holy Family must flee to Egypt as refugees to escape the violence of the tyrant Herod. Even after returning, they make their home in the remote village of Nazareth for fear of ongoing danger to the Child (*Matthew 2:19-23*). In each of these situations, Joseph's mission was to protect and defend the fundamental human rights of his little family in the midst of political, social and economic upheaval.

The mission of the Peace and Human Rights Pillar, in the spirit of Joseph and Mary, is to "break down the wall of hostility" dividing us (*Ephesians 2:14*) and create spaces of hospitality, dialogue, and understanding. Here people of every race, language, religion, and way of life are welcome - especially the poorest and most vulnerable - as honored guests, sisters, and brothers.

**Presentation of Jesus:** *Worship Pillar*. Joseph and Mary present the Child Jesus in the Temple, fulfilling the commandment of the Law and worshipping the God they had come to know in faithful obedience and love (*Luke 2:22-28*). They shared fully in the faith-life of their rural community: attending synagogue, resting on the sabbaths, praying daily in their little home. They kept the special feasts as well and taught their little Son Jesus to do so as well. Every year, no matter what the personal cost or sacrifice, they made together with the 120-mile pilgrimage on foot from Nazareth to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover with family and friends (*Luke 2:41-52*).

Joseph and Mary lived lives of quiet fidelity to the God whom they had come to love and serve with all their "mind, heart, soul, and strength" (*Luke 10:27*). They joyfully shared this same path of praise, love, and worship with their young Son Jesus. The Worship Pillar shares in this mission of St. Joseph today. For peoples of all cultures, languages, and ways of life, the Shrine provides a place to come to seek ever more deeply an encounter with the living God. Daily Eucharist and opportunities for sacramental reconciliation, as well as special experiences of prayer and devotion, individual and communal, throughout the year, create a milieu of peace and prayer and worship. Here all God's People are welcome to encounter the One in whom "we live and move and have our being" (*Acts 17:28*)

**Death of Joseph:** *Recovery, Health & Healing Pillar*. After the finding of Jesus in the Temple at age twelve (*Luke 2:41-52*), Joseph disappears from the pages of Scripture. An ancient tradition of the Church teaches that Joseph lived these years of the "hidden life" of Nazareth in quiet, patient service as husband and father and member of his community village. He died a holy death, comforted and supported to the end by his beloved wife and Son. He experienced joys and hopes, love and happiness. But like all of us, he also had to deal with sickness, suffering, and, eventually, death. In each of these moments, his little family whom he had so loved and protected at such personal cost and sacrifice was there for him as a source of healing, strength, and peace. The Recovery, Health & Healing Pillar honors this time in the life of St. Joseph by accompanying sisters and brothers in their times of need for healing, the newness of life and, eventually, support and comfort for the final journey home.