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Audience with the Community of the Pontifical Belgian College

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the Community of the Pontifical Belgian College on the occasion of the 175th anniversary of its founding.

The following is the address the Pope handed to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers,

I am pleased to welcome you, the 175th anniversary of your College, the Pontifical Belgian College, whose alumni include Saint John Paul II. I thank the rector, Archbishop Smet, for his words of introduction.

On the eve of the Solemnity of Saint Joseph, in this Year dedicated to him, and knowing that the Belgian College has the Guardian of the Redeemer as its heavenly Patron, we can look to him, as ministers of Christ, to bring out some ideas regarding the identity of the pastor and the way of exercising paternity towards those entrusted to us. As you know, fatherhood is the main theme of the Apostolic Letter *Patris corde*, which I wrote to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of Saint Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church.

First of all, Saint Joseph is *a father who welcomes*. Indeed, after overcoming all rebellion and setting aside his legitimate personal plans, he loved and welcomed Mary and Jesus, a wife and son who were very different from the vision of family life that he could have wished for, but for this reason even more cherished and loved by him. In other words, Joseph did not seek explanations for the surprising and mysterious reality he found himself facing, but welcomed it with faith, loving it just as it was.

In this sense, Saint Joseph is master of the spiritual life and of discernment, and we can invoke him to free us from the bonds of excessive reflection in which we sometimes lose ourselves, even with the best of intentions.

They manifest our tendency to "seize" and "possess" what happens to us, rather than welcoming it first of all as it presents itself to us.

Let's think - to make a concrete example that is close to us - of a priest who arrives in a new parish. That community existed before him, it has its own history, made up of joys and sorrows, riches and small miseries, which cannot be ignored in the name of personal pastoral ideas and plans that one cannot wait to apply. This is a risk we can prey to. The new parish priest must first love the community, freely, simply because he has been sent to it; and gradually by loving it he will get to know it in depth and be able to help it set out on new paths.

Saint Joseph, then, is a *father as protector*. Being a protector is an essential part of his vocation and mission. It is a task that Joseph lived "discreetly, humbly and silently, but with an unfailing presence and utter fidelity, even when he finds it hard to understand"; he lived it "by being constantly attentive to God, open to the signs of God's presence and receptive to God's plans, and not simply to his own" (*Homily*, 19 March 2013). Therefore, he carried out this task with the inner freedom of the good and faithful servant who desires only the good of the people entrusted to him.

To protect - for Joseph, as for every priest who is inspired by his paternity - means to love tenderly those who are entrusted to us, to think first and foremost of their wellbeing and their happiness, with discretion and persevering generosity. To protect is an inner attitude, that leads us never to lose sight of others, judging from time to time when to step back and when to draw close, but always maintaining a vigilant, attentive and prayerful heart.

It is the *attitude of the shepherd*, who never abandons his flock, but places himself in a different position in relation to it according to the practical needs of the moment: ahead so as to open the way, in its midst to encourage, behind to gather the last. This is what a priest is called to do in his relationship with the community entrusted to him, that is, to be an attentive guardian, ready to change according to what the situation requires; not to be 'monolithic', inflexible and, as it were, cemented in a way of exercising the ministry that may be good in itself, but not able to respond to the changes and needs of the community.

When instead a shepherd loves and know his flock, he knows how to make himself the servant of all (see *1 Cor* 9: 19), as Saint Paul wrote. He does not place himself and his own ideas at the centre, but rather the good of those whom he is called upon to protect, avoiding the contrary temptations of domination and carelessness.

Finally, Saint Joseph is a *father who dreams*. Not a "dreamer" in the sense of one with his head in the clouds, detached from reality, no, but a man who knows how to look beyond what he sees: with a prophetic outlook, capable of recognising God's plan where others see nothing, and in this way to be clear about the way in which to head. Indeed, Saint Joseph was able to see in Mary and Jesus not only a young spouse and a child; he always saw in them God's work, the presence of God.

In this way, safeguarding the fragility of the Child and his Mother, Joseph looked beyond his duties as a father and, preferring to believe in God rather than in his own doubts, he offered himself to him as a tool for the realisation of a greater plan, in hidden, generous and tireless service, until the silent end of his life.

For priests, in the same way, it is necessary to know how to dream of the community they love, so as not to limit themselves to wanting to conserve what exists - conserve and protect are not synonyms! - to be ready instead to start out from the real history of people in order to promote conversion and renewal in a missionary sense, and to nurture a community on the move, made up of disciples guided by the Holy Spirit and "driven" by the love of God (see *2 Cor* 5: 14).

Dear priests, in this year dedicated to him, I invite you to rediscover in a special way in prayer the figure and mission of Saint Joseph, obedient to God's will, humble author of great undertakings, obedient and creative servant. It will do you good to place yourselves and your vocations under his mantle and to learn from him the art of fatherhood, which you will soon be called to exercise in communities and in the areas and ministerial services that will be entrusted to you. I accompany you with my prayer and my blessing. And you too, please

pray for me. Thank you.
