

**February 20, 2011**

Sunday of the Prodigal Son

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

If we take seriously the implications of the Incarnation, I believe we can say with confidence that Jesus' early formation was largely influenced by his parents---both of them.

First, Joseph: Jesus "was supposed" (*enomizeto*---Luke 3:23) to be "the son of Joseph" (John 1:45; 6:42). When He first addressed the citizens of Nazareth, those in the synagogue inquired, "Is this not Joseph's son?" (Luke 4:22)

There was also an instructive variation on this question: "Is this not the *craftsman's* son?" (Matthew 13:55) The underlying Greek noun here is *tekton*, a term including any sort of builder, craftsman, or skilled worker. A *tekton* was someone who constructed and fashioned things with his hands.

Joseph taught Jesus those cultivated manual talents summarized by George Eliot as the inheritance bequeathed from a craftsman father: "the mechanical instinct, the keen sensibility to harmony, the unconscious skill of the modeling hand."

What more did Jesus learn from Joseph? Let me suggest that he also found in Joseph an ideal son of Abraham---that is to say, a man who lived, as Abraham did, by faith. Consider the calling of Joseph. Every vocation is unique, but there was something supremely unique in the vocation of Joseph. His vocation was not only difficult; it was impossible! Joseph had to figure it out as he went along, simply following God's call, as best he could, wherever it led. He was obliged to "leave the heavy lifting" to God.

With so distinctive and demanding a vocation, Joseph might be excused, surely, if, on occasion---the flight into Egypt, say---he felt anxious and insecure. The evidence, however, indicates that this was not the case. Joseph was not a man given to anxiety. He appeared, rather, as a man of extraordinary serenity. Five times we find Joseph in five scenes in the Gospel of Matthew, and every single time he is sound asleep (Matthew 1:20-24; 2:12, 13, 19, 22). Whatever troubles Joseph endured, they did not include insomnia. Perhaps we see the influence of Joseph, when we contemplate Jesus, sound asleep, during a storm on the stern sheets of a fisherman's boat.

Second, Mary: In the biblical stories concerning her, the most significant fact about Mary was her consent to God's invitation. Absolutely everything else

recorded in the four gospels depended on that consent. Mary's "Be it done unto me according to your word" (Luke 1:38) was also the first step along the road to Jesus' "Not my will, but Yours, be done" (22:42).

I believe the correspondence between these two scenes indicates, likewise, the important spiritual influence of Mary on her son. It was from her that he learned to respond in faith to the call of God, no matter the cost. Their destinies were inextricably entwined in the mystery of Redemption. Even as Simeon prophesied that Jesus was "destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign of contradiction," he took care to warn Mary, "yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also" (Luke 2:34-35).

This prophecy was mainly fulfilled on Mount Calvary where "there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother" (John 19:25), loyally adhering to him unto to the end. For this reason we find Mary-in the New Testament's last mention of her-gathered with the other Christians in the upper room, awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14).

For the rest, Mary walked in faith, and she thereby taught her son to walk in faith. Gradually, day by day, "the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him" (Luke 2:40), but not much happened that was ordinary. Indeed, Jesus seemed so ordinary a child that Mary and Joseph were quite stunned when, at age twelve, he suddenly asked them, "Did you not know that I must be about the things of My Father?" (2:49)

Year followed year, and Jesus remained at home with Joseph, eventually taking over the shop when Joseph passed away. We may imagine that Mary was content, living in company with her son, who was dutiful and conscientious.

Then one day, Jesus announced that he was going to see his cousin, John, who was preaching and baptizing in the Jordan Valley. He left her at home in Nazareth, and, when Jesus came back home some time later, everything was suddenly changed.

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