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THE THREE THEOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO ST. JOSEPH: JOHN PAUL II, BENEDICT XVI, FRANCIS

Summary: The study presents three images of St. Joseph included in selected writings of the last three popes: John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis. It notes that despite the same data from Scripture, the analysed images are different. Their diversity results from different sources used in theological reflection as well as from different methods of interpretation. John Paul II interprets the figure of the Guardian of the Redeemer in the light of God revealing Himself, carrying out His eternal plan. The emphasis was placed on God's eternal plan that was actualized in earthly history and in human events. This made it possible to show both the realization of the divine plan in concrete terms, as well as the cooperation, faith and obedience of the carpenters of Nazareth in this work.

In turn, Cardinal Ratzinger shows the figure of Joseph based on the message contained in a Baroque relief of a Portuguese altar. The symbolic language of the anonymous sculptor and the message contained in the Baroque relief allowed the theologian to draw attention to certain aspects that are difficult to see in the Gospels of Childhood.

On the other hand, the image of Joseph presented by Pope Francis emphasizes the paternity of the Patriarch, expressing a certain analogy to the paternity of God towards Israel and the paternity of God to His Son. From this perspective, Joseph's paternity appears to be a shadow of God's paternity. This term refers to the title of a novel by Jan Dobraczyński, the message of which influenced the content of the theological icon in the document of Pope Francis.

This study found that, despite the limited data on Joseph in Scripture, thanks to the theological sources used and the new interpretative methods used, it was possible to show new, original images of the Guardian of the Redeemer, which allow future generations of Christians to better understand the role and place of St. Joseph in the history of salvation and in the life of the Church.

Keywords: St. Joseph, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, Francis, theological interpretation.

The proclamation of the Year of St. Joseph by Pope Francis and the publication of the apostolic letter "Patris corde" resulted in an increased interest in the figure of the Guardian of the Redeemer, expressed in organized scientific conferences and published materials. The aim of this study is to present three different approaches of St. Joseph, emerging from selected statements of popes: John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis.

In order to answer the question posed, the apostolic exhortation “Redemptoris custos” by John Paul II, the apostolic letter “Patris corde” by Pope Francis and one of the homilies delivered by Pope Benedict XVI were analysed.

1. Joseph according to John Paul II’s “Redemptoris custos”

The title of the apostolic exhortation shows the figure of Joseph in the light of the mystery of the Redeemer. The perspective adopted by John Paul II is compatible with the teaching contained in the dogmatic constitution “Dei Verbum”: “By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation”. (Second Vatican Council, 1965, n. 2) The above words make us realize that all the mysteries of Christ’s life, from the Incarnation to his resurrection and ascension, have a salvific value. (Stramare, 2012, p. 21) This also applies to Jesus’ childhood. The conciliar perspective appears in the papal exhortation: “For salvation, which comes through the humanity of Jesus, is realized in actions which are an everyday part of family life, in keeping with that ‘condescension’ which is inherent in the economy of the Incarnation. The gospel writers carefully show how in the life of Jesus nothing was left to chance, but how everything took place according to God’s predetermined plan”. (John Paul II, 1989, n. 8)

At the centre of the mentioned exhortation is Jesus, who came to fulfil God’s plan for salvation. The emphasis placed on the Christocentric and soteriological perspectives made it possible to emphasize the cooperation of Joseph of Nazareth with God’s saving will and to draw attention to “Joseph’s humble, mature way of serving and of [taking part] in the plan of salvation”. (John Paul II, 1989, n. 1; cf. Kochaniewicz, 2021, p. 65–77) The Pope, as in the case of the Blessed Virgin Mary, drew attention to the attitude of obedience to the faith of Joseph, which was expressed in the acceptance of what God revealed during his birth in Bethlehem, the circumcision and naming, the offering in the temple, escaping to Egypt and in being found in the temple. (John Paul II, 1989, nn. 10–17)

In the papal document, the figure of Joseph of Nazareth was shown in several aspects. First as the father of Jesus. His fatherhood was a form of service and mission to the Redeemer. (John Paul II, 1989, n. 8) It was distinguished by a sacrifice that was in response to the will of God, who entrusted Joseph with the care of the Saviour’s life. (John Paul II, 1989, n. 8)

Moreover, John Paul II introduced Joseph as the bridegroom. His spousal love for Mary implied a disinterested attitude of self-sacrifice, which was

expressed in bringing Mary into her own home and in respect for her exclusive belonging to God. (John Paul II, 1989, n. 20) His marriage to Mary became the source of many favours and the special dignity of Joseph. (John Paul II, 1989, n. 20) He became a companion of her life and a witness of her virginity. (John Paul II, 1989, n. 20)

Karol Wojtyła also evidenced the profession practiced by Joseph. As a carpenter, he provided his family with support. While working, he influenced the development of the virtue of his son's diligence.

The exhortation also highlights Joseph's silence, which testifies to his deep spiritual life. (John Paul II, 1989, n. 25) In Nazareth, he was able to commune daily with the mystery of the Incarnate Word. Joseph experienced both the pure contemplative love of the Divine Truth emanating from Christ's humanity, and the pure love of service that was demanded by the care of Jesus' humanity. (John Paul II, 1989, n. 27)

In summation, it should be stated that the topics related to Joseph: father, bridegroom, carpenter and righteous man, are classic approaches that have their source in the Gospels of Childhood. What makes the exhortation "Redemptoris custos" original is the perspective of the theology of Revelation, expressed by the Second Vatican Council and applied by John Paul II.

2. Joseph according to Joseph Ratzinger / Benedict XVI

In 1992, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger preached a commemorative homily in which he presented the figure of Joseph of Nazareth in an original way. (Ratzinger, 2020, pp. 1254–1259) The originality of the approach was based on the artistic content of the relief of a baroque altar from a Portuguese church.¹ He describes it as follows. It was a relief from a Portuguese baroque altar that depicted the night before fleeing to Egypt. A large, open tent is presented, an angel is approaching from above, and Joseph is lying at the entrance to the tent – he is asleep, but dressed in the robe of a pilgrim, a traveller in large boots with leggings, which are needed for a difficult journey. What may seem a bit naive at first: the sleeper is also a wanderer. In fact, it lets us hear something from the message that comes from this character. (Ratzinger, 2020, p. 1255)

Analysing the theological message, Cardinal Ratzinger drew attention to the sleeping figure of Joseph, who, despite his sleep, was able to hear the angel's message. The attitude of vigilance indicated the openness of his soul,

¹ A similar way of reflecting appeared in the speech Benedict XVI gave during the dedication of the new fountain in the Vatican (5 July 2010). He referred to six scenes from the life of St. Joseph, visible on the reliefs placed on the fountain. (Cf. Bujak, 2021, p. 174)

which was expressed in the Baroque relief by the symbol of an open tent. It also included a transcendent dimension. For Joseph was open enough that the lives of God and his holy angels would reach the ears of his heart. (Ratzinger, 2020, p. 1255)

The description of the bas-relief also emphasizes Joseph's readiness to go on a journey, which is a sign of his willingness to do God's will. (Ratzinger, 2020, p. 1256) These two qualities – openness and a willingness to do God's will – defined Joseph's entire human existence. (Ratzinger, 2020, p. 1256) They also referred to the acceptance of events contrary to his will. The words *someone else will lead you where you do not want to go* (Jn 21:18) – when applied to Joseph – had their fulfilment throughout his life. (Ratzinger, 2020, p. 1256) He was introduced to the messianic mystery of Mary's divine motherhood. Entering this mystery was connected with his renunciation of one's own life plan, and at the same time united him with the mystery of the cross. (Ratzinger, 2020, p. 1256) Joseph went to Bethlehem to experience the inhospitality of the inhabitants there and witness the birth of Jesus outside the city. (Ratzinger, 2020, p. 1257) The escape of the Holy Family to Egypt was interpreted in a similar perspective, where it shared the fate of homeless people, deprived of their homeland, looking for a shelter for themselves. (Ratzinger, 2020, p. 1257) Joseph's renunciation was included in the episode of the 12-year-old Son being found in the temple. Jesus' words to his parents reminded him that he was not a father, but only a guardian and confidant of this function. Therefore, summarizes Ratzinger, Joseph's life was not a self-realization in which he would decide and shape it by exercising his own will. It became more and more the renunciation and a fulfilment of words about being led where you do not want to go. (Ratzinger, 2020, p. 1257)

Cardinal Ratzinger drew attention to the pilgrimage of Joseph who, by accepting and fulfilling God's will, began his pilgrimage in faith, analogous to that of Abraham. Thus, Joseph has become a model for Christians as they discover that their life is a pilgrimage to their heavenly homeland. (Ratzinger, 2020, p. 1258)

Interpretation of the figure of St. Joseph from the baroque relief made it possible to discover the influence of a work of art on the understanding of the content conveyed by the Revelation. The work of art analysed by Cardinal Ratzinger revealed a content that would be difficult to articulate from the Gospel narratives themselves. On the one hand, it refers to Revelation and expresses its content, while on the other, he comments and explains it in a way peculiar to him. Therefore, it appears as an interpreted fragment of Revelation. At the same time, the mentioned explanation is not a strictly defined message. Thanks to the introduced means of artistic expression (symbolism, metaphors), the work of art

remains open to the interpretations of observers, which, although they retain certain similarities, at the same time differ from each other, causing that not only its message plays an important role in the process of interpreting a work of art. (Dzidek, 2013, p. 44) Thus, the baroque figure of Joseph, thanks to the interpretation of Cardinal Ratzinger, showed contents that would be difficult to abstract from the Gospel narratives. This Baroque relief, being a work of art, became a source of theological inspiration (*locus theologicus*).

3. Joseph according to Pope Francis

The figure of the Guardian of the Redeemer is also present in the statements of Pope Francis. The most important of which is the apostolic letter “*Patris Corde*” promulgated on the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of St. Joseph as a Patron of the Catholic Church. (Francis, 2021) The aim of the document was to “increase our love for this great saint, to encourage us to implore his intercession and to imitate his virtues and his zeal”. (Francis, 2021, conclusion) The Holy Father’s letter focuses on the question of Joseph’s paternity. Paying attention to this issue is a result of the crisis that paternity is currently experiencing, manifested in the impermanence of marriages and in the disappearance of care for the child’s upbringing. (Francis, 2021, n. 7) In the face of the immaturity of young men, their self-absorption and emotional unsteadiness, the Pope emphasizes that the gift of fatherhood is connected with taking responsibility for the life of the entrusted person, which implies an attitude characterized by a gift of the self. (Francis, 2021, n. 7) Fatherhood requires a mature love that is connected with self-sacrifice, commitment and altruism. In such an exaggerated perspective, the Pope develops his reflections on the paternity of St. Joseph, showing them in relation to God, to Jesus and to the Holy Family.

As the Pope notes, the source of Joseph’s fatherhood is God’s fatherhood. It reveals God’s tenderness; (Francis, 2021, n. 2) it is a sign of “a certain sublime fatherhood” (Francis, 2021, n. 7) and a role model for Christians, for in a sense, all of us are always in the position of Joseph: “we are all like Joseph: a shadow of the heavenly Father”. (Francis, 2021, n. 7) In this light, Joseph’s paternal tenderness refers us to the paternal bond between God and Israel, for whom he was like *a father who lifts a child to his cheek, bends over him to feed him* (Hos 11: 3-4).

Joseph’s fatherhood is connected with the difficulty of recognizing God’s will, which takes place in the midst of dilemmas and doubts, and with obedience to God. (Francis, 2021, n. 2) The fourfold interventions of God during Joseph’s

sleep are met with his obedience. *He got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt; he stayed there until the death of Herod* (Mt 2:14-15).

Joseph's paternity was especially expressed in relation to the Son. (Francis, 2021, n. 1) It was expressed in the upbringing of Jesus, including teaching him the profession of a carpenter. (Francis, 2021, n. 2) "From him, Jesus learned the value, the dignity and the joy of what it means to eat bread that is the fruit of one's own labour". (Francis, 2021, n. 6) Joseph's merit was introducing his Son to life experience, in teaching Him to make choices, while respecting His freedom. This fatherhood had nothing to do with enslaving or imposing on the child his own choices and solutions. (Francis, 2021, n. 7)

Joseph's paternity also expressed responsibility for the family entrusted to him. On coming into the world, the Son of God entrusted Himself to Joseph's protection. (Francis, 2021, n. 5) As the Pope emphasized, God did not free the Holy Family from the problems of everyday life, but entrusted Joseph with the care of His Son, He trusted in Joseph's creative courage. (Francis, 2021, n. 5) Fatherhood was presented as responsibility for the life of another person, (Francis, 2021, n. 7) an expression of mature, altruistic love, free from all forms of selfishness. (Francis, 2021, n. 7)

An extremely interesting aspect of the analysed letter of Pope Francis is a reference to the novel "The Shadow of the Father" by the Polish novelist Jan Dobraczyński. (Dobraczyński, 1997) His work on St. Joseph has been published many times in the West. The editorial success is evidenced by the fact that the Spanish-language edition of the work has been re-issued over twenty times so far.

The fundamental source on which Dobraczyński based his reflection is the Holy Bible. The author did not use apocryphal literature that could provide him with additional material to help build the figure of the Guardian of the Redeemer. The writer, on the other hand, used information taken from the geography of Palestine, taking into account the political and cultural context. The figure of Joseph was shown against the background of the Israeli culture, along with colourful descriptions of nature and buildings of the era. The author described in a naturalistic way the circumstances of the Saviour's birth and His childhood in Nazareth.

The analysis of the apostolic letter and the aforementioned work allows the conclusion that Pope Francis learned the content of the Polish writer's novel. The analogies and similarities encountered testify to this. Dobraczyński emphasized in his novel the consent of Joseph (resembling Mary's *fiat*), which is connected with the acceptance of the role of the "Father's shadow" in the history of salvation. (Dobraczyński, 1997, p. 125) A similar theme appears in the Pope's letter: "In every situation, Joseph declared his own 'fiat', like those

of Mary at the Annunciation and Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane”. (Francis, 2020, n. 3)

Both writings draw attention to the creativity and creative courage of Joseph, which he reveals in difficult situations: (the stay in Bethlehem, the flight to Egypt). (Dobraczyński, 1997, p. 185; Francis, 2020, n. 5) They also remind us that God works despite human doubts and imperfections. (Dobraczyński, 1997, p. 256; Francis, 2020, n. 2)

The influence of the above-mentioned novel on the letter of Pope Francis is evidenced by the words in the conclusion: “The Polish writer Jan Dobraczyński, in his book *The Shadow of the Father*, tells the story of Saint Joseph’s life in the form of a novel. He uses the evocative image of a shadow to define Joseph. In his relationship to Jesus, Joseph was the earthly shadow of the heavenly Father: he watched over him and protected him, never leaving him to go his own way”. (Francis, 2020, n. 7)

It seems that the title of Dobraczyński’s novel became one of the guiding ideas of Pope Francis, who noted: “In a way, we are all like Joseph: a shadow of the heavenly Father, who *makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust* (Mt 5:45). And a shadow that follows his Son”. (Francis, 2020, n. 7)

The influence of Dobraczyński’s novel on the ideas contained in Pope Francis’ letter allows us to state that it became the source of his theological reflection. This conclusion is consistent with the findings of contemporary theologians who argue that fiction is the *locus theologicus*.

Since one of the constitutive elements of a theological place is the testimony of faith, then literature will become such a place as long as it becomes the transmission of this testimony. (Szymik, 2007, p. 92) It can penetrate the reality of revelation to such an extent that it reveals new aspects, hitherto unnoticed. (Szymik, 2007, p. 92) Jan Dobraczyński’s novel is an example of *locus theologicus*.

Conclusion

The presentation shows three pictures of St. Joseph present in the writings of the last three popes: John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis. Despite the same data from the Scriptures, the images are different. The variety of the presented figure results not only from the different sources used (Scripture, art, literature), but also from different methods of interpretation. John Paul II interpreted the figure of the Guardian of the Redeemer in the light of God revealing Himself and carrying out His eternal plan. The emphasis was placed

on God's eternal plan that was actualized in human events. This made it possible to show both the realization of the divine plan in concrete terms, as well as the cooperation, faith and obedience of the carpenter of Nazareth in this work.

Benedict XVI presented the figure of the Bridegroom of Mary, starting from the message contained in a baroque relief of the Portuguese altar. The symbolic language of the artist and the message contained in the work of art allowed Cardinal Ratzinger to draw attention to certain aspects that would be difficult to read from the pages of the Gospels (openness to transcendence and pilgrimage in faith).

Finally, the icon of Joseph given by Pope Francis emphasized the paternity of the Patriarch, expressing a certain analogy to the paternity of God towards Israel and the paternity of God to His Son. In this light, Joseph's paternity towards Jesus becomes a shadow of God's paternity, and Joseph himself becomes „a shadow of the Father”. This term became the title of a novel by Jan Dobraczyński, the message of which influenced the content of the theological icon contained in the document of Pope Francis.

This study has shown that despite the limited data on Joseph in the Scriptures, thanks to the light of the Holy Spirit, the theological sources used and the use of new interpretative methods, it was possible to obtain new, interesting images of the Guardian of the Redeemer, which allow future generations of Christians to better understand the role and place of St. Joseph in the history of salvation and in the life of the Church.

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Trzy teologiczne ujęcia św. Józefa: Jan Paweł II, Benedykt XVI, Franciszek

Streszczenie: W opracowaniu przedstawiono trzy nowe spojrzenia na postać św. Józefa, które odnajdujemy w wybranych pismach ostatnich papieży: Jana Pawła II, Benedykta XVI i Franciszka. Zwrócono uwagę, że w Piśmie św. na temat św. Józefa mamy niewiele informacji, są one niezmiennie i utrwalone, natomiast analizowane obrazy się różnią. Ich odmiennosc wynika z wykorzystanych źródeł w teologicznej refleksji, jak i z właściwych danemu autorowi metod interpretacji. Jan Paweł II interpretuje postać Opiekuna Odkupiciela w świetle objawiającego się Boga, realizującego swój odwieczny plan. Akcent kładzie na odwieczny Boży plan aktualizujący się w ziemskiej historii, w ludzkich wydarzeniach. Pozwoliło to ukazać zarówno realizację boskiego zamysłu w konkretnie, jak i współpracę, wiarę i posłuszeństwo cieśli z Nazaretu w tym dziele.

Benedykt XVI ukazuje postać Józefa, opierając się na przesłaniu zawartym w barokowym reliefie ołtarza. Symboliczny język anonimowego rzeźbiarza oraz przesłanie emanujące z płaskorzeźby pozwoliło teologowi zwrócić uwagę na pewne aspekty, które trudno dostrzec w Ewangeliach Dzieciństwa.

Natomiast obraz Józefa przedstawiony przez papieża Franciszka akcentuje ojcostwo Patriarchy, wyrażające pewną analogię do ojcostwa Boga wobec Izraela oraz ojcostwa Boga wobec swego Syna. W tej perspektywie ojcostwo Józefa jawi się jako cień ojcostwa Boga. Określenie to nawiązuje do tytułu powieści Jana Dobraczyńskiego, której przesłanie wpłynęło na treść teologicznej ikony zawartej w dokumencie papieża Franciszka.

Przedstawienie i analiza w niniejszym artykule obrazów postaci św. Józefa z perspektywy wizji trzech teologów pozwoliły ustalić, że – mimo powściągliwych danych na temat tego Świętego w Piśmie św. – dzięki wykorzystanym źródłom teologicznym oraz zastosowanym nowym metodom interpretacyjnym, możliwe było ukazanie nowych, oryginalnych obrazów Opiekuna Odkupiciela, które kolejnym pokoleniom chrześcijan pozwolą lepiej zrozumieć rolę i miejsce św. Józefa w historii zbawienia oraz w życiu Kościoła.

Słowa kluczowe: Św. Józef, Jan Paweł II, Benedykt XVI, Franciszek, teologiczna interpretacja.

