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## Obedience: The "Year of St. Joseph"

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#### ABSTRACT:

This piece responds to Pope Francis' proclaiming this year to be the Year of St. Joseph through the lens of exploring obedience as a form of resistance. The piece asks readers to not only grapple with their own privilege during a time where inequalities are rampant and apparent but to resist human made forms of oppression. The author uses her identity as a Chicana mother to invite readers to lament the complex grief that we are collectively experiencing during this time of global pandemic, COVID-19.

## Obedience

### The "Year of St. Joseph"

by Cindy Liliana Gonzalez

Diana R. Garland and David E. Garland, authors of *Flawed Families of the Bible: How God's Grace Works Through Imperfect Relationships*, write that, "most Christians believe that they can go to the Bible for guidance for living their daily lives...many of the Bible's family stories, however, do not always seem edifying and often do not seem suitable for emulating."<sup>1</sup> A biblical family story that I often reflect on when reading Diana and David Garland's work, although not explicitly mentioned, is that of Cain of Abel. The story leads the reader through a murder due to brotherly jealousy, an act of grave disobedience.<sup>2</sup> The story of Cain and Abel leaves the reader to imagine the possible lifetime of complicated familial grief that their mother and father were left to confront.

Given that we are in the midst of the "Year of St. Joseph," as announced by Pope Francis in his apostolic letter, *Patris Corde*, I am left to reflect on the mission

- 1 Garland, Diana R. *Flawed Families of the Bible: How God's Grace Works Through Imperfect Relationships*. BrazonPress, 2007.
- 2 Exodus 20:13, NRSV, "You Shall Not Murder".

"entrusted to him by God's providence."<sup>3</sup> Although little is said about Joseph's daily life throughout the Bible, examples of Joseph's obedience are vivid.<sup>4</sup> I've often found myself skeptical about obedience as a virtue, especially in our nation's current climate.

A climate where women of color continue to die at disproportionate rates than their white sisters in childbirth.<sup>5</sup>

A climate where police brutality, hate crimes, and racism continue to force present and future generations of people of color to inequitably *deal* with intergenerational trauma.<sup>6</sup>

A climate where our very home, planet Earth, is at the center of debate as opposed to a collective effort towards protection.

A climate that continues to allow the separation of migrant families on our nation's borders.<sup>7</sup>

A climate where more than 500,000 lives have been lost at the hand of COVID-19, and a significant portion of that toll has been people of color.<sup>8</sup>

How can I, as a woman of color, not be afraid and simply obey just as God once asked Joseph?<sup>9</sup>

My ambivalence towards obedience stems from associating obedience with the opposite of resistance. Obedience I often regarded as being mentally, physically, and spiritually passive in the midst of oppression, a resignation of sorts. In a world where my existence, as a woman of color, is wrongly yet

- 3 Pope Francis. "Patris Corde (With a Father's Heart). An Apostolic Letter. Vatican: the Holy See, 8 Dec. 2020, [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap\\_20201208\\_patris-corde.html#\\_ftn20](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20201208_patris-corde.html#_ftn20).
- 4 Lk 2:22.27.39, Mt 1:20; 2:13.19.22, NRSV.
- 5 "Lost Mothers: Maternal Mortality In The U.S." NPR, [www.npr.org/series/543928389/lost-mothers](http://www.npr.org/series/543928389/lost-mothers).
- 6 Hong, Nicole and Jonah E. Bromwich. "Asian-Americans Are Being Attacked. Why are Hate Crime Charges So Rare." *New York Times*.
- 7 Rose, Joel. "Fewer Migrant Children Held In Border Detention Facilities, But Challenges Remain." NPR, April 15, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/15/987615232/fewer-migrant-children-held-in-border-detention-facilities-but-challenges-remain>.
- 8 Tompkins, Lucy, et al. "Entering Uncharted Territory, the U.S. Counts 500,000 Covid-Related Deaths." *The New York Times*, March 18, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/18/nyregion/asian-hate-crimes.html>. *The New York Times*, 23 Feb. 2021, [www.nytimes.com/2021/02/22/us-us-covid-deaths-half-a-million.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/22/us-us-covid-deaths-half-a-million.html).
- 9 Mt 1:20, NRSV

continuously deemed *less than* I fear the obedience our communities have and continue to place on oppressive structures. My skepticism of civil obedience in a nation filled with injustice, in turn, negatively influenced my theological understanding of obedience. Hence, when Pope Francis in *Patris Corde* invites readers to explore St. Joseph's obedience as active, I was intrigued.

St. Joseph's obedience, according to Pope Francis, is active, for he "is certainly not passively resigned, but courageously and firmly proactive" against oppression.<sup>10</sup> St. Joseph's obedience to God, in turn, was an act of resistance, a vessel of much-needed strength, lovingly against an otherwise society that time and time again threatened his familial existence. St. Joseph's obedience, as expressed by Pope Francis, meant that "he did not look for shortcuts, but confronted reality with open eyes and accepted personal responsibility for it."<sup>11</sup> St. Joseph was confronted with an unwed pregnant Mary who may or may not have been stoned to death if not for Joseph choosing obedience. St. Joseph chose to resist the persecution placed on his entire family by obeying God's call to flee Bethlehem for Egypt. St. Joseph chose to secure shelter, work, and food while living in Egypt, a home where he and his family were indeed migrants. Obedience then, I am now coming to recognize, is not *easy*. Rather, it is a commitment of resistance against human-made forms of oppression because that is the upholding of the Gospel. I do not fear, I lament. I cry out to God, *Dios mio, nos estamos muriendo, auxilio*<sup>12</sup>, all while keeping my eyes open, in witness to the grief that I can only describe as the taste of a salty tear entering my mouth as opposed to hitting the ground.

This year, the "Year of St. Joseph," I invite you to grapple with your privilege to parent, in whatever capacity, in a nation where migrant families continue to be separated at the border. Such a privilege haunts me every single day as I mother my child because that easily could have been my parent's narrative, who made the same migrant journey, many moons ago, into this country. I invite you to resist human-made systems of oppression that continue to

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10 Pope Francis. "Patris Corde (With a Father's Heart). An Apostolic Letter. Vatican: the Holy See, 8 Dec. 2020, [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap\\_20201208\\_patris-corde.html#\\_ftn20](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20201208_patris-corde.html#_ftn20).

11 Ibid.

12 Spanish for "My God, we are dying, help."

marginalize entire populations of God's people. Lastly, I invite you to lament the complex grief that is to see the sunrise every morning in a country where 500,000<sup>13</sup> people have lost their lives fighting against a pandemic that continues to shed light on drastic inequities we are all being called to name and advocate against.



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13 Tompkins, Lucy, et al. "Entering Uncharted Territory, the U.S. Counts 500,000 Covid-Related Deaths." *The New York Times*, 23 Feb. 2021, [www.nytimes.com/2021/02/22/us/us-covid-deaths-half-a-million.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/22/us/us-covid-deaths-half-a-million.html).