

St. Joseph, March 19<sup>th</sup> 2026, Krijtberg, Amsterdam

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We cannot understand Saint Joseph without Jesus, and we cannot understand Jesus without his ancestors - Abraham, the patriarch, and David, the king. The Messiah is fully rooted in our humanity, which is saved not by itself, but by grace, by grace through faith, as Saint Paul explains well in his famous letter to the Romans. The exponent of that faith is Abraham, while David literally embodies our humanity: "I will raise up your heir after you, sprung from your loins," says the Lord to King David through the Prophet Nathan, "and I will make his kingdom firm." In Saint Joseph, the royal lineage of David and the faith of Abraham, credited as righteousness, came together, to be perfected, divinized even in the son of Mary, who was legally Joseph's son too.

The biography of Saint Joseph is sketchy, to say the least, but every so often someone crosses our path, in real life or in the news, who makes concrete and tangible what a righteous man from noble stock may look like. Such a man was Pieter Wittenberg, who died earlier this week at the age of 78. The former banker came in the news in 2018, when the Greek police on the Isle of Lesbos dragged him and twenty-three other humanitarian aid workers to court on the accusation of human trafficking, membership of a criminal organization, espionage, whitewashing, etcetera. His real offense? He had helped refugees, pointing out safe landing spots and providing them with food, water, and dry clothes once they had landed ashore safely. Only one month ago, after eight long years with the continuous threat of twenty years in prison, the Greek court finally judged the absurd charges "not proven." Shortly thereafter, the terminal disease came to light that would take Pieter Wittenberg to a better world. In the obituaries, he was praised as "someone with a very clear moral compass, who knew exactly what he believed in and acted accordingly." That characteristic, "a very clear moral compass," makes Pieter Wittenberg a man in the image and likeness of Saint Joseph, with whom he also shared a care for refugees - think of the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt - and even a blood lineage, Pieter's father being a Jew who had to flee Czechoslovakia in 1939, shortly before Hitler invaded the country, and found refuge here, in Amsterdam. Professionally, Pieter the banker may seem more distant from Joseph the carpenter, but here too there is an important similarity: as an investment banker for a pension fund, Pieter always worked for the people behind the money, the pensions of ordinary workers and the responsibility that goes with it.

Who would doubt that good Saint Joseph wasn't inspired by the same values while raising our Savior, the Infant Jesus?

The faith of Abraham and the humanity of David are no abstract categories from a distant past, just as its perfect exemplar Saint Joseph cannot be restricted to pious images. What they have in common is the perennial desire for a better world, reflected in a clear conscience. "I have always acted according to my conscience and my duty as a human being and as a sailor: to help people in need," said Pieter Wittenberg. His decision to go and help refugees on Lesbos, together with his wife Liesbeth, was taken after the tragic loss of their youngest son in a scooter accident. It gave new meaning to their lives, not dissimilar from the appeal of a suffering world that inspired God the Father to send his Son, and Saint Joseph to take care of him, together with his mother Mary. We share in that same humanity, we share in the faith of Abraham, we share in the divine calling, well heard and acted upon by Pieter Wittenberg, to make this world a better place by simply sharing our time and talents with everybody, starting with those most in need.