

Devotion to Saint Joseph

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Historically speaking, there is very little material on St. Joseph. What facts we do have come from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Both tell us about Joseph's role in the infancy of Jesus, but almost nothing of Joseph's personal history. Although he plays a prominent role in the infancy narratives, he very quickly disappears from the subsequent narratives of the Christ event.

What exactly do we know about Joseph? He was of the house of David; he was a carpenter; he was engaged to a woman named Mary. He was a just man who, when he discovered his betrothed was pregnant, did not want to put her aside publicly. After a dream, he took Mary as his wife. He traveled with her to Bethlehem to register for the census, and there Jesus was born. Warned in another dream, he led his family to Egypt; years later, informed in a dream once again, he brought his family back to Israel and settled in Nazareth. Joseph's final appearances in the Gospel take place in the Temple: first, at Mary's purification and later, at the finding of Jesus in the Temple.

Joseph was "a just man." This praise bestowed by the Holy Spirit, and the privilege of having been chosen by God to be the foster-father of Jesus and the Spouse of the Virgin Mother, are the foundations of the honor paid to St. Joseph by the Church. It is surprising that the devotion to St. Joseph was so slow in winning recognition. This is true perhaps due to the fact that the infant Church placed so much emphasis on martyrdom.

Far from being ignored or passed over in silence during the early Christian ages, St. Joseph's prerogatives were occasionally mentioned by the Fathers.

The earliest traces of public recognition of St. Joseph's sanctity are to be found in the Eastern Church. His feast was kept by the Copts as early as the beginning of the fourth century. It is said that in the great basilica erected at Bethlehem by St. Helena, there was an oratory dedicated to his honor. The feast of "Joseph the Carpenter" is found, on July 20, in one of the old Coptic Calendars and in a Synzarium of the eighth and ninth century. Greek lectionaries of a later date at least mention St. Joseph on December 25th or 26th, and he is commemorated along with other saints on the two Sundays before and after Christmas.

In the West the name of the foster-father of Our Lord (*Nutritor Domini*) appears in local martyrologies of the ninth and tenth centuries. In 1129, we find, for the first time, a church dedicated to his honor at Bologna. The devotion, then merely private, gained a great impetus owing to the influence and zeal of such persons as St. Bernard (d. 1153), St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), St. Gertrude (d. 1310), and St. Bridget of Sweden (d. 1373). According to Benedict XIV (*De Serv. Dei beatif*, I, iv, n. 11; xx, n. 17), "the general opinion of the learned is that the Fathers of Carmel were the first to import from the East into the West the laudable practice of giving the fullest devotion to St. Joseph." His feast, introduced into the Dominican Calendar, gradually gained a foothold in various dioceses of Western Europe.

Among the most zealous promoters of the devotion were, St. Vincent Ferrer (d. 1419), Peter d'Ailly (d. 1420), St. Bernadine of Siena (d. 1444), and Jehan Charlier Gerson (d. 1429), who deserves special mention. Gerson composed an Office of the Espousals of Joseph in 1400 that was instrumental in promoting the public recognition of devotion to St. Joseph.

Only under the pontificate of Sixtus IV (1471-84) were the efforts of these holy men rewarded by the inclusion of his feast in the Roman Calendar (March 19). From that time the devotion



Betrothal of Mary and Joseph



'Joseph's Dream'
painting by Gaetano
Gandolfi, c.1790

acquired greater and greater popularity, the dignity of the feast keeping pace with this steady growth. One festival in the year, however, was not deemed enough to satisfy the piety of the people. The feast of the Espousals of the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph, so strenuously advocated by Gerson, and permitted first by Paul III to the Franciscans, then to other religious orders and individual dioceses, was, in 1725, granted to all countries that solicited it, a proper Office, compiled by the Dominican Pierto Aurato, assigned January 23, 1725.

Then came St. Teresa. She began to dedicate monasteries and churches to him. Teresa's zeal for St. Joseph spread to her nuns. And where the devotion could not spread because her nuns were not present, it spread by means of her most widely read work, her *Life*. The sixth chapter of her *Life* is an emotional manifesto to the Saint. She writes:

I took for my advocate and lord the glorious St. Joseph and earnestly recommended myself to him. I saw clearly that as in this need so in other greater ones concerning honor and loss of soul this father and lord of mine came to my rescue in better ways than I knew how to ask for. I don't recall up to this day ever having petitioned him for anything that he failed to grant. It is an amazing thing the great many favors God has granted me through the mediation

of this blessed saint, the dangers I was freed from both of body and soul. For with other saints it seems the Lord has given them grace to be of help in one need, whereas with this glorious saint I have experienced that he helps in all our needs and that the Lord wants to us understand that just as He was subject to St. Joseph on earth—for since bearing the title of father, being the Lord's tutor, Joseph could give the Child commands—so in heaven God does whatever he commands. (L6.6)

The Carmelite Order, into which St. Teresa had infused her great devotion to the foster-father of Jesus, chose him, in 1621, for their patron, and in 1689, was allowed to celebrate the feast of his Patronage on the third Sunday after Easter. This feast, soon adopted throughout the Spanish Kingdom, was later extended to all states and dioceses that asked for the privilege. No devotion, perhaps, has grown so universal; none seems to have appealed so forcibly to the heart of the Christian people, and particularly of the laboring classes, during the nineteenth century, as that of St. Joseph.

This wonderful and unprecedented increase of popularity called for a new luster to be added to the cult of the saint. Accordingly, one of the first acts of the pontificate of Pius IX, himself singularly devoted to St. Joseph, was to extend to the whole Church the feast of the Patronage in 1847. In December, 1870, according to the wishes of the bishops and of all the faithful, he solemnly declared the Holy Patriarch Joseph, patron of the Catholic Church, and enjoined that his feast be celebrated on March 19th. Following the footsteps of their predecessor, Leo XIII and Pius X have showed an equal desire to add their own jewel to the crown of St. Joseph: the former, by permitting on certain days the reading of the votive Office of the saint; and the latter by approving, on March 18, 1909, a litany in honor of him whose name he had received in baptism. ☩

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