

Like Wife, Like Husband

Why should we honor St. Joseph?

By Brother John M. Samaha, S.M.

Pope Leo XIII declared that St. Joseph “shines among all mankind by the most august dignity, since by divine will, he was the guardian of the Son.” There are some very good reasons to honor Joseph, the husband of Mary.



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When asked by an inquirer about the dignity of St. Joseph in Christian tradition, the late Father Francis L. Filas, S.J., the country's leading authority on the subject in his time, responded simply, "Like wife, like husband." The man closest to Jesus and Mary rightly deserves all honor and praise. Nevertheless, St. Joseph may seem at times a mystery, a member of the Holy Family overshadowed by Our Lady and Our Lord. Often he is forgotten, or at least left standing obscurely in the background.

A Slow Development in Devotion

History shows that St. Joseph was often neglected in compilations of the lives of our early saints and the Fathers and Doctors of the Church. St. Augustine and a few other ancient Catholic writers wrote of St. Joseph, but his mention is sparse.

Only in later centuries do we find the simple beginnings of a solid devotion to Joseph. The ninth-century Irish writer Feline of Oengus commemorated Joseph, and 10th-century Christians in some parts of the West began to observe a feast day in honor of St. Joseph on March 19 (though this feast was not accepted in Rome until 1479).

The theology of this saint's vocation, dignity, holiness and intercession began to flower in the Middle Ages. Finally, in the 17th century came the golden age of popular devotion to him. The enthusiasm of St. Teresa of Avila for St. Joseph was particularly remarkable, vividly expressed in her writings, and perpetuated in the 12 new convents she gave his name.

The popes of the late 19th century also began to give to St. Joseph the attention he so well deserved. All the pontiffs since that time, from Pope Pius IX until our present pope, have issued substantial

teaching about Joseph in their formal documents.

In 1847, Pope Blessed Pius IX declared St. Joseph "Patron of the Universal Church." He also established another feast in Joseph's honor, to be celebrated with an octave the second week after Easter.

Then in 1889, Pope Pius' successor, Pope Leo XIII, set St. Joseph before us with a dignity best described in his encyclical *Quamquam Pluries*: "There can be no doubt that, more than any other person, he approached that supereminent dignity by which the Mother of God was raised far above all created natures."

In 1955, Pope Pius XII replaced the post-Easter feast with the feast of St. Joseph the Worker, celebrated on May 1. Pope John XXIII added the saint to the Canon of the Mass.

More than "a Righteous Man"

The Gospel says that Joseph was "a righteous man" (Mt 1:19). Some people ask: What more can be said?

Plenty! In 1989, Pope John Paul II offered us a masterful explanation and reflection of the unique vocation of St. Joseph in God's plan of salvation with the pastoral exhortation *Redemptoris Custos* ("Guardian of the Redeemer"). This inspirational document, marking the centenary of Pope Leo's landmark encyclical, treats "the person and mission of St. Joseph in the life of Christ and of the Church." It recalls what makes him special, not only for us personally but for the universal Church.

Some note that Joseph's role must not have been so important because it is not treated in any great detail in holy Scripture. Yet neither is the vocation of Mary. What little is said, however, is highly significant.

Theologians have reasoned from the scriptural basics to explore many of the functions and privileges

granted Mary. The same process has taken place in regard to Joseph. Once the divinity of Jesus and the virginal motherhood of Mary were firmly established in Catholic doctrine and in popular understanding, teaching about Joseph could emerge without concern that his unique position in the Holy Family would be misunderstood.

The better we know Mary, the better we know her Son, from whom she derives all her dignity and whom she reflects so faithfully. In a similar way, contemplating more deeply the mission of Joseph helps us to know more deeply the greatness of Mary.

Pope Benedict XV summed it up this way: "By St. Joseph we are led directly to Mary, and by Mary to the fountain of all holiness, Jesus Christ, who sanctified the domestic virtues by his obedience to St. Joseph and Mary."

The evolution of devotion to St. Joseph is in reality another facet of devotion to Mary, since St. Joseph's position in relation to Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, stems from his position with regard to Mary, Mother of the Redeemer.

Absolutely certain is the fact that God did not choose any unworthy man to be the husband of Mary, who was to be the Virgin Mother of God. Even if St. Joseph had been merely Mary's protector and not her husband, he would still have occupied a position far surpassing that of any other human being. But Joseph is her husband, related to the Mother of God in a marriage that was not less genuine because it was virginal.

God brought the marriage into existence for the express purpose of serving the Incarnation, so that the Son of God might be received and reared within that holy bond. If in all creation God could find none more worthy than Mary to be the Mother of Jesus, we might also say

that God could find none worthier than Joseph to be her husband, and to be related to Jesus by the spiritual ties of a true fatherhood.

"It is certain," Pope Leo XIII wrote, "that the dignity of the Mother of God is so exalted that nothing could be more sublime; yet because Mary was united to Joseph by the bond of marriage, there can be no doubt but that Joseph approached as no other person ever could that eminent dignity whereby the Mother of God towers above all creatures.... Since marriage is the highest degree of association and friendship involving by its very nature a communion of

goods, it follows that God, by giving Joseph to the Virgin, did not give him to her only as a companion for life, a witness of her virginity and protector of her honor: he also gave Joseph to Mary in order that he might share, through the marriage pact, in her own sublime greatness."

Remembering Joseph

Jesus, Mary and Joseph comprise the Holy Family, the basic unit of God's strategy for the Incarnation and Redemption. They belong together in the history of salvation. The three are inseparable and should be seen and understood

together theologically, pastorally and in sacred art.

We must not forget St. Joseph. What he did for Jesus and Mary, he will do for us personally and for the universal Church.

In this third millennium of Christianity, Jesus and Mary will bring us closer to Joseph as we realize more clearly and deeply the mission of the Holy Family in salvation history. Veneration of St. Joseph will increase in proportion to the intensity of our devotion to Jesus and Mary. Like wife, like husband.

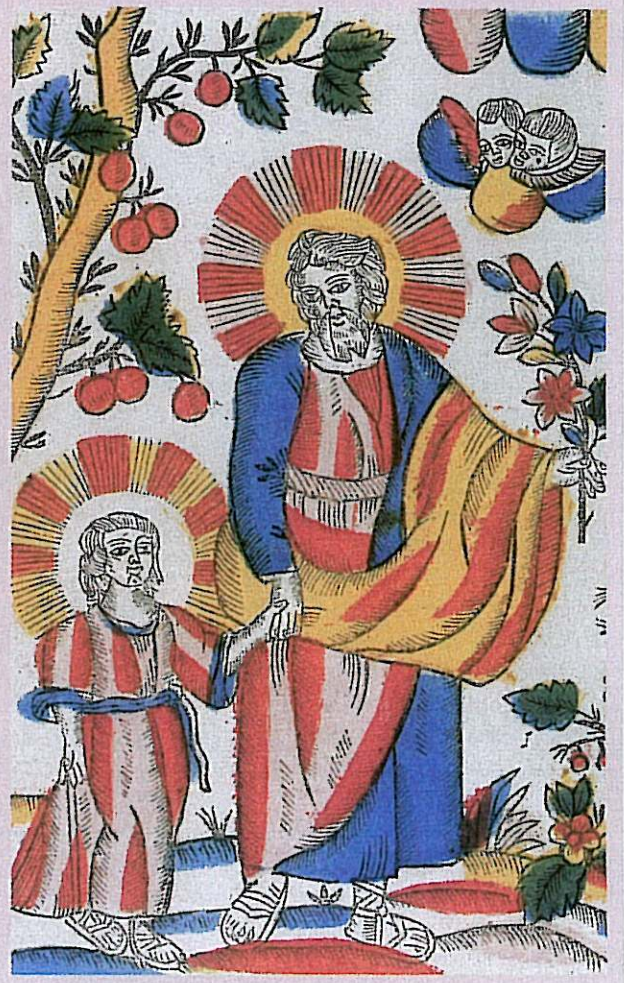
St. Joseph's feast day is March 19. St. Joseph the Worker feast day is May 1. TCA

"A RIGHTEOUS MAN": JOSEPH IN THE GOSPELS

The husband of Mary and legal father of Jesus is characterized as a righteous man (see Mt 1:19) in the Gospels and is described as a *tekton* (a "workman"; see Mt 13:55; Mk 6:3), denoting a carpenter, a craft that included the making of plows, yokes, doors, furniture and similar items.

Joseph is mentioned in Matthew, Luke and John, but does not appear in Mark, save for a reference (see 6:3) preserved in several manuscripts and using the phrase "the son of the carpenter" (see Mt 13:55; Lk 4:22). In accounts of the public ministry of Jesus, the name Joseph is used to designate Jesus as the "son of Joseph" (Jn 1:45; 6:42; Lk 4:22), although Joseph is given a prominent place in the Infancy Narratives, in particular Matthew 1-2. Matthew's account notes the betrothal of Mary to Joseph (1:18) and his discovery that she was with child (1:19). When an angel appeared and told him that the child was conceived of the Holy Spirit (1:20), Joseph obediently took Mary as his wife (1:24). (See also Catechism of the Catholic Church, Nos. 497, 1846.)

After the visit of the Wise Men, Joseph was again warned in a dream about a plot and fled to Egypt (see Mt 2:13). There the parents and child remained until after Herod's death (2:19). The Holy Family returned to Palestine from Egypt and settled once more in Nazareth. It is assumed that Joseph returned to his profession, although the only incident recorded in the Gospels is that of Jesus in the Temple in Jerusalem (Lk 2:41-50). The last mention of Joseph in the Gospel is that Jesus went down to Nazareth and was obedient to Joseph (Lk 2:51; Catechism, No. 532). It is assumed by scholars that Joseph died before the start of Jesus' public ministry. — Matthew Bunson



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