

Reflection on The Importance of St. Joseph to the Catholic Faith **by Deacon Brian Mason - OCDS**

When I was asked if I would like to provide a reflection for this evening, I initially hesitated, because, honestly, I wondered, what could I possibly say that would enlighten all of you beyond what Fr. Dominic has done for us over the years?

However, over the course of a few days, I started to reflect on this idea that came to mind, that St. Joseph is one of the most important, if not the most important, saint of our Catholic faith.

So, I would like to take some time to build a picture for you of the history of how devotion to St. Joseph developed through the centuries, then I would like to take a deeper look at the man, Joseph, himself.

But, before we delve into the historical matters, there is this story about this man who was very devoted to St. Joseph.

Well, it seems that he addressed all his prayers to St. Joseph, he lit candles to him, and gave alms in the name of St. Joseph. Basically, he recognized no one but St. Joseph.

When he died, he went before St. Peter in heaven, and, believe it or not, St. Peter refused to let him in.

It seems that this man had nothing to his credit except all those prayers and devotions to St. Joseph during his lifetime. So, the man says to St. Peter, "well, since I've come all this way, would you please let me at least see St. Joseph"? So, St. Peter sent for St. Joseph. Instantly, St. Joseph was there, and finding his devotee there, said: "Bravo, my devoted and true friend. Come right in!" The man said, "I can't. St. Peter won't let me in, because he says all I did in my life was pray to you and ignored all the other saints." St. Joseph answered; "what difference does that make? Come on in all the same." But St. Peter continued to block the way, and a mighty squabble took place. Then there was an ominous silence, and St. Joseph glared at St. Peter and said: "either you let him in, or I'm taking my wife and my boy and I will be moving Paradise somewhere else!"

Could almost be true, right?

Now, let's dive right in and see what our Holy Mother Church teaches us about St. Joseph.

Well, first of all, to learn the teachings of the Church, there are really two places that we must turn to. The first is, Sacred Scripture itself, which, of course, we find in the bible. And the second is, Church Tradition, which is to be found in the many official church documents that have been produced through the life of the church, including hundreds of apostolic letters, encyclicals, and other writings by popes and saints since the infancy of the church. And the most recent would include the Vatican II documents, and the Catechism.

So, starting with Sacred Scripture, what do you suppose we can find there about St. Joseph? Well, we can pore over every line of Scripture in the New Testament, including the Gospels, all the letters, and the Acts of the Apostles, and not one word of Joseph's is to be found. Not even one word!

Well, to be fair, we do find quite a few references to Joseph in the Gospels, and they do clearly record that God selected Joseph to be the father of Jesus, and to be the virginal spouse of the Immaculate Mother of God.

God did entrust Jesus and Mary to Joseph's care - he was the Head of the Holy Family. These marvelous truths can be found in Scripture; in chapter 1 of Matthew, where the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream telling him to take Mary to be his wife, and then in chapter 2 where the angel tells Joseph to take Mary and the Christ Child to Egypt.

Now, we know that Joseph was not the biological father of Christ, but he was the legal father of Christ. St. Augustine said that Joseph was the father of the human spirit of Christ. So, we can say, that Joseph is, in a real sense, the father of Jesus.

But, here we come across one of the mysteries that are contained in Scripture. You see, God willed that the people would believe that Joseph was the father of Jesus Christ, to hide, for a time, the mystery of the Virgin Birth of Our Lord.

We do not know why this fact was hidden from the people at that time, but, we can find several passages in the New Testament showing that the people considered Joseph to be the father of Christ. For example:

- during Christ's public ministry the people of Nazareth remarked: "How did this man come by this wisdom and these miracles? Is not this the carpenter's son?".... (Mt 13 and Lk 4).

- Then, Mary herself says to her Son in the Temple: "your father and I have been looking for you." (Lk 2).

- Finally, St. Luke tells us that: "the virgin was betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the House of David" (Lk 1). Joseph would be the one to provide the link for Jesus to the Kingdom of David as had been prophesied.

Scripture also tells us that God granted Joseph the privilege of becoming the chaste, celibate, and virginal spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary. And, since many spiritual writers believe that Mary had taken a vow of virginity before the Annunciation, we can, rightly infer that Joseph had also resolved to remain a virgin, before the awesome news of the Virgin's miraculous conception was made known to him.

But, beyond these few references, there is no other mention of Joseph in Scripture. So, from here on, we have to rely on Church Tradition to find out more about what our faith teaches us about this great saint.

And so we start with studying the writings of the Fathers of the Church, where we find that there were early signs of a devotion to St. Joseph sprouting out among the faithful.

One of the earliest items that became a truth of our faith had to do with St. Joseph's death. Early church fathers believed that Joseph died at some point prior to the start of Jesus' public ministry. Tradition speaks of Joseph dying in the presence of Jesus and Mary. For very good reason then, the Church has declared St. Joseph the Patron of a Happy Death.

During the early centuries of the Church, many of the Church fathers, including St. Augustine and St. John Chrysostom, spoke admiringly of Joseph.

And why did this devotion develop amongst the early Christians? Well, it seems to have grown primarily from the realization that he possessed a supremely exalted vocation and mission, so the Church's understanding of St. Joseph's role in the economy of salvation deepened, and, devotion to Joseph grew immensely.

But, in spite of the growth of these devotions, it took almost 1,400 years for the Roman church to finally take steps to acknowledge St. Joseph in a formal way. Now, I specifically said, the Roman Church, because the Eastern Church had acknowledged centuries before, that Joseph held a place of high esteem in their Church.

Now we come to a really interesting fact of history. You see, it was the efforts of the Fathers of Carmel that resulted in the fullest devotion of St. Joseph being brought from the Eastern Church to the Western Church, in the mid 1400's! Some of you might have known that already, but I was amazed when I came across that bit of information.

So, their efforts, and all of the writings of previous popes and saints, gave the Church enough impetus to dedicate a day in the Church calendar to St. Joseph. This was around 1470, and guess what day was chosen - you're right - March the 19th.

Finally, the church had officially acknowledged this great saint, a saint that people had been devoted to for over 1,400 years!

Now, if you thought that was interesting, listen to this! About 40 years later, a baby girl named Teresa de

Ahumada was born. Sound familiar? Yes, this is the same little girl who would grow up to become one of the greatest saints of our faith - Teresa of Avila.

But, that wasn't the interesting part. No, bear with me a minute. You see, Teresa almost died of an unusual crippling illness that none of the doctors could diagnose. So, after almost 5 years of suffering, this young nun turned to St. Joseph to intercede on her behalf. And she devoutly testifies that it was because of the intercession of her glorious father St. Joseph that she was saved from her debilitating illness.

Another historical fact is that, only a few decades later, Teresa infused her great devotion to St. Joseph into the reformed Order of Carmel. She proved to be Joseph's greatest champion, zealously promoting devotion to him.

And, we can find her explanation of why she took St. Joseph as her patron in one of her writings. This one is from "The Collected Works of St. Teresa", where she says:

"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 the other great 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 fails to grant. It is an amazing thing the great 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 us to understand that, just as He was subject to St. Joseph on earth-for, since bearing the title of father, Joseph could give the Child commands-so in heaven God does whatever he commands."

A few years later, St. Joseph was chosen as the patron saint of the new Order. And, in 1689, the Order was allowed to celebrate the feast of his Patronage of the O.C.D. on the third Sunday after Easter.

So, for almost 600 years now, the Church has honoured St. Joseph on this feast day, March 19th, and during these past 6 centuries, the devotion acquired greater and greater popularity, and the dignity of the feast continued to grow.

You know, of all the devotions that arose in the Catholic Church, none has grown so universal, and none seems to have appealed so forcibly to the heart of the Christian people. Curiously, this appeal seemed to grow particularly strong in the labouring classes, during the nineteenth century.

Why was that? Well, it was because, according to tradition, that Jesus as a youth, served as an apprentice to St. Joseph, learning Joseph's craft and trade in his workshop. His work is how he provided for the Holy Family. So, meditating upon the life of Joseph, aided the Church in more fully realizing, that human labor, can be a source of holiness.

So, like Joseph, Christians through their labor can participate in God's ongoing work of creation and the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

Then, in the middle of the 19th century, Pope Pius IX, who was himself devoted to St. Joseph, extended to the whole Church, the feast of the Patronage of St. Joseph to the Worker, in 1847.

This was followed shortly after by a declaration that the Holy Patriarch Joseph, would become the Patron of the Catholic Church. This was the crown of crowns for St. Joseph. Pope Pius IX was acknowledging that God had put the Holy Patriarch, Joseph, in charge of His household, the Church.

So, by the end of the 19th century, the Church recognized Joseph as the Patron of the Carmelite Order, Patron of the Worker, and Patron of the Catholic Church.

And since that time, a series of popes have encouraged devotion to St. Joseph, and numerous encyclicals have been written, including one called: "On the Devotion to St. Joseph", which declared Joseph, Model for

fathers of families by Pope Leo XIII.

And, most recently, John Paul II issued an Apostolic letter on St. Joseph, entitled "Guardian of the Redeemer".

But, of all the titles that the church has created for St. Joseph, the most beautiful one is the one mentioned in today's Gospel, a title given by the Holy Spirit: Joseph - a righteous man. Depending upon which translation of the bible you use, you may find the term "a just man" used.

Now, what I have presented so far is really only a brief overview of the history of the development of the church's doctrine on St. Joseph, and believe me, it would probably take several hours to really do it justice.

But, as I said at the beginning, we also need to look deeper into who this man Joseph was, because through all of this, we really haven't talked about Joseph the person, have we?

Fortunately for me, our own Fr. Dominic has spoken at length about Joseph, so I'm going to borrow from some reflections he has shared with us over the years. You may recognize some of these points, so please don't tell him that I did a bit of plagiarizing.

To understand more about Joseph, the person, the first thing that we need to know about him was that he was an ordinary sort of man, whom God relied upon to do great things. He did exactly what the Lord wanted him to do, in each and every event that made up his life. That is why Scripture praises Joseph as a just man.

In Hebrew, a "just" man means a good and faithful servant of God, someone who fulfills the divine will, and who is honourable and charitable towards his neighbour.

You see, Joseph loved the Torah: he faithfully fulfilled his duties to both God and his neighbor. Because Joseph was a man of great virtue, it makes perfect spiritual sense that God would grant extraordinary graces to the one who had received such a sublime vocation. And Joseph, the "just" man, cooperated fully with the graces God bestowed upon him.

Now, we've already said that we can find no spoken words of Joseph in Scripture, but, through the centuries, we have come to realize that he speaks volumes to us by his silence. Because silence is a sign of love Joseph, in his silence, listens to the needs of Mary, he listens to the needs of his Son, and he was able to provide for them and keep them safe, without seeking praise and acknowledgement for what he did.

Not like today, where we find people wanting to be praised for their accomplishments, wanting recognition for their achievements, wanting to have the last word in discussions.

Not St. Joseph. St. Joseph works quietly behind the scenes, teaching us how to search for Christ in silence, showing us how to be there for others, demonstrating by his actions how to serve others the way Christ served you and I.

Our gospel reading tonight tells us that Joseph was a "righteous man". But, he was not righteous because of his works, but because of his faith. And because he was a righteous man, he wanted to observe the law, so he was faced with having to make a choice:

- do I publicly denounce Mary, knowing that she will be stoned,
- or,
- do I send her away secretly, with only two witnesses and pay the fine that was required by the law ?

By the way, did you know that according to the culture and law at that time, being engaged gave him the same rights as though they were already married? Yes, if a man and a woman were engaged, and, for example, one of them died before their marriage, the other would be considered a widow or widower, just as if they had been married.

So, Joseph, being a righteous man, is torn, over having to decide what to do, because he is so conscious of

the law. He must have been going through a crisis because of this dilemma. He is expected to believe this statement by the angel - something that had never been said to anyone before. Never in the history of humanity had such a thing happened.

Scripture tells us that Joseph listened only to God. We heard in the gospel that: "when Joseph woke up from the dream, he did as the angel told him to do". When he woke up, he obeyed God's command. Did you know that Joseph is the first person, after Mary, to be told by God that salvation has begun?

God certainly subjected the holy souls of Joseph and Mary to a severe trial. And the lesson here for us, is that we should not be surprised if we also undergo difficult trials in the course of our lives. We are called to trust in God during them, and remain faithful to Him, following the example that Mary and Joseph gave us.

We also are called to wake up from our sleep, as we approach the mid-point of Lent, and ask ourselves;

- Are we doing God's will in our lives?
- Are we living the Commitments & Obligations of our Rule the way they were intended to be lived?
- Are we righteous before God, by obeying the law of our Rule?
- How often do we pray to this righteous saint, the saint of the impossible, asking him to look out for us, the way he looked out for the Holy Family?

And, especially because we are members of the St. Joseph Community of the Secular Order;

- Do we cherish this privilege of being members of this community that was named in his honour?
- Does it mean anything special to us to have the Patron Saint of the entire Catholic Church as our patron for this community?

Today, the Church places in front of us this great saint, who teaches us a very valuable lesson - to trust God's will for us. Just as Joseph chose to abandon his own ideas as soon as he heard God's call through the angel, we are called to deny our will, to learn to let go:

- let go of our sins,
- let go of our anger,
- let go of the past,
- let go of our hurts.
- To trust in God's will for us.

That is the great lesson that we are called to learn from the life of St. Joseph.

You know, when we look at all of the things that were said by the Saints of the Church about St. Joseph, we find an amazing testimony. Out of the many hundreds of testaments to his intercessory power, I'll share with you just one tonight. It's from the mother of our Order, St. Teresa.

She said in her Autobiography, ch. 6:

"Would that I could persuade all men to be devoted to this glorious Saint, for I know by long experience what blessings he can obtain for us from God. I have never known anyone who was truly devoted to him and honored him by particular services who did not advance greatly in virtue: for he helps in a special way those souls who commend themselves to him. It is now very many years since I began asking him for something on his feast, and I have always received it. If the petition was in any way amiss, he rectified it for my greater good . . . I ask for the love of God that he who does not believe me, will make the trial for himself-then he will find out by experience the great good that results from commending oneself to this glorious Patriarch and in being devoted to him."

At the start, I mentioned that I prepared this reflection under the theme, "The importance of St. Joseph to our

Catholic faith", so I hope that this has provided a little bit of illumination into the teachings of our church on this great saint, and possibly helped each of us to grow just a little bit in desiring to turn our hearts and minds to Joseph when in need.

May God bless you and may St. Joseph answer each of your prayers.