

St. Joseph: A Faithful Guardian for Jesus, Mary, and Us!

by Pat Gohn

March 19 celebrates St. Joseph, chaste spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary and foster-father to the Child Jesus. The Church has long venerated Joseph for this single, powerful idea: it was into Joseph's hands that God entrusted his most precious treasures – his Son Jesus, and Mary, his holy mother.

As Mary and Jesus are entrusted to Joseph, so too, does the Catholic Church, entrust itself to Joseph's active patronage and paternal protection, as Patron of the Universal Church.

John Paul II's 1989 Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptoris Custos* (RC), translated as "Guardian of the Redeemer," teaches about Joseph in depth.

God entrusts Mary to Joseph

Matthew 1:19 calls Joseph of Nazareth "a just man." This upright and devout man was destined to love and protect the future Mother of God.

According to Jewish custom, Mary's betrothal to Joseph was the first stage of their marriage, before Joseph took Mary into his home. During this betrothal, *Luke* 1:26-38 describes the familiar account of the angel Gabriel's annunciation to Mary, and Mary's loving *fiat* – her "yes" – to being overshadowed by the Holy Spirit to miraculously receive Jesus into her womb.

Alongside Mary, Joseph, like no other person in history, shared the mystery of the Incarnation, up close.

In *Redemptoris Custos*, par. 2, John Paul II notes a parallel "annunciation" story – that of Joseph being visited by an

angel as he searched to reconcile the news of Mary's stunning maternity.

Matthew 1: 18-24 describes the defining moment in Joseph's life:

When... Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit.

Joseph her husband... a righteous man... unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph... do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

...When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home.

God entrusts Joseph with Mary, and all the mystery of her motherhood. In this message God affirms Joseph as Mary's spouse who will, by law, be responsible for Mary's son, whom he will name.

Note Joseph's immediate obedience of faith, fully submitting his own will to the will of God. We see this obedience over and over again in Joseph's life.

Joseph responds to this annunciation as Mary did – giving a positive *fiat* of action at a decisive moment. Joseph's action says "yes" again to his marriage and

"yes" to the new mission God ordains for his life.

The marriage between Joseph and Mary is a true union of souls, unique in light of salvation history. *Redemptoris Custos*, par. 7 states:

"...Whereas Adam and Eve were the source of evil which was unleashed on the world, Joseph and Mary are the summit from which holiness spreads over the earth. The Savior began the work of salvation by this virginal and holy union... to purify and sanctify the family..."

The mission of the Holy Family is for all Christian families: to guard, reveal, and communicate God's love!

God entrusts Jesus to Joseph

The "hidden life" of Jesus' childhood is also entrusted to Joseph. He is eyewitness to the birth of Jesus. He greets





The St. Joseph Altar

by Theresa Cavicchio



The feast of St. Joseph, March 19, always falls during the penitential Lenten season; however, one traditional way to celebrate this beloved saint's feast brings a burst of

brightness and joy to this otherwise somber season - a St. Joseph Altar.

This tradition originated in Sicily in the Middle Ages where, according to legend, the people were suffering greatly from drought and famine. Their impassioned prayers to St. Joseph were answered; rain came and crops thrived. In gratitude, an impressive three-tiered altar, representing the Blessed Trinity, was erected in the town piazza and laden with

specially chosen foods, each having some religious significance.

This tradition continues in numerous locations today, such as New Orleans which has a large population descended from Sicilian immigrants. There and elsewhere, public altars are beautifully decorated with flowers, candles, and a statue or image of St. Joseph. Often there is an outdoor procession, sometimes led by children dressed to represent the Holy Family. Breads shaped into religious symbols, and fava beans, the only crop that survived during the famine, are customary elements of the altar, as are pasta dishes topped with toasted breadcrumbs signifying sawdust for the

carpenter saint. Also traditional are *sfinge*, ricotta-filled pastries and a rare Lenten treat.

Altars can be constructed in private homes as well, a great idea for involving children and very simply done using three cardboard boxes. An important element of this tradition has always been sharing its bounty with the poor. Perhaps a local charity could benefit from the contents of your own personal St. Joseph Altar, a tangible tribute to the loving man who provided so well for the Holy Family.

For more information on this tradition, including a Virtual St. Joseph Altar, see <http://thankevann.com/stjoseph/>.

the shepherds who come to adore the Infant Jesus. And he marvels at the coming of the Magi.

Joseph, in his religious role as father, brings Jesus to the temple for the rite of circumcision, and names him. The name of Jesus denotes his mission: "God saves."

But before Jesus can save, Joseph saves Jesus from the malevolent Herod seeking to kill Jewish infants to wipe out kingly rivals. (Cf. Mt. 2: 13-14.)

Again, God's angel speaks to Joseph in a dream. He promptly obeys, departing for Egypt with the Holy Family until danger has passed.

Joseph's fatherhood is one of affection as well as protection. His love is shown by service: teaching Jesus the Law and providing food, clothing, and shelter through the gift of his daily work. In time, Joseph shares his carpentry trade with Jesus, and they work side by side.

The sanctity of human work is highlighted in *Redemptoris Custos*, par. 22:

Along with the humanity of the Son of God, work too has been redeemed in a special way. At the

workbench where he plied his trade together with Jesus, Joseph brought human work closer to the mystery of the Redemption.

The Church entrusted to St. Joseph

The Gospels never record a single word spoken by Joseph, only his actions. *RC, par. 25:*

...The aura of silence that envelopes Joseph... reveals the inner portrait of the man. The Gospels speak exclusively of what Joseph "did." Still, they allow us to discover his "actions"—shrouded in silence as they are—an aura of deep contemplation.

Joseph presents laypeople with the well-lived life: a harmony between contemplation and activity... prayer and work... *ora et labora*. Time after time, we witness Joseph's hearkening to God's Word, his prompt action, and perfect charity.

Joseph's way is worthy of imitation... to be a genuine follower of Christ "it is enough to have the common, simple and human virtues, but they need to be true and authentic (*RC, par. 24*)."

Joseph, the humble, silent, "just man" is honored daily at Mass in the *Roman Canon (Eucharistic Prayer I)*, listed after Mary, and before the apostles.

Let us commend ourselves to his patronage in prayer:

Most beloved father, dispel the evil of falsehood and sin... graciously assist us from heaven in our struggle with the powers of darkness... and just as once you saved the Child Jesus from mortal danger, so now defend God's holy Church from the snares of her enemies and from all adversity. (RC, par. 31.)

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