



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 envelops 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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