

Saint Joseph

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THE MAN CLOSEST TO CHRIST

Fr. Sebastian Walshe, O. PRAEM.

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O. PRAEM.

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“But as Joseph has been united to the Blessed Virgin by the ties of marriage, it may not be doubted that he approached nearer than any to the eminent dignity by which the Mother of God surpasses so nobly all created natures.”

—Pope Leo XIII, *Quamquam Pluries*, no. 3

Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
Chapter	
1: Devotion to Saint Joseph	5
2: Typology in Scripture and Theology	11
3: Old Testament Types of Saint Joseph	29
4: The Significance of the Name Joseph	36
5: The Holiness of Saint Joseph	42
6: Virginal Spouse of Mary	50
7: Protector of the Universal Church	70
8: Guardian and Provider of the Eucharist	85
9: Patron of a Happy Death	99
10: Guardian and Provider for the Souls in Purgatory	110
11: Saint Joseph Assumed into Heaven, Body and Soul	131
12: Consecration to Saint Joseph	144
<i>Epilogue</i>	<i>155</i>
<i>Appendix: Demonstrating the Existence of Purgatory</i>	<i>156</i>

Introduction

As the year 2020 was ending, Pope Francis unexpectedly dedicated the following year in honor of Saint Joseph. Perhaps His Holiness sensed that the Church needed a father's special care during the pandemic's difficult times. Many of the faithful, who experience a childlike trust in Saint Joseph, rejoiced greatly in this gift to the whole Church. Among the many fruits of this grace was a deeper emphasis and reflection upon the person of Saint Joseph. This book is one of those many fruits.

While there are many excellent devotional books on Saint Joseph, as well as many private revelations about his life, my intention is to draw primarily from Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. The reason for this is that the founts of revelation are the very word of God by which all truth is measured; moreover, as the word of God, they contain more powerful seeds of truth which make for a more profound and certain development of doctrine.

However, in writing a book on Saint Joseph based primarily upon Sacred Scripture, the author is immediately confronted with a serious difficulty: Scripture records not even a single word of Saint Joseph.¹ What is there to say about a

¹ It seems to me that there is a mystical significance to the fact that Saint Joseph uttered no word in Scripture: just as Saint Joseph spoke no word in Scripture, so also he did not beget the Word of God. For Jesus

man who said nothing? Our problem is further compounded when we seek to know something about his heavenly glory. Indeed, Saint Joseph's earthly and heavenly life remain very much a mystery. The Scriptures have not even left us a single word uttered by him: not so much as a scrap from the master's table. If we do not know how to speak of earthly things, therefore, how shall we speak of heavenly ones?² A man's words are a privileged source of insight into his mind and heart. Absent this source, we would seem to be at a great disadvantage in our attempt to understand Saint Joseph in any meaningful way. Perhaps this is why so many turn to private revelations concerning his life.

Yet Saint Joseph—a man so important in the economy of grace and salvation—cannot be simply ignored by revelation. Where Scripture closes one door, it often opens another. And so we trust in the words of the Lord: “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches” (Mt 13:31). Sacred Scripture has certain passages which are like the smallest seeds and yet filled with the greatest power. Their power is hidden at first, but later, they grow, and the truth they contain extends broader and higher.

In God's providence, it seems that the significance of Saint Joseph should remain largely hidden until the later ages of

is the Word begotten by the Father; therefore, the fact that Joseph had no word is a sign meant to indicate that Jesus was not naturally begotten from Joseph.

² Cf. Jn 3:12.

the Church. Pope Pius XI once said, “Between these two missions [the missions of Saint John the Baptist and Saint Peter] there appears that of Saint Joseph, one of recollection and silence, one almost unnoticed and destined to be lit up only many centuries afterwards, a silence which would become a resounding hymn of glory, but only after many years.”³ Therefore, these truths—like a buried treasure—are gradually uncovered, allowing the Church to enter more fully into the mystery of Saint Joseph.

Where then should we look in Scripture to understand the interior life of Saint Joseph and the unique role he plays in the economy of grace and salvation? Scripture reminds us that certain personages in the Old Testament are a type, or prefiguration,⁴ of those in the New Testament. To cite just a few examples, Adam was a type of Christ (see Rom 5:14) and Elijah was a prefiguration of John the Baptist (see Mt 17:12–13; Lk 1:17). Jonah was a prophetic type of Jesus (see Mt 12:40). Often, the person who prefigures someone in the New Testament can give a clearer indication about some reality or truth about the New Testament personage. For example, the universal influence of Adam over all men sheds light upon the universal influence of Christ over all men (see Rom 5:12–21). And Queen Esther’s intercessory role in saving her people prefigures the Blessed Virgin Mary as the

³ Conference delivered on March 19, 1928.

⁴ I am using the words “type” and “prefiguration” as synonymous in this book. There are some who would give a refined definition of these terms which distinguishes them from one another. For example, some say that a type must be a historical fact or individual, while a prefiguration need not be.

queen of heaven and earth. This method of explaining Scripture was used copiously by the Fathers of the Church and has been approved by the Church as a legitimate method of understanding revelation.⁵

This book will examine the Old Testament figures who were clear types of Saint Joseph and will argue from the things said about the type to truths about Saint Joseph.⁶ But because arguments from typology and the spiritual sense of a passage can only be probable and not the foundations of a certain, theological argument, whenever possible, I will also provide a properly theological argument from the literal sense of Scripture for the same conclusion. Finally, I will provide confirmation of these conclusions from the liturgy or Tradition of the Church. The advantage of arguing first from typology is that types often more clearly and quickly lead to a conclusion which is more obscure and lengthy when reached by a rigorously theological argument. Besides, in those matters for which a rigorous theological argument has not yet been found, arguments from typology at least afford some probable knowledge and can be a great assistance to the devotion of the faithful.

With these principles in mind, let us now turn to the person of Saint Joseph.

⁵ See, for example, CCC 128–30; and Leo XIII, *Quamquam Pluries*.

⁶ Granted that there are many objections which someone might raise against this method as a valid theological method, but I will defend this methodology in greater detail (chapter 2).

CHAPTER I

Devotion to Saint Joseph

Understanding Saint Joseph and his place in the economy of grace and salvation is critical for every follower of Jesus. Those who love Jesus also love the things and the people He loved most, especially His heavenly Father and His parents: Joseph and Mary. This investigation is both motivated by devotion to Saint Joseph and meant to increase our devotion to Saint Joseph. Therefore, it is appropriate here to explain why devotion to Saint Joseph is both beneficial and praiseworthy.

The purpose of devotion to Saint Joseph, as with devotion to Mary, is to draw us closer to Jesus. The Scriptures imply that devotion to Joseph increases our love and knowledge of Jesus, for it is there that we find that disdain for Saint Joseph leads to disdain for Jesus:

The Jews murmured about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven;” and they said, “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph? Do we not know his father and mother? Then how can he say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” (Jn 6:41–42 NABRE)

He came to his native place and taught the people in their synagogue. They were astonished and said, “Where did this man get such wisdom and mighty deeds? Is he not the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother named Mary and his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas? Are not his sisters all with us? Where did this man get all this?” And they took offense at him. (Mt 13:54–57 NABRE; cf. Lk 4:22)

Despite evidence that Jesus was a remarkable person with divine attributes, the people refused to glorify and reverence Jesus because they held His parents in little esteem. They thought His parents were ordinary, unexceptional people, and so they could not believe in Jesus. So if it is true, as the Scriptures teach, that lack of devotion and esteem for Joseph leads to disdain for Jesus, the converse is also taught by Scripture: devotion and esteem for Saint Joseph leads to love and esteem of Jesus. And at the same time, the more we love Jesus, the more we honor His parents.

One might reasonably ask: “But why should we approach Jesus through devotion to Joseph? Wouldn’t it be better to approach Jesus directly?” After all, the person directly next to someone is closer to him than the person who has someone else standing between them. So it would seem that the person who comes directly to Jesus is closer to Jesus than the person who has Saint Joseph standing between him and Jesus. Yet it seems that it is not always true that having something in between increases the distance between two things. Who sees the star more clearly: the one who looks with the naked eye or the one who uses

a telescope? In some way, the eye is brought closer to the star because the telescope was placed between them. So the question is: Can Saint Joseph be a kind of instrument or mediator by which we draw closer to Jesus? This question deserves a careful response.

The Divine Economy

To answer the question about whether or not devotion to Saint Joseph draws us closer to Jesus, we must answer a prior question; namely: Does God normally prefer to communicate truth, grace, and salvation directly or through some created instrument? If God normally prefers to use creatures as His instruments for communicating truth, grace, and salvation, it is reasonable to think that God uses certain saints as privileged instruments to bring about a closer union with Him.

Jesus once said: “He who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do” (Jn 14:12). That is a remarkable statement, and it came true. For example, Jesus never healed anyone with His shadow, but Peter did (see Acts 5:15). Jesus never converted three thousand persons in one sermon, but Peter did (see Acts 2:41). Some saints performed more remarkable resurrections than Jesus did. For example, Saint Vincent Ferrer raised a child that had been totally dismembered. Why is it that some saints performed greater miracles than Jesus did? Is it because Jesus could not do this Himself? Clearly not. But for some reason, Jesus wanted to do more through Peter and His other disciples than directly Himself. Here are two

reasons why God would choose to do greater works through the instrumentality of His saints than directly.

First, every father has the experience of wanting his children to be as good as they can be. In fact, I know of no father who does not desire that his children be better than himself. God is no exception. He wants to communicate as much good as possible to His children, and He wants them to have and be worthy of as much honor as possible. So God communicates the dignity of being true and real causes of salvation to His children. This makes His creatures more like Himself.

A second and perhaps more profound reason God chooses human instruments to communicate His grace and salvation is to strengthen the bonds of love between men. If God truly uses us as instruments of His grace and salvation, if He uses the person who baptized you to give you the divine life, or the priest who absolved your sins to put you in His grace, or the friend who prayed and obtained the grace for your conversion, or whatever, then we shall have them to thank one day for a good as great as salvation itself. When we are safely in our fatherland one day, God willing, we shall be able to look one another in the eye and say, "Thank you. If it had not been for you, I would not have been saved." And this will increase our love for one another in heaven tremendously. Nor will we love God any less, since we will see clearly that all grace and salvation has its original source in God, even though it came to us through instruments, like the fruit from the vine through the branches. So it's a win-win scenario for God if He uses us as His instruments: we will not love God any less, but

we will love one another much more. And isn't this what a father most of all desires for his children: that they love one another as much as possible?

Therefore, any theology that claims that God does not ordinarily prefer to use instruments to cause grace and salvation is incompatible with revelation. Furthermore, a theology that denies that God uses instruments as true causes is really the result of a nominalist philosophy which denies universal or secondary causes. Instead, God wants to encourage us to go to Him through His saints. And to do this, He more quickly and readily answers our prayers and gives us greater gifts if we come to Him through them: "They shall do greater works than I."

Let us now apply this principle to the person of Saint Joseph. Together with the Blessed Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph is one of the preeminent examples of a divinely chosen instrument for doing these greater works. Scripture teaches that when the baby Jesus's life was threatened, God chose to save the baby Jesus through the instrumentality of Saint Joseph. It is obvious that God the Father, or even Jesus Himself, could have simply destroyed the troops of Herod with a mere act of their divine will. But instead, God tells Joseph to flee to Egypt and stay there for a time. This involved great personal sacrifice for Saint Joseph, so why didn't God address the problem with His divine power? The clear answer is that God wanted Saint Joseph to receive the honor of having been a true cause of saving Jesus's life. Not only that, but Jesus Himself now had a reason to be grateful to Saint Joseph. Moreover, all Christians have a reason to be thankful to Saint Joseph since he really did save the baby Jesus. Today,

God wills to save us in a similar way—that is, using Saint Joseph as His instrument. Since Joseph was instrumental in the care of Jesus's physical body, so throughout time God wills him to be an instrument in caring for the mystical body of Christ and drawing Christ's members closer to their head. So there is a special reason Christians should foster devotion to Saint Joseph.