

St Joseph

St Bernard hails St Joseph as 'the faithful and wise servant whom God appointed to be the comfort of his mother, the foster-father of his own flesh, and the only trusty helper in the eternal counsels'. This is magnificent praise.

Because Jesus is the New Adam, we do not give attention to the fact that the role of St Joseph in the order of restoration parallels to some extent that of Adam in the Fall. It is true that St Joseph is not on what we might call the primary level of the Redemption. He is not included in the Protevangelium, which specifies that a woman and her seed shall crush the serpent's head. Man rises again in Jesus Christ with the co-operation of Mary, the New Eve.

But we must see that St Joseph was assigned to a central part, made the helper of Mary and that his presence in the mystery of the Incarnation must be classed as necessary. But though we realise that much, it is easy to fail to discern his full magnitude.

Here are some of the reasons given by the saints for that placing of St Joseph by the side of Mary:

- *St Jerome*: (1) that Mary's ancestry should be indicated by the genealogy of Jesus; (2) that she should not be stoned by the Jews as an adulteress; (3) that she should have St Joseph's protection and consolation in the earlier trials; (4) that Satan would not know that Jesus was born of a virgin; this latter reason had already been specified by St Ignatius the Martyr.
- *St Gregory the Great and St Bernard*: that Joseph was needed as a witness that Jesus was born of a virgin.
- *St Ephraem*: that Joseph proves the title of Jesus as Son of David – that is his royal descent.
- *St Thomas Aquinas*: that Joseph assured Our Lord's legal position because status and rights came through the father.

These are extremely important purposes but for our present consideration we cannot be content with them. They are reasons of high convenience whereas Joseph entered into the very heart of the mystery of the Incarnation. Suarez (in words echoed by Pope Pius XI) said that Joseph belongs to the order of the Hypostatic Union (that is of the Incarnation); not in the same way as Mary in whom the Word took flesh, but to the extent that he was caught up in its intimacies. Joseph was contained in the thought of the Trinity, which before the ages decreed the Redemption.

Let us go back and inspect one reason given by St Jerome and St Ignatius; that is the need for having the Incarnation accomplished under the veil of marriage so as to save Mary from obloquy. Actually there is more to it than this high usefulness. The marriage was a true marriage even though the conjugal rights were excluded. It served every other purpose of marriage. Therefore, Jesus

is going to have an earthly father, vested with authority over him and unquestionably endowed by Heaven with a degree of love of the infant which would be appropriate to a real parenthood, and which would hold some sort of reasonable proportion to the love, which Mary had for her child. This would mean that St Joseph's love for Jesus would be the greatest paternal love that would ever exist on earth, second in degree only to Mary's love.

Another aspect of this would be that Joseph was destined to occupy in relation to the Mystical Body the same relation that he had towards Jesus. Therefore his love for Jesus had to be of such a semi-divine character that it could expand in due course to embrace all men. There is something in question which will genuinely parallel the maternal love of Mary for the Mystical Jesus.

All this suggests itself as logical and in accord with the divine method.

I have said that Joseph was intended to represent the Eternal Father in all his earthly dealings with Jesus. How complete this representation would be is shown by the rather sensational scene where Jesus, constrained by the higher allegiance, seems for once to set aside his ordinary attitude of submission to his parents. I refer to the mysterious episode of the Three Days' Loss (Lk 2:41-52) where he announced that he had to be about his Eternal Father's business. Then this isolated act was at once followed by a return to the customary relation. He was subject to his parents, says the New Testament. We do not hear of Jesus ever again departing from that attitude.

It is the divine practice to give along with an office every grace required for its adequate discharge. This ordinance will rise to its ultimate peak when it is a case of the Heavenly Father delegating his authority over his only

son. Such a transaction will have no aspect of unreality. St Joseph's paternity would be real to the extent that it can be. Being constituted by God over the greatest person in the world and for the greatest purpose in the world, it follows that the outpouring of grace must be the greatest that Joseph can receive. His virtue will be in keeping with his office.

He has to be a paternal model to the Infant Jesus, equivalent to that afforded on the maternal side by Mary. He must be seen by Jesus as the ideal father in all aspects, failing in none. He must reflect to Jesus the qualities of the Eternal Father so far as they can be given a human expression. We must remember that in regard to Jesus a human moulding and education was in question and that in this process Joseph played as considerable a part as Mary.

In Joseph the Blessed Virgin met a virgin partner, prepared most carefully for her, worthy of her, with a heart bursting with celestial love for her. Like encountered like. Some writers say that Joseph had made a vow of chastity. This is probably not the case; all the custom and mode of thought of the day would point otherwise. But it is certain that he showed himself acquiescent when Mary proposed that it should be an ingredient of their union. The lily which art so often puts in Joseph's hand shows what the devout world has always thought of that aspect in him.

Some, seeking to glorify him, have even asserted that he was immaculately conceived. But this claim has not been approved by authority; nor does there seem to be justification for it. It was imperative that Mary be conceived immaculate because the body of Jesus would be formed out of her substance which therefore could not be allowed to be tainted. That does not apply in the case of Joseph,

and God does not unnecessarily put forth his power. But it is more than likely that Joseph was freed from Original Sin in the womb of his mother. That would explain the unique characteristic which he presented. According to scripture, that privilege was granted to the Prophet Jeremiah and to St John the Baptist whose missions were less intimate and less necessary than Joseph's.

All the foregoing would lift St Joseph to supreme heights. But are there not in him even higher summits? What higher could there be?

Had Joseph any part towards the Incarnation, which could be regarded as equivalent to that of Adam in the Fall? A key part he certainly had. Adam fell by believing in Eve. Her solicitation was the immediate cause of the Fall even though it was not through her sin but through Adam's that the race fell. But without Eve, Adam would not have fallen.

Can anything in that greatest of all catastrophes be related to Joseph's association with the Incarnation?

In the first place, there was the parity between Adam and Eve on the one hand and Joseph and Mary on the other of unconsummated marriage, permanent in the case of Joseph and Mary. It was during that initial period that the angel of darkness went to Eve and the angel of light to Mary. In each case the woman acquiesced, from which the great consequences ensue; the Fall in the former and the Incarnation in the latter.

In each case the man yielded to the influence of the woman. Adam surrendered to Eve. He ratified and consummated her sin and the Fall of mankind is brought about. In the case of Joseph his triumph takes the form of his belief against all nature that the child, which his spouse had conceived, was from God. He made this act of

faith on the word of the angel, as Mary had before him, and thus he qualified for his great destiny.

His surpassing act of faith earned for him a spiritual paternity of Jesus. In this he receives all the endowment of privileges and graces which must accompany such a role, and equip him to fulfil it with absolute perfection.

Would there not also be entailed for Joseph in this transaction a quality of representation of the human race subordinate to but analogous to that of Mary? Mary's co-operation was of course unique in its character, such as to attract the title of co-Redemptrix. Her consent to the Incarnation was asked in the place of all humanity. In giving it she became the New Eve and the mother of all the living.

Joseph was not the New Adam as Mary was the New Eve. Jesus Christ is the New Adam. But a role or representation does seem to rest on Joseph. As a husband he accepts and ratifies what has been accomplished in Mary. His act of faith is complementary to hers. He does seem to add something vital to her consent on behalf of human nature. In a special way he stands for the male sex. The New Adam was not yet born and so could not visibly represent the old Adam. This point appears to me to be of great importance and as not receiving due attention.

Adam and Eve had been in the fullest sense the heads of humanity until they fell. In the Restoration, Mary becomes most fully the spiritual and physical mother of Jesus. This motherhood, and no less, is carried on into her nurturing of the Mystical Body. Joseph is not the physical father of Jesus, but by that act of faith which he made at the bidding of the angel, and through his career of care of Jesus and Mary, he merited to become spiritual father of Jesus and foster-father of the Mystical Body.

As his support of Jesus and Mary was necessary in the temporal order, so it is necessary to the Mystical Body. On 8 December 1870 Pius IX declared St Joseph to be patron of the Church. In 1961 Pope John XXIII entrusted the deliberations and results of the Second Vatican Council to the care of St Joseph. On 13 November 1963 Pope John added the name of St Joseph to the ancient Canon of the Mass.

But we must not think that his office was conferred on him by any Church declaration. That declaration only acknowledged an existing fact.

Moreover the word 'patron' is not sufficiently expressive: his function enters a classification not comprised by that word. His association to the Incarnation was immeasurably higher in degree and different in kind from the co-operation of any of the saints. He is father of the Church in the same measure that he was the foster-father of Jesus. Mary is its mother in the measure that she was actual mother of Jesus, which belongs to a far superior order.

Accordingly the Catholic instinct which coupled as one on the lips of our forefathers the three august names of Jesus, Mary and Joseph was solid in its theology. Let honour be given where honour is due.

We must impart significance to the fact that after the angelic apparition of the Annunciation, it was not to Mary but to Joseph that the divine messages concerning the Holy Family were communicated. This is a testimony to the reality of his headship of the family. Those 'appearances in sleep,' as the scripture calls them, represented the highest sort of interventions: the first to ask Joseph's concurrence in the divine plan of salvation; the second to save the lives of Jesus and Mary; the third to

restore them to their native land, fulfilling what God had spoken through his prophet: 'Out of Egypt have I called my son' (Mt 2:15), and thereby placing them on the direct redemptive road.

St Matthew uses the same phrase each of those three times: 'The Angel of the Lord appeared in sleep to Joseph' (Mt 2 & 3). This mysterious wording must not leave us with the impression that dreams were in question. Whatever their precise character, they rose above such things. To Joseph they were utterly clear and peremptory so that he acted at once. In the case of the Flight into Egypt he did not even await the dawn but rose forthwith and undertook the grim perils of that journey through mountain paths in the winter darkness. Anyone who has had any experience of the like will realise the horror of it. St Joseph's responsibility was appalling. Fear for himself was obliterated by his agony on behalf of those who were so totally committed to his care. But on him the divine plan was wisely founded and it stood firm.

But an inconceivably greater trial of faith was imposed on him in the first of those appearances in sleep, which took place when Joseph realised that Mary, then betrothed to him, was with child. The matter of fact narrative passes over the unutterable torment of soul, which he experienced; it must have been akin to Mary's own dolours in three of which he was associated. What he saw was beyond his comprehending. But there it was. Being 'a just man' bound by the law, he could not take her as his wife. Neither could he denounce her. So he thought of a halfway course prescribed by the law – a private divorce without reasons assigned (Deut 24:1).

But while his tortured mind dwelt on the subject, behold the Angel of the Lord appeared to him in his sleep,

saying: 'Joseph, son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife. For that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins' (Mt 1:18-21).

Analyse that angelic pronouncement which is worthy to be termed a second annunciation. Are not those sensational but reassuring words parallel to and analogous to the angel's address to Mary at the Incarnation? Each concerns the conception of the child. Each declares the child to be the Son of God, produced without the concurrence of a man, and each requests a consent based on a transcendent act of faith.

Joseph is asked to take Mary and her child unto himself as his family with a total responsibility for them. That child is conceived of the Holy Spirit; his name shall be called Jesus; he shall save his people from their sins.

What vistas of thought this must summon up in Joseph! All Jewish history passes before him in a flash; the Fall, the ancient promise of Redemption, the Woman of prophecy, the Virgin with Child, the Mother of Emmanuel the Saviour. All this is contained in the demand now made to him. That Woman of Destiny is his affianced wife and he is asked to take her to himself. He now understands that he is part of the Eternal Plan. Unquestioningly he utters his fiat.

So colossal was that act of faith that it may bring the idea: Is not his faith as great as Mary's own? On the word of the angel he believed as she did, and in the same immensity which exceeded all human possibility.

At first sight, yes. But a pivotal consideration must enter here. Mary's conduct was quite unique. She was under the Old Law and she was by herself. Her faith

proceeded from her own essential quality and she alone out of all humanity and in all time could bear up the Plan of Regeneration, which had been made to pivot on her. Her faith did not shake; it brought the Lord on earth and set the whole machinery of love and mercy in motion. The supernatural order was established. Grace was now on tap. Persons could now draw on it according to capacity. Joseph benefited under this new dispensation. He imbibed the rich grace of Jesus and he got it through Mary. 'Mary is the only one through whom men reach Jesus, and the only one through whom Jesus reaches men' (Louis Bouyer).

We have been accustomed to think that St John the Baptist was the first beneficiary of Mary's mediation but here is a new thought: Was not St Joseph the very first?

That is why Joseph's faith was not the equal of Mary's. It was not altogether his own. He was aided to it by her who believed in the fullest possible sense of the word. One of her titles is 'Torch of Faith'. In her was that torch first lit in intensity. It is her prerogative to communicate its flame. All others who have believed, including St Joseph, have been illuminated from her.

But Joseph's faith was the next closest to Mary's.