

THE FOSTER-FATHER OF CHRIST

By BRO. HUGH HARTNETT, O. P.



ERY seldom is St. Joseph represented with Our Lord alone, and though there is no doubt but that Christ had a perfect filial affection for His foster-father, the world seems to be more attached to the picture of the sweet and girlish Madonna as she clasps the lovely Babe with all the tenderness and charm of motherhood. Not that we would dare to detract in the least from the divine prerogative of Mary, but it is strange that owing to one of the inexplicable anomalies of humanity, the head of the family has not always the prominence that would naturally be his claim. Somehow or other, he retires to a rather hidden life and all the grace of popularity and honor is woven into a maternal garland of gratitude and devotion. Motherhood certainly deserves all its praise and more; its sacrifices with mingled joys and sorrows; its cares filled with tenderness and love, ever willing "to spend self and be spent" for the sake of lovely childhood.

And fatherhood, the mainstay and support of the family, the provider of the necessities of the body and the household. His domain is none the less free from anxiety and the demands of sacrifice, as in his quiet way, he patiently helps to shape the destinies of the family. Such a father was St. Joseph in the humble home at Nazareth, helping the Christ, the long promised Messiah, prepare for His great mission in the world. He, Who was to be the Teacher of men, was peculiarly destined to humble Himself and be taught by a common workman. It was at this time of the history of the world that labor was held in very low esteem and practically despised and shunned. Ease and luxury, purple and gold were the ambitions of every heart. Such objects of the world's adoration could never be a source of attraction to the ways of God, nor a fitting preparation for entrance into His eternal Kingdom. So He consecrated by the touch of His divine hands, the work of Joseph and dignified and made honorable the lowly position of labor that has since been esteemed as a means of sanctification by countless others who have truly followed Christ. He knew that most of His followers,

His blessed poor, would spend their lives in hard, distasteful labor and nothing could be more inspiring than to encourage them by His example in the important work of salvation. While we glory in the humility and virtue of St. Joseph and we exult in the pre-eminent blessing bestowed upon him by God, we must also call to mind, the fact that he was a descendent from the greatest kings of the tribe of Juda.

It was singularly appropriate that the omniscient decree of God, in choosing a protector and a paternal guide for the Child Jesus, should select such a kingly character, nevertheless, a man who labored by the sweat of his brow. Though not His father according to nature, St. Joseph was to exercise the unprecedented office and rights of paternity towards the Son of God. The Divine Redeemer, Who was to plead our cause before the courts of heaven was to receive His training in the business of human affairs from a man who had learned the lessons of life in the difficult and often discouraging school of human experience. From the far distant past the wrathful words of the Great Jehovah still thundered through the centuries, "Cursed is the earth in thy work; with labor and toil shalt thou eat thereof all the days of thy life." That eternal echo was beginning to grow faint with the promise of the Messiah, and hope had dawned upon the world unperceived, yet soon to flare up from a little spark into a universal conflagration. From the light that streamed about that little royal Form, the world would be divinely inflamed as human hearts in a holocaust of love would fume the heavens with an incense of devotion.

Little Footsteps had come to sanctify the world; to lead man from the deplorable and desolate state of sin; to lift the curse and crown man's labors with a halo of holiness. Little Hands, possessing omnipotence, were obedient to the humble workman of Nazareth. He, Who had fashioned the universe, had come with providential design to live His hidden Life as an apprentice to a carpenter. The world little knew how important this poor and lowly tradesman's position was, but looking down from the highest portals of heaven amid all the splendor of celestial glory, the angels must have rejoiced when they beheld the sublime gifts of God's grace permanently given to man. From our Saviour's tenderest Infancy, St. Joseph's solicitude was for the care of the Divine Child. We can easily feel some idea of the happiness of the Saint as he labored in his shop offering

all for the little Charge who had been mysteriously put into his care. How precious those drops of sweat as he bent across his bench in a labor of love sweeter than ever before, for he was ever mindful that the divine Youngster must be maintained. Strange, inconceivable ways of God, Who, while He placed man under the guardianship of angels, chooses a man to care for His Only Divine Son.

We need not stretch our imagination very far in picturing the scene of the carpenter shop and the Child with characteristic inquisitiveness roaming about as He hummed a childish tune in an ecstasy of perfect contentment and happiness. We can see the gentle Joseph stop his work, lift Jesus in his arms and speak with all the tenderness of a devoted father, answering His questions with a willingness and an eagerness that spoke his overflowing love. How proudly he looks after Him as those little Feet skip so lightly away, and then slowly and meditatively returns to his labors. Often the Little One, in His childish way, must have tried to assist St. Joseph and brought him tools and small pieces of lumber. We wonder if when carrying those upon His tiny Shoulder, a dark cloud of the future could, momentarily, disturb the happiness of His Childhood. Could it be possible that when Joseph asks Him to bring the carpenter's square, in His eagerness to obey, He lifts it upon His shoulder and for a moment staggers as the pressure of the instrument reminds Him of the future. And when St. Joseph, laughingly, helps Him with a board that He is carrying, we wonder if He does not hear through that laugh, the jeers and mocking laughter of the condemning mob. When St. Joseph used the saw, perhaps the little Child could visualize the preparation of the cross for His torture and death; that sign which for the world would be the conquering banner of redemption. The blows of the hammer, as His foster-father completed some work, may have brought those last three hours to Him in closer reality with a foresight of the work completed in "His Father's business." And it is not a rash conjecture to say that the All Beautiful Child, filled with a tender spirit of gratitude for His wonderful earthly mission, prayed to His Heavenly Father in thanksgiving and asked for strength to endure all until the end.

By a special gift of grace, Joseph loved the Divine Infant with a devotion far exceeding any fatherly affection on earth, for he

knew it was not man he loved but God. And with this incomparable gift that distinguished the gentle Saint, was the wisdom begotten of his humility which so refined his character that he was the companion above all others for the Divine Child and His Blessed Mother. This is not to be wondered at since by the Holy Spirit he was charged, not like St. Peter with the mystical body of the Church but, with Christ, its head. The beautiful human character of Jesus that was to diffuse His heavenly and conquering Love throughout the world was to bloom unseen in the regal refinement of Joseph's companionship. If the profligacy of the pagans was to be exterminated; the hatred of the Jews and their defiance of the pagans transformed to fraternal life; a religion of peace and good will established, the Holy Founder must be the very essence and source of charity for all. Need we wonder, when we think of the calmness and the mildness that marked Joseph's demeanor, wherever we may read, why Christ stood so serenely before the Roman magistrates and the murderous mob, willing and ready to perform the supreme act of His Love for man; why He retained His regal poise and courageous conduct until the end? True He was God as well as Man, but surely it was not without reason that the Holy Spirit confided the responsibility of Christ's human character to the wisdom and paternal government of St. Joseph. May we not say that in the Saint's conduct and patience in his labors, he had some little influence upon the human character of Christ, because all the labors he underwent, all the pains he suffered, he endured all to sustain the sublime Life of the Son of God, upon which depended the salvation of men.

We look upon St. Joseph with awe and reverence, considering the unparalleled privilege that was his in having Jesus continually in his presence. From the time of his heavenly call, when with true humility he submitted to the mysteries of faith, until the final hour when his gentle soul wafted heavenwards, his divine commission as foster-father was blessed with unlimited happiness. To St. Joseph alone among men was conferred the consolation of dying in the arms of Jesus and Mary. Although he was not asked to die a violent death like so many others who served in the cause of Christ, his divine service caused him much mental and physical suffering which he freely offered to God in the work of redemption.

The month of St. Joseph occurs in Lent, quite appropriately, during which season the duty of mortification of our passions and natural inclinations is more frequently called to mind. It has ever been the delight of the Church to do honor to the memory and virtues of the saints. Day by day she chants the praises of her heroes and rejoices that after their struggles upon the earth, they have been deemed worthy of the eternal crown of life. March is, therefore, in a peculiar manner dedicated to the Saint who seems among all the great saints of the Church to hold the first place next to the virgin Mother of God, the foster-father of the Redeemer, St. Joseph.

