

## "... TO A MAN WHOSE NAME WAS JOSEPH"

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ESUS, MARY AND JOSEPH." This blessed trilogy of names, besides forming an ejaculatory prayer for millions of Catholics the world over, demonstratively unfolds for us an hierarchical order of pre-eminence in grace. Jesus is first. He is the Word of God made flesh, the Source of all grace. The absolute totality of His perfection is unassailable. What would be the significance of any discussion concerning perfection were the Son of God displaced from His position as cornerstone? Mary, the vessel in which the Head of grace dwelt, comes next. The Mother of God reigns in first place below her Son in the order of celestial dignity. The pre-eminence of her divine maternity places her high above all the angels and saints at the throne of her Creator. Mary's intimate relationship with the hypostatic union, i.e., the personal union of the humanity of Jesus with the Uncreated Word, has recently received further elucidation with the proclamation of her glorious Assumption into heaven. "And Joseph." *What of Joseph*, the Foster Father of the Son of God, the spouse of the unrivaled Virgin Queen? Is his life of glory in heaven to follow the same path his earthly life trod? Must the earthly obscurity of this most humble of men keep hidden from us even now the predominant place that is his in heaven?

Less than a century has passed since Pius IX proclaimed St. Joseph, the obscure carpenter of Nazareth, Patron of the Universal Church. 1870 might well be called the culminating date of the *recent* cult to St. Joseph. Looking back over twenty centuries, one can safely term the cult of this man of God as indeed "recent." He who was to round out the starring portion of the *dramatis personae* of the divinely conceived and directed redemptive Incarnation was destined for many centuries to continue in earthly oblivion. True, mention of Joseph can be found in the early Church. Yet it was merely a nod. The Eastern Church foreran the Western in explicit devotion to Mary's spouse, but it is well to remember that this was the same East-

ern mind that so easily gave itself to early Marian devotion. With the arrival of the fifteenth century Joseph's rôle began to assume something of the proportions designed for it by the Divine Author. The nod of the first centuries became applause. Today, over nineteen hundred years after his masterly performance, St. Joseph receives his due acknowledgment: exultant acclaim.

St. Joseph is the man of today. One author of what may be termed "Josephology" has written in his preface: "I restrain the urge which at this point always occurs to the Catholic writer, to say that the saint has a special message for our age. I do not say it because St. Joseph has presumably a thousand different messages for our age, most of them known to himself. If I conclude by saying that he has as many messages as there are persons capable of receiving them I shall have said everything."<sup>1</sup> "Just as Mary, Mother of the Savior, is spiritual mother of all Christians . . . Joseph looks on all Christians as having been confided to himself. He is the defender of the Holy Church." It was thus that Pope Leo XIII acknowledged the Saint's patronage of the entire Church.<sup>2</sup> When, more than today, has man needed such a guide, such a protector in whom to place confidence; or the Church such a defender? We stand in need of the most powerful help that we can obtain from the merciful court of Heaven; it bespeaks puerile folly to ignore "the king uncrowned."

"He is the greatest after Mary," Father Garrigou-Lagrange unflinchingly writes of Joseph,<sup>3</sup> and this doctrine has become more and more certain in recent years. The source of this pre-eminence finds its best expression in the succinct principle of Saint Thomas Aquinas: an exceptional divine Mission calls for a corresponding degree of grace (*Summa*, III, 27, 5, ad 1). *O altitudo divitiarum sapientiae et scientiae Dei*. He 'who orders all things' apportioned grace. Thus, as the Angelic Doctor goes on to point out Our Lord as man properly should possess *all* graces that He might fulfill His rôle as sanctifying Head of the human race, the font from which all graces flow. Similarly, Mary "received such a fullness of grace that she was nearest of all to the Author of grace," for she was to be the Mother of God. So it is with all

<sup>1</sup> O'Carroll, M., C.S.Sp., *The King Uncrowned*, Newman, Maryland, 1948.

<sup>2</sup> *Quamquam Pluries*, Encyclical Letter of Leo XIII, 1899.

<sup>3</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange, R., O.P., *The Mother of the Saviour*, Herder, St. Louis, Missouri, 1948.

the wonderful array of God's Saints. Apostles, martyrs, doctors, virgins, founders of religious orders—each required and received a peculiar grace to carry out his or her special task in life. We, in our own degree, require our own special grace to meet the demands of our state of life, no matter how puny this task might appear to us. St. Joseph, chosen directly by God Himself for a most unique mission, received such a proportionate grace that it surpasses that of any other saint.

"There is no doubt that he approached nearer than any other to that super-eminent dignity of hers by which the Mother of God surpasses all created natures" (*Quamquam pluries*). By this close participation in Mary's unsurpassed dignity. St. Joseph would seem to hold unchallenged the place of eminence after his virginal spouse. But what, might we ask, of St. John the Baptist, of whom Christ said: "There has not risen among them that are born of women a greater than John the Baptist" (*Mt.* 11:11), or of the Apostles, the very foundation-stones of Christ's Church? Two different orders are involved in the solution to such inquiries.<sup>4</sup> Of the order of nature no mention need be made, for St. Joseph's mission was supernatural. Yet there remains the order of grace, and it is this with which we are here concerned. Many saints have had special graces as we have indicated above. Still, as many theologians (many of them saints themselves endowed with an abundance of extraordinary graces) have taught, St. Joseph's mission can be said to approach the order of the Hypostatic Union, an order surpassing that of grace. Suarez, the Jesuit theologian and commentator on St. Thomas, might be quoted here profitably as expressing summarily this teaching so prevalent among St. Joseph's greatest protagonists. Any list of the saint's devotees, renowned for their penetrating analysis of St. Joseph's life, must always include St. Bernard, St. Bernardine of Siena, St. Vincent Ferrer, St. Teresa of Avila, Cardinal Lepecier and Isidore de Isolani, a Dominican who is often accredited with the task of formulating the first formal treatise on our saint. Suarez writes: "Certain offices pertain to the order of sanctifying grace, and among them that of the Apostles holds the highest place . . . but there are other offices which touch upon or border on the order of the Hypostatic Union . . . as can be clearly seen in the case of the divine

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<sup>4</sup> Pertaining to the status of St. John, the testimony of many scriptural commentators and authorities also bears witness to the fact that Our Lord had reference to no one living, but rather to figures of the Old Testament.

maternity of the Blessed Virgin; and it is to that order that the ministry of St. Joseph pertains.<sup>5</sup> We might say here that it is in the realm of moral and not physical causality that St. Joseph found his vocation intimately connected with the term of the unparalleled Hypostatic Union. "The one chosen to be the Mother of God was his lawful wife. So strong a thing is marriage, so divine a thing is marriage, that it brought Joseph into this special hypostatic order. It brought him into it morally, not intrinsically; secondarily, not immediately. But from it flowed God's life to his soul."<sup>6</sup>

Just as Mariologists of renown credit priority to Mary's predestination to her Divine Maternity over her predestination to her graces and glory, is so it is with her spouse. It is in such a light that St. Joseph's relationship with the Divine Word hypostatically united with the humanity of Christ is strikingly borne out. When Divine Wisdom formulated the plan of the Incarnation—and this from all eternity—everything connected with the accomplishment of such a decree was included in the single scheme of the Divine Economy. Mary's Motherhood and Joseph's Foster Fatherhood were sealed in that one plan.

In what did this man's part in the Divine Plan precisely consist? Joseph was created by God to be a *protector*—a protector of His Son and the Virgin Mother of this Son. Loving Mary as man never loved woman, he was primarily to guard her immaculate virginity, and this he did under the cover of what indeed was a true and perfect marriage. "The beauty of the whole universe was nothing compared with that of the union of Mary and Joseph, a union created by the Most High, which ravished the angels and gave joy to the Lord."<sup>7</sup> His other equally tremendous task consisted in his functioning as a father for Him Who would not, could not, ever know an earthly father. This carpenter, one of the most humble of men, was *head* of the Holy Family. To him was given paternal authority over Jesus Christ, the Son of the Most High. To him did Mary turn as each step of their divine secret unfolded itself in the living out of their lives. Joseph gave comfort to his two precious charges by his presence, gave protection by his vigilance, gave joy by his love. He who was the least among the three of them fulfilled his destiny expertly, co-

<sup>5</sup> *In Summam S. Thomae* IIIa, q. 28, disp. 8, sect. 1.

<sup>6</sup> O'Carroll, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

<sup>7</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange, *op. cit.*, p. 331.

operating minutely with each of his Creator's designs. *Joseph's life was lived for Jesus and Mary.*

This article limits itself to one essential point: the greatness in grace of Joseph: a greatness that is superceded only by that of the Mother of the Font of grace, Jesus Christ. It is the loftiness of his place before God's throne, and the reason for this celestial overtowering, that prompted this writing. Here questions about our saint—each of them fascinatingly interesting—must go unasked and unanswered. His doubt, his age, his initiation of Jesus into his trade, his death scene: these and so many others of pious, accidental extracts find their milieu in imaginative speculations. How little the Gospel tells us of Joseph! In no way are these problems to be considered belittled as they are treated in classical works on Joseph. Yet it must be insisted that the fundament for any treatment of this saint depends totally on his grace, which corresponded to the unique character of his mission. St. Thomas' principle must be reiterated: when God calls any of His creatures to some special task—and St. Joseph certainly had a "special" task—He does this as He does everything, in a supremely perfect manner: He gives the grace necessary to accomplish the mission.

"Joseph most obedient" co-operated with all his powers to this immense treasure of grace. Ever heavenward his soul surged as each day saw him grow in virtue. For the spiritual life is governed by a law of gravitation just as is the life of nature. The closer the stone approaches its term, the spot that will halt its descent, the more rapid becomes its descent. This same principle is applied in the spiritual life: the more one grows in grace the closer he comes to God, his Term, and all the more swiftly is he carried on this journey. Joseph's charity, the mother of all virtue, daily increased, and, as his realization of his nearness to God grew, his virtuous increase became ever more accelerated. Thus with St. Francis de Sales<sup>8</sup> we can conclude that Joseph's rôle having been played to its fullest, it was love that closed the curtain on his earthly performance. His was a death of love. "He is the patron of death because he was the protector of life. He was the custodian of Him by whose death we have life. For him

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<sup>8</sup> *Treatise of the Love of God*, Bk. VII, ch. xiii.

the last passage was a triumph."<sup>9</sup> Another of the remarkable paradoxes of our religion! "What we are in the moment of death we are forever."<sup>10</sup>

"The angel Gabriel was sent from God into a city of Galilee, called Nazareth, to a virgin . . . and the angel said unto her: Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee" (*Lc.* 1:26 27). Thus are we introduced to Mary in the Gospel. What utter simplicity St. Luke employed! Our feeble minds stagger in the contemplation of the grace that was proclaimed in Nazareth on that most sublime day. Such admitted weakness acknowledges the breath-taking greatness of the event and it is from this that we draw our conclusion that the pre-eminence showered upon the one creature to whom God entrusted the Mother of His Son was surpassed only by her own pre-eminence in grace and glory. And all this was given to "a man whose name was Joseph."

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph's bodily assumption has been defended by many saints and scholars: St. Francis de Sales, St. Bernardine of Siena, St. Leonard of Port Maurice, Suarez. Of course the basis for their arguments rests once again on the choice of St. Joseph by God for a most unique mission, one so closely allied to the Hypostatic Union. E. H. Thompson, in his *The Life and Glories of St. Joseph*, ch. XLVI, treats of this particular point extensively.

<sup>10</sup> O'Carroll, *op. cit.*, p. 111.