

Thus, in the face of all this, we stress the value of priestly celibacy and (certainly fully acquainted with human limitations and human failures and with what is of value in the marriage and family of the Lutheran pastors) we can see how the marriage and family of the deacon are of value for us.

Also we can hope that he would draw a noticeable number of recruits to the Diaconate. We trust that the marriage and family of the deacon would stand as an upright example before the eyes of society and especially of the youth of society.

Under such conditions, the rebirth of the Diaconate would most assuredly be recognized with joyous acceptance by our Lutheran brothers.

Whenever there is an approach of the separated Christian to the domains of discipline or liturgy or any other possible area, a building stone for the Ecumenical Movement is laid. The rebirth of the Diaconate can be a giant step on the way to mutual understanding.

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(translated by Joseph Albert Doshner, O.P.)

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE THEOLOGY OF ST. JOSEPH

EVERY FAMILY HAS ITS JOSEPH. Somewhere, if not in the present, at least in days gone by there was a man named Joseph. And every land and tongue has its word for Joseph: José, Giuseppe, Josef, Jozef. The name "Joseph" has been and remains a most popular name for all people and all ages. Its appeal is universal.

Two thousand years ago in Palestine, a small and insignificant land, there lived a Joseph who has become more widely known and more deeply loved than the very name which he bore. St. Joseph, husband of the Blessed Virgin and virgin father of Jesus, is now the official patron of the Universal Church.

Joseph has not always enjoyed this high official honor of the Church. For centuries he remained in the background of the Church's devotional life, just as he had lived in relative obscurity during his lifetime. The

Fathers, for instance, during the first five centuries of the Church, seemed reluctant to speak about Joseph. But there were reasons for this:

The early Church was a church of martyrs, and except for the veneration of the Blessed Virgin, the martyrs were the ones who received religious honors from the faithful. Moreover, the pressure from contemporary heresies exerted a constant and powerful influence. These heresies attacked the bed-rock doctrines of Christianity: the divinity of Christ and the true nature of the Trinity. All the energies of the Fathers were absorbed in warding off these onslaughts against the very core of the Faith.¹

During the past century, Joseph has come more and more into prominence. Today, as we look forward to a great General Council of the Church, proposals are being made to bring to Joseph new honors which more closely signify the exalted place he has ever held in the divine plan. Pope John, who has a deep devotion to the saint, on March 19, 1961 proclaimed Joseph as the protector of the Second Vatican Council.

Since 1870, when Pius IX pronounced Joseph the Patron of the Universal Church, hundreds of members of the hierarchy and hundreds of thousands of the faithful have petitioned that the name of St. Joseph be placed in the prayers of the Mass after the name of Mary, his wife. It is possible that the Fathers of the Council will consider this matter. Of this we can be sure: any steps that are taken will be evaluated at great length on the doctrinal level. The scholars will be busy; those versed in the theology of St. Joseph will be called upon to guide the discussions.

The term "theology of St. Joseph" may be puzzling to some. We tend to think that theology is limited to the study of God. Is it not a misuse of the term "theology" to apply it to the study of St. Joseph? No, this application is a valid one. The theologian, of course, is concerned principally about God. But he considers all sorts of other things: men and angels, sin and grace. And this is part of the theologian's true work. "In sacred science all things are treated of under the aspect of God; either because they are God Himself, or because they have an order to God as their beginning and end."²

Joseph has a very special order or relation to God. God Himself has told us something about Joseph in Sacred Scripture; it seems rather little, yet it is of great importance. It is enough to make clear the fact that Joseph was called to play a very important part in the drama of salvation.

The theologian uses the truths about Joseph in Sacred Scripture as a

starting point for his study. He realizes that if what appears on the sacred page is true, certain other things must also be true. He penetrates into the meaning of what he knows from Scripture about Joseph, and by a strict process of reasoning develops and unfolds and deepens the expression of the truth. He is not moved by sentiment or emotion; he states only those things which a scholarly, prayerful study of the revealed word permits and demands.

Here is a definition of what we mean by the theology of St. Joseph: It is "a part of theological science which, beginning with revealed principles, studies the Holy Patriarch as the husband of the Mother of God and the putative father of the Incarnate Word, with all the graces and privileges which derive from this ministry."³

"Beginning with revealed principles"; that is, with the truths revealed in Sacred Scripture. We might summarize the main conclusions derived from Sacred Scripture concerning St. Joseph as follows:

1. St. Joseph is the husband of the Virgin Mary.
2. Joseph was considered by the people as the father of Jesus.
3. Joseph exercised the office and held the state of the father of the family with respect to Jesus and Mary.
4. Joseph was a just man.⁴

Starting with these things as revealed by God, we ask what else we can learn about St. Joseph. The main truth to be pointed out is this: Joseph, after Mary, enjoyed the most exalted degree of holiness of all of God's creatures. Pope Pius IX taught that God "enriched him and filled him to overflowing with entirely unique graces in order that he might execute most faithfully the duties of so sublime a state."⁵

Joseph's sublime state in life, his vocation, was to be the husband of the Virgin Mother of God and the defender, supporter and teacher of her Divine Son! Joseph had a very special relationship with Mary, and through her, with her Son; and thence to God Himself. This fact alone accounts for the exalted holiness and "unique graces" which were Joseph's.

Of himself, Joseph was nothing. Neither was his virginal wife. The only reason for their eminent sanctity is that both these persons were selected by God to play an important part in the winning of salvation by His Son. Now when God chooses someone for a particular work in life, He gives those graces which will be needed to carry out the tasks involved.⁶ Married couples receive in the sacrament of Matrimony the special graces

they will need to meet all their new responsibilities. Mary and Joseph were to feed, clothe, teach and protect the very Word of God! Theirs was the vocation of vocations, the sublimity of which left Mary and Joseph in wonder at the goodness of God. They needed many graces to fulfill their sublime calling; and these graces were given to them.

Aside from the matter of their vocation, there is another reason why Mary and Joseph received such an abundance of grace. From our own experience we know that the closer a thing is to the source of something it receives, the more it actually receives from that source. Have you ever watched construction workers in mid-winter huddling around a raging bonfire during their lunch hour? The lucky two or three right next to the fire are as warm as they would be in their own homes. The men farther away from the fire are more or less frozen. The fire is the principle, the source of the heat. The workers closer to this source enjoy more of its heat.

Now the Infant Jesus took His human nature from Mary. So it is clear that she was the closest of all creatures to Jesus in His humanity, the closest to the Author of grace, from Whom grace overflows into all men. "Of His fullness we have all received" (John, 1:16). Mary, therefore, received the greatest grace from Jesus. Day after day she lived with the very Source of all our grace, as close to Him as any mother is to her child. And after Mary, no one was so close to Jesus as Joseph. Consequently, he too was elevated to an exalted degree of holiness and dignity. Here are the classical words of Pope Leo XIII:

. . . since the bond of marriage existed between Joseph and the Blessed Virgin, there can be no doubt that more than any other person he approached that supereminent dignity by which the Mother of God is raised far above all created natures.⁷

It is now the common teaching of theologians, following the popes, that St. Joseph is the greatest of the saints after Mary. But they must answer some difficulties which exist.

According to Sacred Scripture, it seems that St. John the Baptist is the greatest of all the saints. St. Matthew records Christ's words concerning John: "Amen I say to you, that among those born of women there has not risen a greater than John the Baptist" (Mt. 11:11). How, then, can we say that Joseph is greater than John? The answer rests in the correct understanding of the text from Matthew. Clearly, the words of Jesus were not meant to be taken in an absolute sense. Otherwise, we would have to say that Mary, born of St. Anne, and Jesus, born of Mary, were also lesser than

John the Baptist. The true understanding of the verse is that John was the greatest of all the prophets, as is had by St. Luke: "I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist" (Luke, 7:28). Thus, John the Baptist, the precursor of Jesus, is greater than all the prophets of the Old Testament.

But in the Litany of the Saints, the name of John the Baptist immediately precedes that of Joseph; how can this be? Quite simply, the purpose of the litanies is not to list the saints strictly according to their relative holiness or rank. Indeed, the Church has no desire to do this, and the task would be an impossible one.

Our statement stands that Joseph had the most exalted holiness of all creatures, after Mary. It is commonly taught also, therefore, that Joseph was raised to a greater dignity than the apostles and the angels. The basic reason for this is that Joseph was truly a part of the order of Hypostatic Union, that union in Jesus of human and divine nature. By reason of his marriage to Mary, Joseph enjoyed the privilege of being the head of the Holy Family, that family in which the God-made-man was raised to maturity. Joseph was thus intimately connected with the order of the Hypostatic Union, and is, therefore, far higher in dignity than the apostles or angels, who do not belong to that order.

We saw in our definition of Josephology that Joseph is called the "putative father" of Jesus. That is, although he was not the natural, physical father of Our Lord, people at the time thought that he was. Theologians have long discussed what title most meaningfully signifies Joseph's unique position as father of Jesus. He has been called the "adoptive" father, the "legal" father, the "foster" father, and the "nutritive" father. These last two terms signify the same reality: that Joseph fostered the Divine Child—raised Him, sheltered Him, and taught Him. But it should not be thought that Joseph was merely the guardian of Jesus. Mary herself did not consider him so; her words on the occasion when she and Joseph found the Boy Jesus teaching in the temple show this: "Your *father* and I have been seeking you in sorrow" (Luke 2:49).

So the eminent Josephologists of today look to another term to portray more appropriately the fatherhood enjoyed by Joseph. And they agree on the term "virgin father." This is taken to mean that St. Joseph was "father to Jesus in all respects as far as possible, with the sole exception, that is, of natural generation."⁸

Much is written about the fact that Joseph is called a "just man" in the Gospel. This term means that Joseph was adorned with all virtue, as

was only fitting, since he was to live so closely with Mary, the sinless one, and Jesus, God Himself. More and more theologians are teaching that it is reasonable to hold that Joseph was sanctified in his mother's womb. It is also taught that Joseph's bodily assumption after death is theologically probable. Pope John himself said that this belief could be accepted as plausible.⁹

We have made some elementary investigations into the study known as the "theology of St. Joseph." In the months and years that are to come, we shall be hearing more and more about that young carpenter of Nazareth, about the virgin husband of Mary, the Mother of God. The great Council of the Church convenes this year. The Church, in these troubled times, needs the protection of St. Joseph. Our times, as no other times, need St. Joseph:

. . . our times need him as the saint of social justice and the saint of the family. Joseph the carpenter is to teach the value and dignity of labor, the holiness of marriage, respect for authority, social and interracial justice, and the critical importance of saintly family life—all vital issues that have to be stressed again and again in order to combat the modern errors of worship of the state, of wealth, of pleasure, and of power.¹⁰

—Joseph Payne, O.P.

¹ Francis L. Filas, S.J., *Joseph and Jesus*, (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1952), p. 5.

² *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 1, a. 7, c.

³ Boniface Llamera, O.P., *Teología de San José*, (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1953), p. 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 11.

⁵ Pius IX, *Inclytum Patriarcham*, 1871.

⁶ *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 27, a. 4, c.

⁷ Leo XIII, *Quamquam Pluries*, 1889.

⁸ Joseph Mueller, S.J., *The Fatherhood of St. Joseph*, trans. Athanasius Dengler, O.S.B. (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1952), p. 101.

⁹ *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 52 (1960), p. 455.

¹⁰ Francis L. Filas, S.J., *Joseph Most Just*, (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1956), pp. 11.