

CONTEMPLATA

THE FLIGHT INTO MYSTERY

SEEKING WISDOM WITH ST. JOSEPH

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Our minds struggle in the pursuit of knowledge. Even when beginning to study a discipline, its most basic principles seem hard to reconcile with one another, making it feel as if the whole edifice might suddenly come falling down. As we advance in knowledge, encountering our intellectual limits, we face a deeper difficulty. This is especially true when we seek understanding of the divine mysteries, which exceed our natural experience and elusively dazzle us with their blinding light. We are also limited by our fallen and wounded nature, making the pursuit of knowledge treacherous as we repeatedly mistake error for truth. To find wisdom, to learn how to engage a mystery, we need a guide and helper. One such guide is St. Joseph, the husband of Mary and foster father of Jesus, whose silent example teaches us the virtues needed to participate in the mysteries of God.

WHAT IS MYSTERY?

What does it mean for something to be a mystery? According to Msgr. Charles Pope, “mystery refers to the fact that there are hidden dimensions in things, people, and situations that extend beyond their visible, physical dimensions”

(“What Does the Christian Tradition Mean by the Word ‘Mystery’?”, *Community in Mission*). A mystery is a reality that always remains partially hidden to us, something that we can adequately apprehend but never exhaustively know. It possesses an unlimited potential for its truth to be divulged, for every true mystery possesses a comprehensive intelligibility that remains beyond our reach.

We encounter mysteries in both the natural and supernatural realms. Our understanding of the natural world has advanced, but so much still remains to be known, and the empirical sciences keep showing us that the nature of physical reality itself is simply hard to grasp. For example, beyond the discovery of the basic structure of the atom are even smaller, more enigmatic subatomic particles still in need of much explaining. Our understanding of quantum physics is not yet fully developed. In some ways, the continual discoveries of modern science show us a natural world that has an inexhaustible intelligibility.

Mystery, however, refers preeminently to things divine. While God is supremely knowable in himself, the human mind is dazzled by the abundance of his truth. We receive access to the supernatural mysteries of the Catholic faith through divine revelation. As with natural mysteries, we are able to understand the initial significance of God’s revelation, and can even expound on the truth given to us in these mysteries in order to grow in understanding—as is done in the science of theology. Nevertheless, comprehensive knowledge of these divine truths remains far from us, for our limited intellects can never exhaust the unlimited truth of God’s mysteries.

PRIDEFUL KNOWLEDGE

As a result of the Fall, we have an aversion to what is mysterious. The proud mind seeks to master and domineer things through knowledge. In our sinful state, it is easy for us to distort our desire for the truth and succumb to the temptation to amass erudite concepts and facts with the intention of impressing, looking

down upon, or controlling those around us. Learning the truth of things gives a certain gratification, and then we learn how useful knowledge can be. We can continue to feed this appetite, and a vicious cycle develops. This is the sin incurred by the building of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9). These people had lost a sense of their place in reality and had grasped after more than they could rightly know. This is our postlapsarian confusion.

We see this aversion to mystery particularly in modernity. Modern man has lost his sense of mystery and tends to focus only upon empirical truths that can be verified and controlled by science. It is easy for modern man to be distracted from what is mysterious due to his ability to rapidly develop an empirical understanding of the world. We become all too satisfied with the advancements that we can achieve and forget that something lies beyond this abundance of scientific data. But this modern aversion to mystery is just a specific instantiation of a deeper problem: the pride that diverts and distracts man away from an encounter with the truths that are enshrouded in mystery.

HUMBLE KNOWLEDGE

Yet our minds were made for mystery. Those truths that are unchanging and eternal give security to our feeble existence. We must not forget that for St. Thomas Aquinas and the other Scholastics, truth perfects the intellect. We find the foundation for this in Scripture: “This is eternal life, that they *know* thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent” (Jn 17:3). While it is true that we can err in our pursuit of knowledge, that does not mean that the pursuit itself is in vain. We can begin to correct our erring pursuit by looking at the mirroring virtue of the vice of pride: humility.

The solution for gaining knowledge without pride is to acquire it in the midst of a healthy tension. We must foster a certain humility in the endeavor, coupled with an ever expanding magnanimity. Humility corrects our presumption about our

ability to attain to the heights of knowledge, knowing that our intellects have been weakened. On the other hand, the virtue of magnanimity gives us the desire to seek knowledge that will rightly order our life and perfect our soul. The wise are those who prudently know when to suffer at the threshold of the capacity of their knowledge, taking the time to absorb what they behold, simply contemplating the mystery in which they are caught up.

THE EXAMPLE OF ST. JOSEPH

St. Joseph exemplifies these virtues. His humility—the virtue at the root of his patience and steadfastness—disposes him to receive with magnanimity a deep participation in the mystery of the Incarnate Lord. As a holy and simple man who lives in visible truth and obscure mystery, St. Joseph teaches us how to properly order our pursuit of knowledge.

The opening chapters of St. Matthew's Gospel reveal to us St. Joseph's special virtue of patient humility as he is confronted by the mystery of divine providence. Soon after Mary became betrothed to him, St. Joseph finds her to be with child. This thrusts him into a mysterious paradox: his conviction of Mary's sanctity, on the one hand, and the fact of her pregnancy, on the other. However, he does not act rashly. Rather, St. Joseph sits silently with the news and allows the mystery to unfold before him. He does not give in to the temptation to be presumptuous about the situation before him, to assume that he understands completely what is happening. Instead of acting hastily, St. Joseph humbly trusts in the divine plan and patiently allows it to play itself out.

Through this humble patience, St. Joseph gains greater insight into the mystery of God's providential plan for him and his family. For it was "as he considered these things" (Mt 1:20) that an angel of the Lord appeared to him to assuage his uneasiness. The angel immediately greets him with the common angelic address, "do not fear," and assures him that God's wisdom is present in Mary's conception of a son. The angel goes on to announce, "that

which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:20). Because of his patience and humility, St. Joseph finds himself at the heart of God’s mysterious plan of salvation.



Gerard Van Honthorst — Childhood of Christ

St. Joseph resigns himself to not asking more about the life of this child. Rather, he simply and meekly obeys the Lord, even though his very social credibility and personal dignity hang in the balance. St. Joseph exercises his humility and patience by not asking for an extensive explanation. There is not a dialogue between him and the angel, but a monologue. This shows us an important aspect of St. Joseph’s response to mystery: he is only receiving the good news, not trying to control it. Though he first sought to divorce Mary quietly (Mt 1:19), once he is assured by the angel that he is integral to the divine plan, St. Joseph humbly and eagerly embraces God’s will for himself and his family. He respects

the mystery of the incarnation and thus continues to receive and abide in its wealth of truth as it is given to him.

As God gradually reveals his plan to St. Joseph, in the events of the nativity and the flight into Egypt, his humble patience matures into steadfastness. In the midst of confusion, upheaval, and danger, Joseph and Mary continue to trust in God's providential care of their family. During these times the holy couple must have talked and encouraged each other to continue to be faithful to the Lord.

Because of his humility, patience, and steadfastness, St. Joseph is led into the depths of the mystery of God's work of redemption. His humility is paired with magnanimity, allowing him to be drawn into the heart of God's mystery of redemption. His humility is not tainted by a false modesty. Rather, St. Joseph fully and willingly accepts the exalted task that God entrusts to him. As a result, he is granted a deep participation in the divine mystery of Christ's salvation.

St. Joseph teaches us, not only that we should not avoid mystery, but that we should embrace it as a gift—especially when it has come to us from on high. Mysteries are gifts because everything we learn from them are not results of our own accomplishments. We may sit with them for a while and not gain much, but if we continue with the steadfastness of St. Joseph, they will eventually reveal different aspects of their secret truth. Mysteries, especially those of God, reveal to us more about ourselves than we could ever discover by our own effort. Mysteries slowly unveil reality before us in ways we cannot control. In order to receive the wisdom of a mystery, though, it is necessary for us to replace the vice of Adam with the virtue of Joseph. We must cease to grasp at that which God has not given us. Rather, we must respond to the mysteries we encounter with humility, patience, and trust, just as St. Joseph did as the mystery of the incarnation unfolded before him. The more he gave himself to the mystery of divine providence, the more he received insight into the meaning of his life and the secret depths of the God-man.

The example given by St. Joseph in the search for truth is our antidote to a vain curiosity. It remains for us, then, to become faithful disciples of God's truth by following the papal exhortation of Pius XII, "*Ite ad Joseph*" ("Go ye to Joseph"). For it is only by exercising magnanimous humility in the face of the divine mysteries that we will be granted entry into the secret wine cellar of wisdom.

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