

## ST JOSEPH'S DEVOTION TO THE CHURCH

First of all, it should be said that during the first centuries of the Church's existence, in principle, it was only the martyrs who enjoyed veneration.

The earliest traces of public recognition of the holiness of St. Joseph are found in the East. His feast was held in high esteem by the Copts as early as the early fourth century. Nicéphorus Calixto says that in the great basilica erected in Bethlehem by St. Helena, there was a magnificent oratory dedicated to St. Joseph. The truth is, however, that the feast of "Joseph the Carpenter" is recorded, on July 20, in one of the ancient Coptic Calendars that has come down to us, as well as in a Synaxarium (martyrology) of the eighth and ninth centuries. Greek menologia (catalogues of Saints and martyrs organized by months) of a later date at least mention St. Joseph on December 25 or 26, and another commemoration of him jointly with other saints was made on the two Sundays immediately before and after Christmas.

In the West, the name of the adoptive father of Our Lord appears in some martyrrologies of the ninth and tenth centuries, and in 1129, for the first time, we find a church dedicated to him in Bologna. His devotion, at that time only private, as it appeared to be, gained great impetus due to the influence and zeal of saints such as St. Bernard, St. Thomas Aquinas, Saint Gertrude (died 1310), and St. Brigid of Sweden (died 1373).

It was only under the pontificate of Sixtus IV (1471–84), in 1476, by that pope's command, that the feast in honor of St. Joseph was introduced on March 19th. Since then, devotion has become increasingly popular, and the dignity of the festival has been related to its strong growth. Benedict XIII, in 1726, added the name of St. Joseph in the Litany of Saints.

**Pius IX (1846-1878) who will officially declare St Joseph, as we will later see, Patron and Protector of the universal Church. On 8<sup>th</sup> December 1870, the anniversary of the opening of the Council, he published the decree *Quemadmodum Deus*, in which he proclaimed St Joseph patron of the Universal Church.**

The Pope lists the reasons that led him to make this decision. First, the very choice by God, which made Joseph his trusted man, in whose hands He put what He had most precious; then, because it is a fact that the Church has always honoured St Joseph with the Virgin Mary and that, in disturbing circumstances, the Church has always successfully resorted to her protection. Once again -- as had happened at the time of the Western Schism and more recently with Pius VII -- in the face of the innumerable evils that in those days overwhelm the Church, the Pope personally put himself, and put all the faithful with him, under the protection of St Joseph.

The Pope asked 'that the Christian people should get used to imploring, with great mercy and deep confidence, St Joseph at the same time as the Virgin Mary.' This practice is one of the most pleasing to Our Lady, who enjoys it.

Devotion to St Joseph is already widespread, but the Pope believes that it is his duty to encourage Christians so that this devotion "is deeply rooted in the uses of the Catholic tradition, for this is of extreme importance". In declaring St Joseph patron of the universal Church, **Pius IX** did nothing but express the feeling of the Christian people and, at the same time, continue the teaching of their predecessors. His successors did so much.

It was in this spiritually very fruitful context of the nineteenth century that the devotion and worship of St Joseph extended, both in people and in institutions throughout the Church. At the same time, as we have seen, a flow of petitions started to get the Pope to officially recognize the patronage of St Joseph, not only on the particular Churches, the local communities, or even entire regions, but on the universal Church and on the whole world. No one more suited to fulfilling this unifying mission than St Joseph.

### **Leo XIII and The First Pontifical Encyclical on St Joseph**

Leo XIII wrote the first and masterful Encyclical dedicated to St Joseph, *Quamquam pluries*, and then published a document, through which he asked Christian households to consecrate themselves to the Holy Family of Nazareth, "a perfect example of the domestic society, at the same time as a model of all virtue and all holiness". In it he teaches the role of St Joseph in the Church

### **In the 20th century**

Pius X had a great devotion to St Joseph, whose name was imposed on him in Baptism. He was the one who approved the Litanies in honor of this Saint and authorized their insertion into the liturgical books. In this, as he himself says, he is fully in line with his predecessors: Pius IX and Leo XIII. Joseph is a powerful and very useful aid to the family and to society (1909).

Benedict XV (1914-1922), later published a document inviting all the bishops of the world to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the patronage of St Joseph by encouraging the faithful to renew their devotion to the saint and to the Holy Family.

On 26 October 1921, Benedict XV extended the Feast of the Holy Family to the whole Church.

**Pius XII** (1939-1958) Exercised an indefatigable magisterium, dealing in his addresses with multiple aspects of Christian life and morals, in the new circumstances of the world. He wanted to Christianize "Labour Day on May 1<sup>st</sup>" by **the institution of the feast of St. Joseph Craftsman**. Time and again he pointed to St Joseph as the most qualified protector of all

classes in society and of all professions. He spoke of this Saint to workers, young couples, militant Christians, students and children.

### **The Second Vatican Council and St Joseph**

**John XXIII** (1958-1963) succeeds Pius XII. When he was elected Pope, he felt that he could not take Joseph's name because of custom, but nonetheless chose March 19<sup>th</sup> as the date of his personal feast. John XXIII gave multiple testimonies of his devotion to St Joseph. He confessed: 'I love St Joseph very much, to such an extent that I do not know how to begin my journey, nor to finish it, without my first word and my last thought addressing him'

When he was Pope, he gave the same slogans to all Christians: to devote oneself equally either to humble tasks or to important missions, with no distinction in the dignity of what is done. Joseph, Mary's husband, was nothing more than a craftsman who made a living with his work. What counts before God is fidelity. On 19<sup>th</sup> March 1959, celebrating Mass for a group of workers in the city of Rome, he told them: *"All glorified saints deserve particular honor and respect, but it is clear that St Joseph has, with just a title, a very particular place, softer, more intimate, more penetrating in our hearts"*.

John XXIII's great initiative was to convene the Second Vatican Council. In the Apostolic Letters of 19<sup>th</sup> March 1961, he explains why he wants this important Council, which he has placed under the special protection of St Joseph. He begins by recalling what his predecessors did for the glory of St Joseph, then explains that the Council is for all the Christian people, who must benefit from it by a current of grace, for greater vitality. He adds that no better protector can be found than St Joseph to obtain heaven's help in the preparation and development of this Council, which should mark an entire era.

Another important initiative of John XXIII in 1962 was to introduce the name of St Joseph in the Canon of Holy Mass, immediately behind the Virgin Mary.

The solemn opening was on October 11, 1962, but the good Pope John only lived to attend the first session. He was **succeeded by** Paul VI (1963-1978), who ruled the Church during the three subsequent stages of the Council, held in the following three years, until the conclusion, on 8 December 1965. Paul VI frequently speaks of St Joseph.

The then Auxiliary Bishop of Krakow, Karol Wojtyla, wrote of St Joseph: 'Since the nineteenth century in the Church, both in its Magisterium and in its liturgy, another way of interpreting St Joseph has prevailed. The contemplative trait is not so as highlighted as its social role.' 'St Joseph, who, during his life on earth, was the guardian of the historical Christ, must now necessarily be the guardian of the mystical Christ, that is, of the Holy Church.'

After the death of Paul VI came the fleeting but luminous pontificate of **John Paul I** (26-VIII to 29-IX 1978); and on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1978, Cardinal Karol Wojtyła, Archbishop of Krakow, was elected Pope and took the name **John Paul II**. The new Pontifical Election was an event of great significance: for the first time in four and a half centuries a non-Italian sat on the Chair of Peter.

At a General Audience on 19<sup>th</sup> March 1980, John Paul II, with great wealth of traditional ideas, commenting on some gospel passages on Jesus's Childhood, delves into the fatherhood of St Joseph and his continuity in the family of God, which is the Church: *'Joseph, the one we know from the Gospel, is a man of action. He is a man of work. The Gospel has not preserved any word of his. It has described, on the contrary, his actions: simple, everyday actions, which have at the same time a limpid meaning for the fulfillment of the divine Promise in the history of man; works full of spiritual depth and mature simplicity. Such is Joseph's activity, such are his deeds, before there had been revealed to him the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God, which the Holy Spirit had effected in his Betrothed. (. . .) The Son of God, the Word Incarnate, remained hidden for thirty years of his earthly life: hidden in the shadow of Joseph. At the same time Mary and Joseph remained hidden in Christ, in his mystery and his mission.'*

John Paul II, as he was embroiled in such serious world events, turned his eyes to St Joseph. The *Redemptoris Custos*, which forms a trilogy with the *Redemptor Hominis* and the *Redemptoris Mater*, is a call to St Joseph personally to 'bless the Church'. The Holy Father leaves his place as a 'representative', to St Joseph who is the 'true Father,' in the sense that the Eternal Father, from whom all fatherhood comes in heaven and on earth, granted him parental power over Christ and his Work. The Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II was also signed on 15 August. (...) May St Joseph protect the Church, bless her and with her in a particular way Pope John Paul II, who has so providentially given us God and Our Lady, at these crucial moments in the history of humanity and who has put herself at the service and under the protection of the whole Holy Family".

**Benedict XVI** repeatedly underlined the excellence of his virtues.

And **Pope Francis**? He writes: *"I love St. Joseph very much. And I have on my desk an image of Saint Joseph sleeping. And while sleeping he takes care of the Church. Yes, he can. We, cannot. And when I have a problem, a difficulty, I make a note on a piece of paper and put it under St. Joseph for him to dream of, that is for him to pray for that problem."*