

Life of the Spirit

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ON THE PATRONAGE OF ST JOSEPH

AND OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN

WHOSE HELP IS TO BE INVOKED ON ACCOUNT OF THE DIFFICULTY
OF THE TIMES

POPE LEO XIII,

To our Venerable Brethren Patriarchs, Primate, Archbishops, Bishops and other local Ordinaries enjoying peace and communion with the Apostolic See,

Venerable Brethren, Health and Apostolic Benediction.



ALTHOUGH we have on many occasions ordained special prayers to be offered up throughout the world, and have often ordered the Catholic cause to be commended to God with greater insistency, no one will be surprised that in these present times we have once more seen fit to bring the duty of special prayer home to souls.

In times of difficulty and hardship, more especially when the powers of darkness seem to be given free rein to dare all within their power for the disgrace of the Christian cause, the Church has always been wont to implore God's help with greater fervour and perseverance, knowing that he is her author and defender. She has at the same time had recourse to the intercession of the saints in heaven, above all to that of the august Virgin the Mother of God, the support of whose patronage is surely the most powerful help in difficulty. Sooner or later the fruit of such pious supplication and of confidence in the divine goodness becomes apparent.

You know the nature of the times in which we are living, Venerable Brethren; and that they are hardly less disastrous for the Christian religion than the most disastrous her past has ever witnessed. We see that faith, chief among Christian virtues, has perished in many souls; charity has grown cold; youth has grown up with depraved morals and opinions; the Church of Jesus Christ is being attacked with violence and cunning on all sides and a terrible war against the Pontificate is in progress. The very foundations of religion are being undermined with a daring that grows from day to day. It is too well known for repetition how far things have gone in the most recent times and what designs are yet harboured.

In such a difficult and unhappy situation human remedies are unavailing, and the only course is to seek healing from the divine power.

This has led us to make an appeal to the piety of Christians to implore the help of Almighty God with ever greater zeal and perseverance. At the approach of the month of October, which we have on a former occasion decreed to be dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of the Most Holy Rosary, we earnestly exhort the faithful to practise the devotion of this month with the utmost possible religion, piety and regularity. We know that the Virgin's motherly goodness is an ever open refuge, and we are certain that the hope we place in her is never vain. She has shown her help hundreds of times at critical stages in the history of the Church; why then should we doubt that she will renew the manifestation of her power and favour if we unite in humble and constant prayer to her? Indeed we believe that the longer she lets us plead for her help, the more wonderful will her intervention be.

But we have another proposal which you will support according to your custom, Venerable Brethren. So that God may show greater favour to our prayers, and through a greater number of intercessors, may the more speedily and fully come to our help, we deem it most advisable that the Christian people should get used to invoking together with the Virgin, Mother of God, her chaste Spouse, the Blessed Joseph; and that they should invoke him with great piety and confidence. We are certain that the Virgin herself wishes this and that it will be pleasing to her.

This is Our first public reference to this devotion, but We know that the people are already inclined to it, that it is indeed established and in full progress. In our time we have seen the growth and dissemination of the cult to St Joseph, which the Roman Pontiffs have striven to develop and propagate in a gradual way. This has been the case more especially since Our predecessor, Pius IX, of happy memory, in compliance with the instances of a great number of Bishops, declared this most holy Patriarch the Patron of the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, as it is of such vital importance that the veneration of St Joseph should be a deeply rooted and integral part of Catholic observances and institutions, We wish to direct to it the special attention of Christian people, and to do this by means of Our word and of Our authority.

The primary reason why St Joseph has been chosen as the Patron of the Church, and why the Church in turn hopes much from his protection and patronage, is that he was the spouse of Mary, and the father, as it was thought, of Jesus Christ. This is the source of all

his dignity, grace, sanctity and glory. It is certainly true that the dignity of the Mother of God is so great that nothing greater could possibly be created. But as Joseph was joined to the Blessed Virgin in wedlock, there can be no doubt that he approached more nearly than anyone else to the supereminent dignity by which the Mother of God so far surpasses all other created natures. For marriage is the most intimate union and relationship of all, which by its very nature brings about a mutual community of goods. Also, in espousing Mary to Joseph, God gave her not only a companion to share her life, a witness to her virginity, a guardian of her honour, but also, by virtue of the marriage tie itself, someone who shared in her sublime dignity. Similarly, the most august dignity distinguishes Joseph from amongst all men; Joseph, whom the divine will appointed to be the guardian, and in the eyes of men, the father of the Son of God. In consequence, the Word of God was humbly subject to Joseph, obeyed him and paid him all the honour which children owe their parents.

By virtue of this double dignity Joseph discharged the duties which nature imposes on the head of the family; he was the guardian, the administrator and the lawful defender of the divine household over which he presided. And he did in fact, throughout the course of his life on earth, exercise this charge and fulfil these functions. With supreme love and a daily renewed zeal he devoted himself to the protection of his Spouse and the divine Child. By his labour he earned what was necessary for the food and clothing of each; he preserved the Child from death by finding it a safe refuge when it was threatened by a king's jealousy; in the trials of the journey and the bitterness of exile he was the constant companion, help and comforter of the Virgin and of Jesus.

Now the divine household over which Joseph rules with powers like those of a father, contained within itself the beginnings of the infant Church. In the same way as the most Blessed Virgin Mary is the Mother of Jesus Christ, she is also the Mother of all Christians, whom she brought forth amidst the Redeemer's supreme sufferings on Mount Calvary; thus too, Jesus Christ is the firstborn among Christians, who are his brothers by virtue of the spirit of adoption, and by the redemption.

These are the reasons why the Blessed Patriarch considers the multitude of Christians who make up the Church as being most specially confided to his care; for being the spouse of Mary and the father of Jesus Christ he has, as it were, paternal authority over the immense family of the Church scattered throughout the world. Thus it is fitting and most worthy of Blessed Joseph that he who once ministered to the needs of the family at Nazareth and protected it

with saintly care, should now guard and defend the Church of Christ with his heavenly patronage.

You will readily understand, Venerable Brethren, that these considerations are confirmed by the opinions of many of the Fathers of the Church, and supported by the sacred liturgy itself, when the view is put forward that the Joseph of ancient times, son of the Patriarch Jacob, was the figure of our Joseph, and that by renown the ancient Joseph was a witness to the greatness of the future guardian of the Church.

Apart from the fact that they shared the same name, a matter by no means devoid of significance, you are no doubt aware of the evident parallels that may be drawn between them. In the first place the other Joseph won the favour and special friendship of his master, who, having put Joseph in control of the administration of his affairs, found that thanks to him, prosperity and plenty flowed into the royal household. A yet more important parallel is that by the royal command, he ruled over the whole kingdom with unlimited power; and at a time of famine when the fruits of the earth were scarce and every kind of food was dear, he provided with such wisdom for the needs of the Egyptians and their neighbours, that the king decreed that he should be called: *THE SAVIOUR OF THE WORLD (Salvator Mundi)*.

Thus we may see in the story of the ancient patriarch a symbolical foreshadowing of the new Joseph. Just as the former brought success and prosperity to his master's domestic affairs, and in a short space of time rendered wonderful service to the whole kingdom, so too the latter, who was destined to be the guardian of the Christian religion, should be looked upon as the protector of the Church, which is indeed the house of the Lord and the kingdom of God on earth.

This is why all men, of whatever condition or country, should commit themselves to Joseph's faithful care.

In Joseph, fathers of families find the most excellent example of paternal vigilance and care; husband and wife see in him a perfect model of married love, harmony and faithfulness; virgins have in him a pattern and at the same time a guardian of their innocence. Let those of noble birth learn from Joseph how to preserve their dignity even in misfortune; let the rich understand from him what kind of goods are most worthy to be desired and ardently sought.

But the working man, the labourer, and all who are of lowly estate, have a special right of appeal to Joseph, and a right to learn of him what they should imitate. For although Joseph was of royal race, joined in marriage to the greatest and most holy among women, and was the father, as it was thought, of the Son of God, he nevertheless

spent his life in working, and he supported his family by the skilled labour of his hands.

It is clear, then, that there is really nothing abject in being of humble station; and that far from being devoid of honour, every kind of work, provided that it is virtuous, has the power of ennobling the workman. Content with the little that was his, Joseph bore with the greatest tranquillity of mind the poverty which was a necessary part of his lowly state of life; this he did in imitation of his Son, the Lord and maker of all things, who took the form of a slave and freely submitted himself to the greatest poverty and need.

In view of these considerations, all those who are poor and live by the labour of their hands, should be filled with courage and adopt a just attitude to their problem. For although they have the right to emerge from their state of poverty and to better their condition by legitimate means, they are forbidden by reason and justice to overthrow the order constituted by God's providence. Indeed it is a senseless expedient to stoop to the use of violence, and to tackle a problem of this kind by means of sedition and uproar; for this usually only serves to aggravate the evil which is meant to be relieved. Let the poor not put their trust in the promises of men who stir up hatred, but in the example and the patronage of Blessed Joseph, and in the motherly love of the Church whose solicitude for all that concerns their welfare is ever growing.

That is why, Venerable Brethren, relying greatly on your authority and episcopal zeal, and hoping that the good and devoted among the faithful will of their own accord undertake even more than is laid down, We decree that throughout the month of October, the recitation of the rosary, which has previously been ordered, be supplemented by a prayer to St Joseph, which will be communicated to you with this letter. This is to be done every year in perpetuity. To those who devoutly recite this prayer we accord an indulgence of seven years and seven quarantines for each recitation.

It is a salutary and most laudable practice, already established in some countries, to consecrate the month of March to the holy Patriarch by daily exercises of piety. In places where it is not easy to establish this custom, it is to be desired that before his feast at least a triduum of prayers be offered up in the main church of every place.

Meanwhile may our apostolic benediction, the augury and pledge of divine blessings, descend upon you, Venerable Brethren, on your clergy and on your people, and remain with you for ever.

Given at Rome, from Saint Peter's, August 15th, 1889, in the 12th year of Our Pontificate.

LEO P. P. XIII.

NOTE.—The feast of the Solemnity of St Joseph occurs on 4th May.