 Reading time: 21 min.

Saint Joseph is patron of the Church and also co-patron of the Salesian Congregation. From the very beginning, Don Bosco wanted to associate him as protector of the fledgling work for the young. Certain of his powerful intercession, he wanted to spread his cult and wrote a life for this purpose, more to instruct than to meditate on, which we wish to present as a continuation.

Introduction

At a time when devotion to the glorious foster-father of Jesus, Saint Joseph, seems to be so universal, we believe that it would not be out of place for our readers if a dossier on the life of this saint were to be published today.

Nor should the difficulties encountered in finding the particular facts of this saint's life in the ancient writings diminish our esteem and veneration for him in the slightest; on the contrary, in the very sacred silence with which his life is surrounded we find something mysterious and great. St Joseph had received from God an entirely opposite mission to that of the apostles (Bossuet). The latter were to make Jesus known; Joseph was to keep him hidden; they were to be torches that showed him to the world, he a veil that covered him. So Joseph was not for himself, but for Jesus Christ.

It was therefore in the economy of Divine Providence that St Joseph should keep himself obscure by showing only what was necessary to authenticate the legitimacy of his marriage with Mary, and to clear all suspicion about Jesus. But although we cannot penetrate into the Sanctuary of Joseph's Heart and admire the wonders that God worked there, we nevertheless argue that for the glory of his Divine protégé, for the glory of his heavenly bride, Joseph had to gather into himself a stock of graces and heavenly gifts.

Since true Christian perfection consists in appearing as great before God and as the least before men, St. Joseph, who spent his life in the humblest obscurity, is able to provide the model of those virtues that are like the flower of holiness, interior holiness, so that what David wrote of the sacred bride can be very well said of St Joseph: *Omnis gloria eius filia Regis ab intus* (Ps. 44).

St Joseph is universally recognised and invoked as the protector of the dying, and this for three reasons: 1st because of the loving command that he acquired over the Heart of Jesus, judge of the living and the dead and his earthly son; 2nd because of the extraordinary power that Jesus Christ bestowed on him to

vanquish the demons that assail the dying, and this in recompense for the saint having once saved him from Herod's snares; 3rd because of the sublime honour that Joseph enjoyed in being assisted at the point of death by Jesus and Mary. What new important reason is there for us to be inflamed in his devotion?

Eager, therefore, to provide our readers with the main features of the life of St Joseph, we have sought among the works already published some that would serve this purpose. Many of them have been published for some years now, but either because they were too voluminous or too removed from popular style in their sublimity, or because they lacked historical data and were written with the aim of serving as meditation rather than instruction, they did not suit our purpose. Here, therefore, we have gathered from the Gospel and from some of the most accredited authors the main information about the life of this saint, with some appropriate reflections from the holy Fathers.

The truthfulness of the narrative, the simplicity of the style, and the authenticity of the information will, we hope, make this tenuous effort palatable. If the reading of this booklet serves to procure the chaste husband of Mary even one more devotee, we shall already be abundantly satisfied.

Chapter 1. Birth of St Joseph. His native place.

Ioseph, autem, cum esset iustus. (Joseph was a righteous man. – Mt 1:19)

About two leagues [9.7 km] from Jerusalem on the summit of a hill, whose reddish soil is strewn with olive groves, stands a small town famous for ever because of the birth of the child Jesus, the town of Bethlehem, from which the family of David drew its origin. In this small town about the year of the world 3950 was born the one who in God's lofty designs was to become the guardian of Mary's virginity, and the foster-father of the Saviour of mankind.

His parents gave him the name Joseph, which means increase, as if to make us understand that he was increased with the gifts of God and lavishly filled with all virtues from his birth.

Two Evangelists handed down Joseph's genealogy. His father had the name Jacob according to St Matthew (Mt 1:16), and according to St Luke he was called Eli (Lk 3:23); but the most common and oldest opinion is the one handed down to us by Julius Africanus, who wrote at the end of the second century of the Christian era. True to what he was told by the Saviour's own relatives, he tells us that Jacob and Eli were brothers, and that Eli having died childless, Jacob married his widow as was prescribed by the law of Moses, and from this marriage Joseph was born.

Of the royal lineage of David, descended from Zerubbabel who brought God's people back from the captivity of Babylon, Joseph's parents had fallen far from the ancient splendour of their ancestors in terms of temporal affluence. According to tradition, his father was a poor labourer who earned his daily sustenance by the sweat of his brow. But God, who admires not the glory that is enjoyed in the face of men, but the merit of virtue in his own eyes, chose him to be the guardian of the Word descended upon the earth. Besides, the profession of a craftsman, which in itself has nothing abject, was in great honour among the people of Israel. Indeed, every Israelite was a craftsman, because every father of a family, whatever his fortune and the height of his rank, was obliged to make his son learn a trade unless, the law said, he wanted to make a thief of it.

Little do we know about Joseph's childhood and youth. In the same way that the Indian, in order to find the gold that is to make his fortune, is obliged to wash the river sand in order to extract from it the precious metal that is found only in very small particles, so are we obliged to search the Gospel for those few words that the Holy Spirit left scattered here and there about Joseph. But as the Indian by washing his gold gives it all its splendour, so reflecting on the words of the Gospel we find appropriate to St Joseph the most beautiful praise that can be given of a creature. The holy book contents itself with telling us that he was a just man. Oh admirable word that by itself expresses far more than entire speeches! Joseph was a righteous man, and in grace of this righteousness he was to be judged worthy of the sublime ministry of the foster-father of Jesus.

His pious parents took care to educate him in the austere practice of the duties of the Jewish religion. Knowing how much the early education influences the future of children, they endeavoured to make him love and practise virtue as soon as his young intelligence was able to appreciate it. Besides, if it is true that moral beauty is reflected on the exterior, it was enough to glance at Joseph's dear person to read on his features the candour of his soul. According to authoritative writers, his face, his forehead, his eyes, the whole of his body exuded the sweetest purity and made him resemble an angel descended from the earth.

("There was in Joseph an exalted modesty, a modesty, a supreme prudence, he was excellent in piety towards God *and shone with a marvellous beauty of body*." Eusebius of Caesarea, lib. 7 *De praep. Evang. apud Engelgr.* in Serm. St Joseph.)

Chapter 2. Joseph's youth – Moving to Jerusalem – Vow of chastity.

Bonum est viro cum portaverit iugum ab adolescentia sua. (It is good for one to

bear the yoke in youth. – Lam. 3:27)

As soon as his strength allowed him, Joseph helped his father with his work. He learned the trade of being a woodworker, which, according to tradition, was also his father's trade. How much application, how much docility he had to use in all the lessons he received from his father!

His apprenticeship ended precisely when God allowed his parents to be taken from him by death. He mourned those who had cared for his childhood; but he endured this hard trial with the resignation of a man who knows that everything does not end with this mortal life and that the just are rewarded in a better world. Now that he was not at all restricted to Bethlehem, he sold his small property, and went to settle in Jerusalem. He hoped to find more work there than in his home town. On the other hand, he approached the temple where his piety continually attracted him.

There Joseph spent the best years of his life between work and prayer. Gifted with perfect probity, he did not try to earn more than his work deserved, he set the price himself with admirable good faith, and his customers were never tempted to negotiate with him, because they knew his honesty. Although he was all intent on his work, he never allowed his thoughts to stray far from God. Ah! if one could learn from Joseph this precious art of working and praying at the same time, one would without fail make a double profit; one would thus secure eternal life by earning one's daily bread with much greater satisfaction and profit!

According to the most respectable traditions, Joseph belonged to the sect of the Essenes, a religious sect that existed in Judea at the time of its conquest by the Romans. The Essenes professed greater austerity than the other Jews. Their main occupations were the study of the divine law and the practice of work and charity, and in general they were admired for the holiness of their lives. Joseph, whose pure soul abhorred the lightest uncleanness, had joined a class of the people whose rules corresponded so well to the aspirations of his heart; he had even, as the venerable Bede says, taken a formal vow of perpetual chastity. And what confirms us in this belief is the assertion of St Jerome, who tells us that Joseph had never cared for marriage before becoming Mary's husband.

By this obscure and hidden way, Joseph prepared himself, unbeknownst to himself, for the sublime mission that God had reserved for him. With no ambition other than to faithfully fulfil the divine will, he lived far from the noise of the world, dividing his time between work and prayer. Such had been his youth, such also, in his belief, was his desire to spend his old age. But God, who loves the humble, had other cares for his faithful servant.

Chapter 3. Marriage of St Joseph

Faciamus ei adiutorium simile sibi. ('I will make him a helper as his partner. – Gen. 2:18)

Joseph was entering his fiftieth year when God took him out of the peaceful existence he was leading in Jerusalem. In the temple there was a young Virgin consecrated by her parents to the Lord from her childhood.

Coming from the lineage of David she was the daughter of the two holy elders Joachim and Anne, and her name was Mary. Her father and mother had been dead for many years, and the burden of her education was left entirely to the priests of Israel. When she had attained the age of fourteen, the age fixed by law for the marriage of young maidens, the High Priest took care to procure for Mary a bridegroom worthy of her birth and high virtue. But an obstacle presented itself; Mary had made a vow to the Lord of her virginity.

She respectfully replied that since she had taken the vow of virginity, she could not break her vows to marry. This response greatly disconcerted the high priest's ideas.

Not knowing how to reconcile the respect due to the vows made to God with the Mosaic custom that imposed marriage on all the maidens of Israel, he gathered the elders and consulted the Lord at the foot of the tabernacle of the covenant. Having received the inspirations from Heaven and convinced that something extraordinary was hidden in this matter, the High Priest resolved to summon the many relatives of Mary, in order to choose from among them the one who should be the blessed Virgin's lucky bridegroom.

All the unmarried members of David's family were therefore summoned to the temple. Joseph, though older, was with them. The High Priest having announced to them that it was a matter of casting lots to give a bridegroom to Mary, and that the choice would be made by the Lord, ordered that all should be at the holy temple on the following day with an almond-tree rod. The rod would be placed on the altar, and the one whose rod had blossomed would be the favourite of the Most High to be the consort of the Virgin.

On the following day a large crowd of young men came to the temple with their almond branches, and Joseph with them; but either out of a spirit of humility or because of the vow he had made of virginity, instead of presenting his branch he hid it under his mantle. All the other branches were placed on the table, the young men came out with their hearts full of hope, and Joseph silent and gathered with them. The temple was closed and the High Priest postponed the gathering until tomorrow. The new sun had barely risen, and already the youth were impatient to

know their fate.

When the appointed time arrived, the sacred doors were opened and the High Priest appeared. Everyone crowded in to see the outcome. No rod had flowered.

The High Priest prostrated himself with his face to the ground before the Lord, and questioned him about his will, and whether because of his lack of faith, or because he had not understood his voice, the promised sign had not appeared in the branches. And God answered that the promised sign had not come to pass because among those tender rods the branch of the one wanted from Heaven was missing; let him seek and see the sign fulfilled. A search was soon made for the person who had removed his branch.

The silence, the chaste blush that flushed Joseph's cheeks, quickly betrayed his secret. Led before the holy Priest, he confessed the truth: but the priest glimpsed the mystery and, taking Joseph aside, questioned him why he had so disobeyed.

Joseph humbly replied that he had long had in mind to keep the danger far away from himself, that he had long been resolved in his heart not to marry any maiden, and that it seemed to him that God himself had comforted him in his holy purpose, and that he himself was too unworthy of so holy a maiden as he knew Mary to be; therefore he was to give himself to another who was holier and richer.

Then the priest began to admire God's holy counsel, and to Joseph he said: Be of good cheer, O son: lay down your branch like the others and wait for the divine judgement. Surely if he elects you, you shall find in Mary so much holiness and perfection above all other maidens that you shall not have to use prayers to persuade her of your purpose. On the contrary, she herself will pray to you for what you want, and will call you brother, guardian, witness, spouse, but never husband.

Joseph, reassured of the Lord's will by the words of the High Priest, laid down his branch with the others and withdrew in holy recollection to pray.

The next day the gathering around the High Priest was once again congregated, and behold, on Joseph's branch peeled white, thick flowers with soft, tender leaves.

The High Priest showed everything to the assembled young men, and announced to them that God had chosen for the husband of Mary, daughter of Joachim, Joseph, son of Jacob, both of the house and family of David. At the same time a voice was heard saying: "O my faithful servant Joseph! To you is reserved the honour of marrying Mary, the purest of all creatures; conform to all that she shall say to you.

Joseph and Mary, recognising the voice of the Holy Spirit, accepted this

decision and consented to a marriage that was not to harm their virginity.

According to St Jerome, the marriage was celebrated on the same day with the greatest simplicity.

A tradition from the History of Carmel tells us that among the youth gathered for that occasion was a handsome and lively young man who ardently aspired to Mary's hand. When he saw Joseph's branch blossom and his hopes vanished, he was astonished and without feeling. But in that turmoil of affection the Holy Spirit descended within him and suddenly changed his heart. He raised his face, shook the useless branch and with unusual fire: "I was not for her", he said. She was not for me. And I will never be of another. I will be God's." He broke the branch and threw it away, saying: Go, and with you every thought of marriage. To Carmel, to Carmel with the sons of Elias. There I will have the peace that by now would be impossible for me in this city. Having said this, he went to Carmel and asked to also be accepted among the sons of the Prophets. He was accepted, made rapid progress there in spirit and virtue, and became a prophet. He is the Agabus who predicted chains and imprisonment for St Paul the Apostle. He founded a shrine to Mary on Mount Carmel. The holy church celebrates his memory in its splendours, and the children of Carmel have him for a brother.

Joseph, holding the humble Virgin by the hand, appeared before the priests accompanied by a few witnesses. The modest craftsman offered Mary a gold ring, adorned with an amethyst, a symbol of virginal fidelity, and at the same time addressed the sacramental words to her: "If you consent to become my bride, accept this pledge." By accepting it, Mary was solemnly bound to Joseph even though the marriage ceremonies had not yet taken place.

This ring offered by Joseph to Mary is still preserved in Italy in the city of Perugia, where, after many vicissitudes and controversies it was finally granted by Pope Innocent VIII in 1486.

Chapter 4. Joseph returns to Nazareth with his bride.

Erant cor unum et anima una. ([They] were of one heart and soul – Acts 4:32)

Having celebrated the marriage, Mary returned to her native Nazareth with seven virgins whom the High Priest had granted her as companions.

She was to await the marriage ceremony in prayer, and to form her modest wedding trousseau. St Joseph remained in Jerusalem to prepare her dwelling and

arrange everything for the marriage celebration.

After a few months, according to the customs of the Jewish nation, the ceremonies that were to follow the wedding were celebrated. Although they were both poor, Joseph and Mary gave as much pomp and circumstance to this celebration as their limited means would allow. Mary then left her home in Nazareth and came to live with her husband in Jerusalem, where the wedding was to take place.

An ancient tradition tells us that Mary arrived in Jerusalem on a cold winter's evening and that the moon was shining its silver rays over the city.

Joseph made his way to meet his young companion at the gates of the holy city, followed by a long procession of kinsmen, each holding a torch. The bridal procession led the couple to Joseph's house, where the wedding feast had been prepared by him.

As they entered the banquet hall and the guests took their assigned places at the table, the patriarch approached the holy Virgin, "You shall be like my mother," he said to her, "and I will respect you as the very altar of the living God. Henceforth, says a learned writer, they were no more than brother and sister in marriage in the eyes of religious law, though their union was integrally preserved. Joseph did not stay long in Jerusalem after the wedding ceremonies; the holy couple left the holy city to go to Nazareth to the modest house that Mary had inherited from her parents.

Nazareth, whose Hebrew name means flower of the fields, is a beautiful little town, picturesquely perched on the slope of a hill at the end of the valley of Esdrelon [Jezreel]. It was therefore in this pleasant town that Joseph and Mary came to make their home.

The Virgin's house consisted of two main rooms, one of which served as Joseph's workshop, and the other was for Mary. The workshop, where Joseph worked, consisted of a low room ten or twelve feet wide over as many feet long. There one could see the tools necessary for his profession neatly distributed. As for the wood he needed, one part remained in the workshop and the other outside, for when the climate allowed the holy workman to work outdoors for a large part of the year.

At the front of the house, in accordance with Eastern custom, was a stone bench shaded by palm mats, where the traveller could rest his weary limbs and shelter from the scorching rays of the sun.

The life these privileged spouses led was very simple. Mary took care of the cleanliness of her poor abode, worked her own clothes with her own hands, and laundered those of her husband. As for Joseph, he now made a table for the needs

of the house, or wagons, or yokes for the neighbours from whom he had been commissioned; now with his still vigorous arm he went up the mountain to cut down the tall sycamores and the black terebinths that were to be used for the construction of the huts that he erected in the valley.

His young and virtuous companion certainly did not keep him waiting, indeed she herself wiped his sweat-drenched brow, presented him with the lukewarm water she had heated to wash his feet, and served him the frugal supper that was to restore his strength. This consisted mostly of small barley loaves, dairy products, fruit and some pulses. Then, when the night was over, a restful sleep prepared our holy Patriarch to resume his daily occupations tomorrow. This life, hard-working and sweet at the same time, had lasted for about two months, when the hour marked out by Providence for the incarnation of the divine Word arrived.

Chapter 5. The Annunciation of Mary

Ecce ancilla Domini; fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum. (Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word. – Lk. 1:38)

One day Joseph had gone to work in a neighbouring village. Mary was alone in the house and according to her custom was praying while busy spinning linen. Suddenly an angel of the Lord, the Archangel Gabriel, came down into the poor house all resplendent with the rays of heavenly glory, and greeted the humble Virgin, saying to her: “Hail, full of grace; the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women.Such unexpected praise produced a deep disturbance in Mary’s soul. To reassure her, the Angel said: Fear not, Mary; for you have found favour in the sight of God. Behold, you shall conceive and bear a son, whose name shall be Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord shall give him the throne of David his father; he shall reign eternally in the house of Jacob, and his kingdom shall have no end.” “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” asked the humble Virgin.

She could not reconcile her promise of virginity with the title of Mother of God. But the Angel answered her: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; ttherefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of Go.” And to give proof of God’s omnipotence, the Archangel Gabriel added: “And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing is impossible to God.”

At these divine words the humble Mary could find nothing more to say:

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord,”she answered the Angel, “let it be with me according to your word.” The Angel disappeared; the mystery of mysteries was accomplished. The Word of God had become incarnate for the salvation of mankind.

Towards evening, when Joseph returned at the usual hour, having finished his work, Mary told him nothing of the miracle which had taken place for her.

She contented herself with telling him about the pregnancy of her cousin Elizabeth: and since she wished to visit her, as a submissive wife she asked Joseph’s permission to undertake the journey, which was indeed long and tiring. He had nothing to refuse her and she left in the company of some relatives. It is to be believed that Joseph could not accompany her to her cousin’s house, because he had his work in Nazareth.

Chapter 6. Joseph’s uneasiness – He is reassured by an Angel.

Ioseph, fili David, noli timere accipere Mariam coniugem tuam, quod enim in ea natum est, de Spiritu Sancto est. (Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. – Mt. 1:20)

St Elizabeth lived in the mountains of Judea, in a small town called Hebron, seventy miles [113 km] from Nazareth. We will not keep track of Mary on her journey; it is enough for us to know that Mary stayed about three months with her cousin.

But Mary’s return prepared Joseph for a trial that was to be the prelude to many others. He did not delay in realising that Mary was in an interesting state and was therefore tormented by mortal anxieties. The law authorised him to accuse his bride before the priests and cover her with eternal dishonour; but such a step was repugnant to the goodness of his heart, and to the high esteem in which he had hitherto held Mary. In this uncertainty, he resolved to abandon her and to go back where he came from in order to bring all the dfficulty of such a separation solely upon himself. Indeed, he had already made his preparations for departure, when an angel descended from Heaven to reassure him:

“Joseph, son of David,” the heavenly messenger said to him, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Henceforth Joseph, completely reassured, had the highest veneration for his chaste bride; he saw in her the living tabernacle of the Most High, and his cares were but more tender and more respectful.

Chapter 7. Edict of Caesar Augustus. – The census. – Journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem.

Tamquam aurum in fornace probavit electos Dominus. (like gold in the furnace he tried them. – Wis. 3:6.)

The time was approaching when the Messiah promised to the nations was finally to appear in the world. The Roman Empire had then reached the height of its greatness.

By seizing supreme power, Caesar Augustus brought about the unity which, according to the designs of Providence, was to serve the propagation of the Gospel. Under his reign all wars had ceased, and the Temple of Janus was closed (it was customary in Rome at that time to keep the Temple of Janus open during war and to close it in times of peace). In his pride, the Roman Emperor wanted to know the number of his subjects, and for this purpose he ordered a general census throughout the empire.

Each citizen had to have himself and his entire family enrolled in his native city. Joseph therefore had to leave his poor house to obey the emperor's orders; and as he was of the line of David, and this illustrious family came from Bethlehem, he had to go there to be enrolled.

It was a sad and foggy morning in December, the year 752 in the year of Rome, when Joseph and Mary left their poor home in Nazareth to go to Bethlehem where the orders of the sovereign called them. Their preparations for departure were not long. Joseph put some clothes in a sack, prepared the quiet and tame horse which was to carry Mary, who was already in the ninth month of her pregnancy, and wrapped himself in his large cloak. Then the two holy travellers left Nazareth accompanied by the felicitations of their relatives and friends. The holy patriarch, having his travelling staff in one hand, held the bridle of the mare on which his wife was sitting with the other.

After four or five days of walking they saw Bethlehem from afar. Day was beginning to break when they entered the town. Mary's mount was tired; Mary, moreover, was in great need of rest: so Joseph set out quickly in search of lodging. He went through all the inns of Bethlehem, but in vain. The general census had attracted an extraordinary crowd there; and all the inns were overflowing with strangers. In vain did Joseph go from door to door asking for shelter for his exhausted bride, and the doors remained closed.

Chapter 8 Mary and Joseph take refuge in a poor cave. – Birth of the

Saviour of the world. – Jesus adored by the shepherds.
Et Verbum caro factum est. (And the Word became flesh. – Jn. 1:14.)

Somewhat discouraged by the lack of any hospitality, Joseph and Mary left Bethlehem hoping to find the asylum which the city had refused them in the countryside. They came to an abandoned cave which offered shelter to shepherds and their herds at night and on days of bad weather. A little straw lay on the ground, and a hollow in the rock also served as a bench for resting and a manger for the animals. The two travellers entered the cave in order to rest from the fatigues of the journey, and to warm their limbs that were parched from the cold of winter. In this miserable shelter, far from the gaze of men, Mary gave the Messiah promised to our first fathers to the world. It was midnight, Joseph adored the divine child, wrapped him in cloths, and placed him in the manger. He was the first of men to whom fell the incomparable honour of offering homage to God who had descended to earth to redeem the sins of mankind.

Some shepherds were watching their flocks in the nearby countryside. An angel of the Lord appeared and announced to them the good news of the Saviour's birth. At the same time heavenly choirs were heard repeating, "Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to men of good will." These simple men did not hesitate to follow the voice of the angel, "Let us go," they said to themselves, "to Bethlehem and see what has happened." And without further ado they entered the cave and adored the divine child.

(continued)