

Life of Saint Joseph, spouse of Mary Most Holy, earthly father of Jesus Christ (2/3)

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Chapter 9. The Circumcision.

Et vocavit nomen eius Iesum. (And he named him Jesus. – Mt 1:25)

On the eighth day after the birth the children of Israel were to be circumcised by the express commandment of God given to Abraham, that there might be a sign to remind the people of the covenant which God had sworn with them.

Mary and Joseph understood very well that such a sign was not at all necessary for Jesus. This painful service was a punishment that suited sinners, and its purpose was to wipe out original sin. Now, Jesus being the saint par excellence, the source of all holiness did not carry with him any sin that needed remission. Besides, he had come into the world by miraculous conception, and need not submit to any of the laws that pertained to men. Yet Mary and Joseph, knowing that Jesus had not come to break the law, but to fulfil it; that he had come to give men the example of perfect obedience, willing to suffer all that the glory of the Heavenly Father and the health of mankind would require of him, did not shrink from performing the painful ceremony on the Divine Child.

Joseph the holy Patriarch was the minister and priest of that sacred rite. Here he was, with eyes soft with tears, saying to Mary: "Mary, now is the time that we are about to perform the sign of our father Abraham on this blessed son of yours. My heart sinks, thinking about it. Placing the knife on this spotless flesh! Drawing the first blood of this lamb of God; oh, if you would open your mouth, O my child, and tell me that you do not want the wound, oh how I

would throw this knife away from me, and I would rejoice that you did not want it! But I see that you ask me for this sacrifice; that you want to suffer. Yes, sweetest child, we shall suffer: you in your most unworldly flesh; Mary and I in our hearts."

Joseph meanwhile had performed the sorrowful office by offering to God that first blood in atonement for the sins of men. Then with Mary, tearful and full of anguish at the affliction of her Son, he had said: "you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins: *vocabis nomen eius Iesum; ipse enim salvum faciet populum suum a peccatis eorum.*" – Mt. 1:25. O most holy name! O name above every name! How fitting that your name should be pronounced at this time, for the first time! God willed that the child should be called Jesus, then, when he began to shed blood, for if he was and would be Saviour, it was precisely by virtue and because of his blood, whereby he entered into the holy of holies once, and by the sacrifice of his whole self consummated the Redemption of Israel and of the whole world.

Joseph was the great and noble minister of the Circumcision whereby the Son of God was given his own name. Joseph received the report of it from the angel, Joseph pronounced it first among men, and when he pronounced it, he caused all the angels to bow down, and the demons to be seized with extraordinary fright, even without understanding why, to fall down worshipping and hide in the depths of hell. The great dignity of Joseph! The great obligation of reverence we owe him, for he was the first to have called the Son of God a Redeemer, and he was the first to have cooperated with the holy ministry of circumcision in making him our Redeemer.

Chapter 10. Jesus adored by the Magi. The Purification.

Reges Tharsis et insulae munera offerent, Reges Arabum et Saba dona adducent. (May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. – Ps. 71:10)

The God who had come down to earth to make the house of Israel and the dispersed peoples one family wanted the representatives of one people and the other around his cradle. The simple and the humble had preference in being around Jesus: the great ones moreover and the wise of the earth were not to be excluded. After the nearby shepherds, Jesus from the silence of his cave in Bethlehem moved a star from Heaven to bring back distant worshippers.

A tradition, popular throughout the East and recorded in the Bible, announced that a child would be born in the West who would change the face of the world, and that a new star should at the same time appear and mark this event. Now at the time of the Saviour's birth there were certain princes in the far East commonly called the three Magi, endowed with extraordinary knowledge.

Deeply versed in the astronomical sciences, these three Magi anxiously awaited the appearance of the new star that was to announce to them the birth of the wondrous child.

One night while they were observing the heavens attentively, a star of unusual magnitude seemed to detach itself from the celestial vault, as if it wanted to descend above the earth.

Recognising in this sign that the moment had come, they hastily departed, and guided again by the star they reached Jerusalem. The fame of their arrival and above all the cause which led them, troubled the heart of the envious Herod. This cruel prince had the Magi come to him and he said to them: "Get exact information about this child, and as soon as you have found him, return to warn me so that I may also go and worship him." The doctors of the law having indicated that the Christ was to be born in Bethlehem, the Magi went out from Jerusalem still preceded by the mysterious star. It was not long before they reached Bethlehem; the star stopped above the cave where the Messiah stood. The Magi entered, prostrated themselves at the feet of the child and adored him.

Then opening the caskets of precious wood that they had brought with them, they offered him gold as if to

acknowledge him as king, frankincense as God, and myrrh as a mortal man.

Warned then by an angel of Herod's true designs, without passing through Jerusalem, they returned directly to their countries.

The fortieth day after the birth of the Holy Child was approaching: the law of Moses prescribed that every first-born child should be brought to the Temple to be offered to God and thus consecrated, and the mother to be purified. Joseph in the company of Jesus and Mary went to Jerusalem to perform the prescribed ceremony. He offered two turtle doves as a sacrifice and paid five shekels of silver. Then having had their son inscribed on the tables of the census and having paid the tribute, the holy couple returned to Galilee, to Nazareth their city.

Chapter 11. The sad annunciation. – The Slaughter of the Innocents. – The holy family leaves for Egypt.

Surge, accipe puerum et matrem eius et fuge in Aegyptum et esto ibi usque dum dicam tibi. (An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you. – Mt. 2:13)

Vox in excelso audita est lamentationis, luctus, et fletus Rachel plorantis filios suos, et nolentis consolari super eis quia non sunt. (A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more. – Jer. 31:15)

The tranquillity of the holy family was not to last long. As soon as Joseph had returned to the poor house in Nazareth, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said to him: "Arise, take the child and his mother away from here, and flee into Egypt, and stay there until I bid you return. For Herod will seek the child to put him to death."

And this was all too true. Cruel Herod, deceived

by the Magi and furious at having missed such a good opportunity to get rid of the one whom he regarded as a competitor to the throne, had conceived the infernal design of having all male children under two years of age slaughtered. This abominable order was executed.

A broad river of blood ran through Galilee. Then what Jeremiah had foretold came true: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more." These poor innocents, cruelly slain, were the first martyrs of the divinity of Jesus Christ.

Joseph had recognised the voice of the Angel; nor did he allow himself any reflection on the hasty departure he had to decide on or on the difficulties of so long and so dangerous a journey. He must have regretted leaving his poor home to go across the deserts to seek asylum in a country he did not know. Without even waiting for tomorrow, the moment the angel disappeared he got up and ran to wake Mary. Mary hastily prepared some clothes and provisions for them to take with them. Joseph meanwhile prepared the mare, and they departed without regret from their city to obey God's command. Here, then, is a poor old man, who renders vain the horrible plots of the tyrant of Galilee; it is to him that God entrusts the custody of Jesus and Mary.

Chapter 12. Disastrous journey – A tradition.

Si persequentur vos in civitate ista, fugite in aliam. (When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next. – Mt. 10:23.)

Two roads presented themselves to the traveller who wanted to go to Egypt by land. One passed through deserts populated by ferocious beasts, and the paths were rough, long, and unfrequented. The other went through a little-visited country, but the inhabitants of the district were very hostile to the Jews. Joseph, who had men to fear above all in this precipitate flight, chose the first of these two roads as the

more hidden.

Having set out from Nazareth in the thick of night, the cautious travellers, whose itinerary required them to pass close to Jerusalem, beat the saddest and most tortuous paths for some time. When it was necessary to cross some great road, Joseph, leaving Jesus and his Mother in the shelter of a rock, would scout the way to make sure that the exit was not guarded by Herod's soldiers. Reassured by this precaution, he returned to get his precious treasure, and the holy family continued its journey among ravines and hills. From time to time, they would make a brief stop at the edge of a clear stream, and after a frugal meal they would take a little rest from the exertions of the journey. When evening came, it was time to resign oneself to sleeping under the open sky. Joseph stripped off his cloak and covered Jesus and Mary with it to preserve them from the humidity of the night. Then tomorrow, at daybreak, the arduous journey would begin again. The holy travellers, having passed through the small town of Anata, headed on past Ramla to descend to the plains of Syria, where they were now to be free from the snares of their fierce persecutors. Unusually for them they had continued walking despite the fact that it was already nightfall in order to get to safety sooner. Joseph went ahead feeling the way before them. Mary, trembling from this nocturnal rush, shifted her restless gaze into the depths of the valleys and the crevices in the rocks. Suddenly, at a turn, a swarm of armed men appeared to intercept their path. It was a band of brigands who ravaged the district, and whose frightening reputation spread far and wide. Joseph had stopped Mary's mount, and prayed to the Lord in silence; for any resistance was impossible. At most, one could hope to save one's life. The leader of the brigands broke away from his companions and advanced towards Joseph to see who he was dealing with. The sight of this old man without weapons of this little child sleeping on his mother's breast, touched the bandit's bloodthirsty heart. Far from wishing them any harm, he extended his hand to Joseph, offering him and his family

hospitality. This leader was called Dismus. Tradition tells us that thirty years later he was taken by soldiers and condemned to be crucified. He was put on the cross on Calvary at the side of Jesus, and is the same one we know under the name of the good thief.

Chapter 13. Arrival in Egypt – Prodigies occurring on their entry into this land – Village of Matari – Dwelling of the Holy Family.

Ecce ascendet Dominus super nubem levem et commovebuntur simulacra Aegypti. (See, the Lord is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt; the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them – Is. 19:1)

As soon as day appeared, the fugitives, thanking the brigands who had become their hosts, resumed their dangerous journey. It is said that Mary on setting out said to the leader of those bandits: "What you have done for this child, you will one day be amply rewarded for." After passing through Bethlehem and Gaza, Joseph and Mary descended into Syria and having met a caravan leaving for Egypt they joined it. From this moment until the end of their journey they saw nothing ahead of them but an immense desert of sand, whose aridity was only interrupted at rare intervals by a few oases, that is, a few stretches of fertile and verdant land. Their labours were redoubled during this race across these sun-baked plains. Food was scarce, and water was often lacking. How many nights did Joseph, who was old and poor, find himself pushed back, when he tried to approach the spring at which the caravan had stopped to quench its thirst!

Finally, after two months of a very painful journey, the travellers entered Egypt. According to Sozomenus, from the moment the Holy Family touched this ancient land, the trees lowered their branches to worship the Son of God; the ferocious beasts flocked there, forgetting their instincts; and the birds sang in chorus the praises of the Messiah.

Indeed, if we believe what we are told by trustworthy authors, all the idols of the province, recognising the victor over Paganism, fell to pieces. Thus were the words of the prophet Isaiah literally fulfilled when he said, "Behold, the Lord shall ascend upon a cloud and shall enter into Egypt, and in his presence shall the idols of Egypt be broken."

Joseph and Mary, eager to reach the end of their journey soon, did no more than pass through Heliopolis, consecrated to the worship of the sun, on their way to Matari where they intended to rest from their labours.

Matari is a beautiful village shaded by sycamores, about two leagues from Cairo, the capital of Egypt. There Joseph intended to make his home. But this was not yet the end of his troubles. He needed to seek accommodation. The Egyptians were not at all hospitable; so the holy family was forced to take shelter for a few days in the trunk of a large old tree. Finally, after a long search, Joseph found a modest and small room in which he placed Jesus and Mary.

This house, which can still be seen in Egypt, was a kind of cave, twenty feet long and over fifteen feet wide. There were no windows either; light had to come from the entrance. The walls were of a kind of black and filthy clay, whose antiquity bore the imprint of misery To the right was a small cistern from which Joseph drew water for the family's service.

Chapter 14. Sorrows. – Consolation and end of exile.

Cum ipso sum in tribulatione. (I will be with them in trouble. – Ps. 90:15)

Having just entered this new dwelling, Joseph resumed his ordinary work. He began to furnish his house; a small table, a few chairs, a bench, all the work of his hands. Then he went from door to door looking for work to earn a living for his small family. He undoubtedly experienced many rejections and endured much humiliating scorn! He was poor and unknown, and this was enough for his work to be refused. In

turn, Mary, while she had a thousand cares for her Son, courageously gave herself to work, busy for part of the night to make up for her husband's small and insufficient earnings. Yet in the midst of his sorrows how much consolation for Joseph! It was for Jesus that he worked, and the bread that the divine child ate was what he had bought with the sweat of his brow. And then when he returned in the evening exhausted and oppressed by the heat, Jesus smiled at his arrival, and caressed him with his small hands. Often at the cost of privations which he imposed on himself, Joseph was able to obtain some savings, what joy he then felt at being able to use them to improve the situation of the divine child! Some dates, some toys suitable for his age, that the pious carpenter brought to the Saviour of men. Oh how beautiful then were the good old man's emotions as he contemplated the radiant face of Jesus! When Saturday came, the day of rest and consecrated to the Lord, Joseph took the child by the hand and guided his first steps with a truly paternal solicitude.

Meanwhile the tyrant who reigned over Israel died. God, whose almighty arm always punishes the guilty, had sent him a cruel illness, which quickly led him to the grave. Betrayed by his own son, eaten alive by worms, Herod had died, bringing with him the hatred of the Jews, and the curse of posterity.

Chapter 15. The new annunciation. – Return to Judea. – A tradition reported by St Bonaventure.

Ex Aegypto vocavi filium meum. (Out of Egypt I called my son. – Hos. 11:1)

Joseph had been in Egypt for seven years when the Angel of the Lord, the ordinary messenger of Heaven's will, appeared to him again during his sleep and said to him: "Arise, take away the child and his mother from here, and return to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child to put him to death are no more." Ever ready for God's voice, Joseph sold his house and his furniture, and ordered

everything for departure. In vain did the Egyptians, enraptured by Joseph's goodness and Mary's gentleness, make earnest petitions to retain him. In vain did they promise him an abundance of everything necessary for life, for Joseph was adamant. The memories of his childhood, the friends he had in Judea, the pure atmosphere of his homeland, spoke much more to his heart than the beauty of Egypt. Besides, God had spoken, and nothing else was needed to decide Joseph to return to the land of his ancestors.

Some historians are of the opinion that the Holy Family made part of the journey by sea, because it took less time, and they had a great desire to see their homeland again soon. As soon as they landed in Ascalonia, Joseph heard that Archelaus had succeeded his father Herod on the throne. This was a new source of anxiety for Joseph. The angel had not told him in which part of Judea he should settle. Should he do this in Jerusalem, or in Galilee, or in Samaria? Joseph, filled with anxiety, prayed to the Lord to send him his heavenly messenger during the night. The angel ordered him to flee from Archelaus and retreat to Galilee. Joseph then had no more to fear, and quietly took the road to Nazareth, which he had abandoned seven years before.

Our devoted readers will not mind hearing from the seraphic Doctor St Bonaventure on this point of history: "They were in the act of departing: and Joseph went first with the men, and his mother came with the women (who had come as friends of the holy family to accompany them a little way). And when they were out of the door, Joseph held the men back, and would let them accompany him no more. Then one of the good men, having compassion on them, called the Child and gave him some money for expenses. The Child was ashamed to receive them; but, for the sake of poverty, he put forth his hand and received the money shamefully and thanked him. And so did more people. The honourable women called him again and did the same; his mother was no less ashamed than the child, but nevertheless humbly thanked them."

Having taken leave of that fiendly company and

renewed their thanks and greetings, the holy family turned their steps towards Judea.

Chapter 16 Arrival of Joseph in Nazareth. – Domestic life with Jesus and Mary.

Constituit eum dominum domus suae. (He made him lord of his house. – Ps. 105:21)

The days of exile were finally over. Joseph could once again see his longed-for native land, which brought back to him the fondest memories. One would have to love one's country as the Jews loved it then to understand the sweet impressions that filled Joseph's soul when the sight of Nazareth appeared from afar. The humble Patriarch quickened the pace of Mary's mount, and they soon arrived in the narrow streets of their dear city.

The Nazarenes, who were unaware of the cause of the pious worker's departure, saw his return with joy. The heads of the family came to welcome Joseph, and to shake the hand of the old man, whose had gone far from his homeland. The daughters greeted the humble Virgin, whose grace was further increased by the care with which she surrounded her divine child. The beloved Jesus saw the boys of his own age flocking to him, and, for the first time, he heard the language of his ancestors instead of the bitter language of exile.

But time and neglect had reduced Joseph's poor dwelling to a bad state. Wild grass had grown over the walls, and moths had taken possession of the holy family's old furniture.

Some of the land surrounding the house was sold, and with its price the most necessary household goods were bought. The couple's meagre resources were employed in the most essential purchases. Joseph was left with nothing but his workshop and hands. But the esteem that everyone felt for the holy man, the confidence that people had in his good faith as well as in his ability, meant that little by little the work and the patrons returned to him; and the courageous carpenter

soon resumed his usual work. He had grown old in his labours, but his arms were still strong, and his ardour further increased after he had been charged with feeding the Saviour of mankind.

Jesus was growing in age and wisdom. In the same way that Joseph had guided his first steps when he was still a little child, he also gave Jesus his first knowledge of work. He held his little hand and directed it in teaching him to draw lines, and to handle the plane. He taught Jesus the difficulties and the practice of the trade. And the Creator of the world allowed himself to be guided by his faithful servant whom he had chosen for a father!

Joseph, who was regular in attending worship in the holy temple, as he was diligent in the duties of his work, strictly observed the law of Moses and the religion of his ancestors. So never would he be seen working on a public holiday, he had understood how one day per week is not too many to pray to the Lord and thank him for his favours. Every year on the three great Jewish feasts, the feasts of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, he went to the Temple in Jerusalem in the company of Mary. Ordinarily he left Jesus in Nazareth, who would have been excessively tired from the long journey; and he always used to pray to one of his neighbours to take charge of the child in the absence of his parents.

Chapter 17. Jesus goes with Mary his mother and St Joseph to celebrate Easter in Jerusalem. – He is lost and found after three days.

Fili, quid fecisti nobis sic? Ecce pater tuus et ego dolentes quaerebamus te. Quid est quod me quaerebatis? Nesciebatis quia in his quae Patris mei sunt oportet me esse? (Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety; [and he said to them]: Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' – Lk. 2:48-49)

When Jesus had reached the age of twelve, and the

Passover feast was approaching, Joseph and Mary judged him strong enough to endure the journey, and took him with them to Jerusalem. They stayed about seven days in the holy city to celebrate the Passover and perform the sacrifices commanded by the law.

When the Passover feasts were over, they took the road back to Nazareth in the midst of their relatives and friends. There were many who made up the caravan. In the simplicity of their customs, the families of the same town or village returned to their homes in joyful brigades, in which the old men talked earnestly with the old men, the women with the women, while the boys ran and played together on their way. So Joseph, not seeing Jesus near him, believed as was natural, that he was with his mother or with the boys of his own age. Mary also walked among her companions, equally convinced that the child was following the others. When evening came, the caravan stopped in the small town of Machmas to spend the night. Joseph came to find Mary; but what surprise and grief it was when they asked each other where Jesus was? Neither one nor the other had seen him after leaving the Temple; the boys for their part could give no news of him. He was not with them.

Immediately Joseph and Mary, in spite of their weariness, set out again for Jerusalem. Pale and restless they retraced the road they had already travelled that same day. The surroundings echoed with their cries of mourning; Joseph called out for Jesus, but Jesus did not answer. At daybreak they arrived in Jerusalem, where, the Gospel says, they spent three whole days searching for their beloved son. How much it pained Joseph's heart! And how much he had to reproach himself for one moment of distraction! Finally, towards the end of the third day these desolate parents entered the Temple, rather to invoke light from on high than with the hope of finding Jesus there. But what was their surprise and admiration at seeing the divine child in the midst of the doctors marvelling at the wisdom of his discourses, the questions and answers he gave them! Mary, full of joy because she had found her son, could

not, however, refrain from expressing to him the disquiet that had afflicted her: "My son," she said to him, "why have you done this to us? It is three days we have been in sorrow looking for you" – Jesus answered, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I am doing my father's business?" The Gospel adds that Joseph and Mary did not immediately understand this answer. Fortunate to have found Jesus, they quietly returned to their little home in Nazareth.

Chapter 18. Continuation of the domestic life of the holy family.

Et erat subditus illis. (And Jesus was obedient to them. – Lk. 2:51)

The holy Gospel, after recounting the main features of Jesus' life up to the age of twelve, at this point concludes the whole of Jesus' private life up to the age of thirty in these brief words: "Jesus was obedient to Mary and Joseph, *et erat subditus illis.*" These words, while they conceal the glory of Jesus from our eyes, reveal the greatness of Joseph in a magnificent aspect. If the educator of a prince has a dignified and honourable position in the State, what must be the dignity of Joseph while he was entrusted with the education of the Son of God! Jesus, whose strength had grown with the years, became Joseph's pupil. He followed him in his working days, and under his direction learned the carpenter's trade. St Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, wrote about the year 250 of the Christian era that ploughs made by the Saviour's hand were still kept with veneration. It was undoubtedly Joseph who had provided the model and who had directed the hand of the Creator of all things in his workshop.

Jesus wanted to give men the example of obedience even in the smallest circumstances of life. Thus, a well can still be seen near Nazareth, where Joseph sent the divine child to draw water for the needs of the family.

We lack details about these laborious years that Joseph spent in Nazareth with Jesus and Mary. What we can say

without fear of misleading ourselves is that Joseph worked tirelessly to earn his bread. The only distraction he allowed himself was to converse well and often with the Saviour, whose words remained deeply engraved in his heart.

In the eyes of men, Jesus passed as Joseph's son. And he, whose humility was as great as his obedience, kept within himself the mystery he was charged to protect with his presence. "Joseph," says Bossuet, "saw Jesus and kept silent; he enjoyed him and did not speak of him; he was content with God alone without sharing his glory with men. He fulfilled his vocation, for as the apostles were ministers of the known Jesus Christ, Joseph was the minister and companion of his hidden life."

Chapter 19. Last days of St Joseph. His precious agony.

O nimis felix, nimis o beatus Cuius extremam vigiles ad horam Christus et Virgo simul astiterunt Ore sereno! (O blessed or happy pious soul, that of your exile in the last moment, you enjoyed at the side of Jesus and Mary the beautiful semblance. – The Holy Church in the office of St Joseph).

Joseph was reaching his eightieth year, and it would not be long before Jesus left home to receive baptism from John the Baptist, when God called his faithful servant to himself. Labours and travails of all kinds had worn down Joseph's sturdy frame of mind, and he himself felt that his end was near. After all, his mission on earth was finished; and it was right that he should at last receive the reward his virtues deserved.

By a very special favour an angel came to warn him of his approaching death. He was ready to appear before God. His whole life had been a series of acts of obedience to the divine will and he cared little for life, for it was a matter of obeying God who was calling him to the blessed life. According to the unanimous testimony of tradition, Joseph did not die in the acute suffering of illness. He died gently, like a flame no longer fed with fuel.

Lying on his deathbed, with Jesus and Mary at his side, Joseph was rapt in ecstasy for twenty-four hours. His eyes then saw clearly the truths that his faith had hitherto believed without understanding. He penetrated the mystery of God made man and the greatness of the mission that God had entrusted to him, a poor mortal. He witnessed in spirit the sorrows of the Saviour's passion. When he awoke, his face was illuminated and as if transfigured by an all heavenly beauty. A delicious perfume filled the room in which he lay and also spread outside, thus announcing to the holy man's neighbours that his pure and beautiful soul was about to pass into a better world.

In a family of poor and simple souls who love each other with that pure and warm love that is hardly to be found in the bosom of greatness and abundance, when these people enjoyed the years of pilgrimage in holy union, and who, just as they shared the domestic joys, so they shared the sorrows sanctified by religious comfort, if it should happen that this beautiful peace should be darkened by the separation of a dear member, oh how anguished the heart would then feel at parting!

Jesus had a father in heaven as God, who communicated his divine substance and nature to him from all eternity, making the celestial glory of his person on earth everlasting (though veiled by mortal remains); Mary had Jesus on earth who filled her heart with paradise. Who, however, would deny that Jesus and Mary, now being near the dying Patriarch and leaving even the tenderness of their hearts at the mercy of nature, did not suffer from having to temporarily part with their faithful companion on earth? Mary could not forget the sacrifices, the pains, the hardships that Joseph had had to suffer for her on the painful journeys to Bethlehem and Egypt. It is true that Joseph, by being continually in her company, was compensated for what he suffered, but if this was an argument of comfort for the one, it was not a reason that dispensed the tender heart of the other from a feeling of gratitude. Joseph had served her not only with all the affection of a husband, but also with all the fidelity of a

servant and the humility of a disciple, venerating in her the Queen of heaven, the Mother of God. Now Mary had certainly not overlooked so many signs of veneration, obedience and esteem, and she could not fail to feel deep and very true gratitude for Joseph.

And Jesus, who in matters of love should certainly not have been inferior to either of them, since he had decreed in his divine Providence that Joseph should be his guardian and protector on earth, since this protection had also had to have cost Joseph so many sufferings and labours, Jesus too must have felt in his most loving heart the sweetest senses of grateful remembrance. As he contemplated those meagre arms arranged in a cross on his weary breast, he remembered how many times they had opened to hold him to Joseph's breast when he was wailing in Bethlehem, how they had toiled to carry him to Egypt, how they had worn themselves out at work to keep him the bread of life. How often those dear lips had reverently drawn near to print loving kisses on him or to warm his parched limbs in the winter; and those eyes, which were then about to close in the light of day, how often had they opened to weeping, honouring his and Mary's suffering when she had to contemplate Him fleeing into Egypt, but especially when for three days she mourned Him lost in Jerusalem. These signs of unwavering love were certainly not forgotten by Jesus in those last moments of Joseph's life. So I imagine that Mary and Jesus, in the spreading of paradise in those last hours of Joseph's life, would also have honoured, as he did on the tomb of his friend Lazarus, with the outpouring of the purest tears, that last solemn farewell. Oh yes, Joseph had paradise before his eyes! He turned his gaze to one side and saw Mary's appearance, and held her most holy hands in his, and received her last care, and heard her words of consolation. He turned his eyes to the other side and met the majestic and almighty gaze of Jesus, and felt his divine hands holding his head, and wiping away his sweat, and gathering comforts, thanksgivings, blessings and promises from his lips. And it seems to me that Mary was saying, "Joseph, you are leaving us; you have

finished the pilgrimage of exile, you will precede me in your peace, descending first into the bosom of our father Abraham; oh Joseph, how grateful I am for the sweet company you have kept me, the good example you have given me, the care you have taken of me and of my things and the most grievous pains you have suffered on my account! Oh you are leaving me, but you will always live in my memory and in my heart. Be of good cheer, Joseph, *quoniam appropinquat redemptio nostra.*" And it seems to me that Jesus said, "Joseph, you are dying, but I also will die, and if I die you must esteem death and love it as a reward. Joseph, the time of darkness and expectation is brief. Tell it to Abraham and Isaac, who longed to see me and were not worthy; tell it to those who have waited many years for my coming in that darkness, and tell them of the coming deliverance; tell it to Noah, to Joseph, to David, to Judith, to Jeremiah, to Ezekiel, to all those Fathers who must wait three years more, and then the Host and the Sacrifice will be consumed and the iniquity of the world will be wiped out. In the meantime, after this short time you will be revived and glorious and beautiful, and with me, more glorious and more beautiful, you will rise in triumph. Be glad, dear guardian of my life, you were good and generous to me, but no one can be more grateful than I am." The holy Church expresses the loving last cares of Jesus and Mary towards St Joseph in these words: "*Cuius extremas vigiles ad horas Christus et Mater simul astiterunt ore sereno.*" In St Joseph's final hours with a serene countenance, Jesus and Mary assisted with the most loving vigilance.

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