

□ Reading time: 9 min.

*Every year we celebrate the Holy Family of Nazareth on the last Sunday of the year. But we often forget that we celebrate with pomp the poorest and most delicate events of this Family. Obligated to give birth in a cave, persecuted at once, having to emigrate amidst so many dangers to a foreign country to survive, and this with an infant and no substance. But everything was an event of grace, permitted by God the Father, and announced in the Scriptures.*

*Let us read the beautiful story that Don Bosco himself told his boys of his time.*

### **The sad annunciation. - The massacre of the innocents. - The holy family left for Egypt.**

*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. Matt. II, 13.*

*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. c. XXXI, v. 15.*

The tranquillity of the holy family [after the birth of Jesus] was not to be of long duration. 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 thee, and flee into Egypt, and stay there until I bid thee return. For Herod will seek the child to put him to death."

And this was but too true. The cruel Herod, deceived by the Magi and furious at having missed such a good opportunity, in order to get rid of him 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 was heard in Ramah, a voice mixed with tears and lamentations. It is Rachel who weeps for her children and does not wish to be consoled; for 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, to which they had to resolve; 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 Maria. Mary hastily prepared a small amount of 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 the horrible plots of the tyrant of Galilee in vain ; it is to him that God entrusts the care of Jesus and Mary.

### ***Disastrous journey - A tradition.***

*When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next. Matt. X, 23.*

Two roads presented themselves to the traveller who wished to go to Egypt by land. One went through deserts populated by ferocious beasts, and the paths were uncomfortable, long and not very busy. The other went through a little-visited country, but the inhabitants of the district were very hostile to the Jews. Joseph, who especially feared men in this precipitate flight, chose the first of these two roads as the most hidden.

Having set out from Nazareth in the thick of night, the cautious travellers, whose itinerary required them to pass Jerusalem first, 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, between 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 the side of Ramala to descend to the plains of Syria, where they were now to be free from the snares of their fierce persecutors. Against their custom they had continued walking despite the fact that it was already nightfall in order to get to safety sooner. Joseph was almost touching the ground ahead of the others. Mary, all trembling from this nocturnal run, was casting her restless glances into the depths of the valleys and the crevices in the rocks. Suddenly, a swarm of armed men appeared to intercept their path. It was a band of scoundrels, ravaging the district, whose frightful fame stretched far into the distance. Joseph had arrested 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 with whom he had to deal. The sight of this old man without arms, 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 Dismas. 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.

### **Arrival in Egypt - Prodiges that occurred on their entry into this land - Village of Matarie - Dwelling of the Holy Family.**

*Behold, the Lord will ascend on a swift cloud and will enter Egypt, and in his presence the idols of Egypt will tremble. Is. XIX, 1.*

As soon as day appeared, the fugitives, thanking the brigands who had become their hosts, resumed their journey full of dangers. It is said that Mary on setting out said these words 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 of Paganism, fell to pieces. Thus were the words of the prophet Isaiah literally fulfilled when he said, "Behold, the Lord will ascend on a swift cloud and will enter Egypt, and in his presence the idols of Egypt will tremble."

Joseph and Mary, desirous of reaching the end of their journey soon, did but pass through Heliopolis, consecrated to the worship of the sun, to go 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 big old tree. Finally, after a long search, Joseph found a modest 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 over fifteen feet wide. There were no windows either; light had to penetrate through the door. The walls were of a kind of black and filthy clay, the oldness of which bore the imprint of misery. To the right was a small cistern, from which Joseph drew water for the family's service.

### **Sorrows. - Consolation and end of exile.**

*I will be with them in trouble. Ps. XC. 15.*

As soon as he had 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 many humiliating scorns! 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, occupying in it a 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 he who had bought it 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 with the price 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 sweeten the condition of the divine child! Now it was some dates, now some toys suitable for his age, that the pious carpenter brought to the Saviour of men. Oh how sweet 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 all-possessing 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.

***The new annunciation. - Return to Judea. - A tradition reported by St Bonaventure.***

*Out of Egypt I called my son.* Hosea XI, 1.

For seven years Joseph had been in Egypt, when the Angel of the Lord, the ordinary messenger of Heaven's will, appeared to him again in his sleep and said to him: "Arise, take away the child and his mother from thee, and return to the land of Israel; for those who sought the child to bring 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, 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 them 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.

Let not our devoted readers be sorry to hear 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 took the men back, and would not let them accompany him any more. Then some of those good men, having compassion on the poverty of these men, called the Child and gave him some money for expenses. The Child was ashamed to receive them; but, for the sake of poverty, he set forth his hand and received the money shamefully and thanked him. And so did more people. Those honourable matrons called him again and did the same; the mother was no less ashamed than the child, but nevertheless humbly thanked them."

Having taken leave of that warm company and renewed their thanks and greetings, the holy family turned their steps towards Judea.