

# 73. DEVOTION TO SAINT JOSEPH

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*In his last will and testament, De La Salle recommended the Brothers of the Christian Schools to have "a special devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin and St Joseph, the patron and protector of their society". This final recommendation is the last of a series of invitations and reminders, frequently repeated over the years, as can be seen from the Founder's writings.*

*During his lifetime, De La Salle showed a great devotion to St Joseph. Shortly after founding the Institute, he made St Joseph its patron. He recommended his feast to be celebrated solemnly and he introduced the recitation of his litanies.*

*De La Salle's decision was endorsed by the Bull of Approbation of the new Institute, which says "founded under the protection of the Most Holy Child Jesus and the patronage of St Joseph, the Brothers' chief concern must be to instruct children, especially the poor".*

## 1. THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Devotion to St Joseph in the Church goes back beyond the 17th century. Its proponents were numerous and varied. Of these we can mention saints such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Bridget, Bernadine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, Peter of Alcantara and Francis de Sales; and religious congregations such as the Reformed Carmelites, the Dominicans and the Jesuits. In the 15th century, John of Gerson asked the Holy See to extend to the whole Church a devotion that was restricted to certain places; this was done by Pope Sixtus IV. In 1621, Pope Gregory XV made the feast of St Joseph a holyday of obligation, and Clement IX, during the lifetime of the Founder, made it a feast double of the first class.

In 1649, in Paris, a well-known priest, Adrien Bourdoise, founded an "association for prayers to St Joseph to obtain from God, by his intercession, good men and women teachers for working class schools". It was not long before the priests of St Sulpice gave their support to this pious work, which gained a certain popularity.

To help us understand De La Salle's attitude it might be helpful to make two observations: there was quite a large number of Sulpician priests in the association; St Joseph's work of education within the Holy Family was mentioned explicitly. The Founder came under the influence of St Sulpice before devoting himself to the education of the working classes.

In the 17th century France, there were also other zealous devotees of St Joseph, such as St John Eudes, Sister Margaret of the Blessed Sacrament, who had a direct influence on John Eudes, Jean Jacques Olier and Blessed Nicolas Roland, another spiritual influence on De La Salle.

As part of the same reform movement in the Church, a number of secular communities of women

were founded in several dioceses in France. Their members were known as the *Sisters of St Joseph* and they devoted themselves to looking after the poor and to teaching their children catechism. They shared a common spirituality which led them "to see Our Lord in the person of the poor". Several of these congregations have survived and now devote themselves to teaching or missionary work.

## 2. SAINT JOSEPH IN LASALLIAN WRITINGS

The importance of devotion to St Joseph is implied by the fact that his name is mentioned 120 times in the writings of De La Salle. We shall concentrate in particular on the three works in which he is mentioned most often.

### 2.1. In the "Common Rules"

Where the name of St Joseph is mentioned in the successive versions of the *Rules* before 1726, it is essentially to remind Brothers of the devotion they were supposed to have to him and of the community practices in his honour. These were directives, therefore, rather than a body of doctrine. However, they indicate the importance attached to the fact that St Joseph was patron of the young Institute.

### 2.2. In the catechisms

De La Salle devotes instruction XVIII of his third catechism, entitled *Of external and public worship*, to the feast of "St Joseph, spouse of the Most Blessed Virgin" (CL 22,273f = DC 44,18).

In the form of question and answer, the text deals successively with :

- the identity of the saint,
- his poor and hidden lifestyle in Nazareth,
- his principal virtues,
- the difficulties he encountered and the special graces he was given,
- the kind of model he is for us.

One result of the use of a question-and-answer form is that we are given a number of short lists which do not perhaps give us a clear overall idea of Lasallian thinking about St Joseph. The modern — and adult — reader would no doubt prefer a more detailed treatment. As it is, he has to be satisfied with 5 reasons for Joseph's hidden life, 5 virtues he practised, 7 privi-

leges he received from God, 5 types of difficulties he encountered, 6 sorts of consolation and 7 ways of honouring him. That is how the instructions are arranged on the basis of 22 questions.

The material as a whole reflects the piety of the times, which is so different from our own. It is worth noting, however, that the best part of this presentation is based on the albeit few Gospel references to St Joseph.

### 2.2. In the "Meditations"

The meditation for the feast of St Joseph summarises the thinking of the Founder on this saint who, more than any other, is an example for the Brothers.

The Founder begins by stating that Joseph had all the necessary qualities and virtues to fulfil his sacred ministry of watching over the external actions of Jesus Christ. He was "just", submissive to God and full of solicitude for the Child Jesus.

De La Salle uses St Joseph's justice towards God to establish a parallel with the ministry of the teaching Brother, and to recommend the saint as a model. Like many of his contemporaries, De La Salle highlights St Joseph's educative role regarding the Child Jesus. Do not Brothers have a similar role with regard to children?

The Gospel account of the birth and childhood of Jesus stresses the "complete submission" of St Joseph "to the orders of God". This provides the Founder with a good opportunity to remind the Brothers of the need and excellence of obedience "which, of all the virtues", he says, "is the one most suited to you in your state and employment, and the one which will draw down most graces on you" (MF 110,2).

The third point of the Meditation concentrates on St Joseph's great solicitude for Jesus, especially during the flight into Egypt, the return, the loss in the Temple. Conscious, like the great Patriarch, of the mission he has received from the Father, and inspired by a tender love for Jesus, the Brother must be vigilant in order to preserve the innocence of the children, protect them against "whatever can harm their education", and finally "provide for their needs".

We can see, then, that in his admiration for the saint and the devotion he has for him, De La Salle stresses above all God's call to the ministry and the way it is exercised.

This same ministerial point of view can be seen also in the meditation for the Sunday preceding the Epiphany, which is entitled "The example of Jesus Christ living retired and hidden in Egypt teaches us to love a hidden life" (MD 6).

### 3. DE LA SALLE'S PERSONAL DEVOTION TO SAINT JOSEPH

#### 3.1. Origin of this devotion

In an article listed in the bibliography, Br Yves Poutet suggests that the Founder's devotion to St Joseph could be explained by the custom in his family to read and listen to the lives of the saints, a practice that was customary in pious families such as his own. These stories always began with the facts of the Scriptural passages before going on to the marvels recorded in the Apocrypha or mediaeval lives of the saints.

Among the saints, whose lives and example the young John Baptist came to know, there were several who had a great devotion to St Joseph. Also, as Canon of the Cathedral of Rheims, he had the opportunity to recite or sing the office of St Joseph, and to listen to office readings taken from the Fathers of the Church. And so, the young De La Salle was not only brought into contact with devotion to St Joseph and its practice, but was also able to assimilate the doctrine on which they were based. His stay in the seminary of St Sulpice in Paris could only have strengthened this devotion.

#### 3.2. Manifestation of this devotion

To discover the full extent of De La Salle's devotion, we would have to examine his life and pick out the instances when it was particularly manifested. However, we are fortunate that Jean Baptiste Blain, the most prolix of his early biographers, has summarised these for us (CL 8,492).

He tells us:

- that the Founder's devotion to St Joseph was as great as his devotion to the angels and St Michael;

- that he showed this devotion by placing his Institute "as soon as it was founded under the protection of this great saint";

- that he constantly sought means to honour him and make him honoured by reciting his litanies daily, in order to live according to the spirit that had inspired him, and by making his feast day "one of the most solemn in the Institute";

- that he added his own example to his constant exhortations. In spite of being very ill, he left his sickbed to celebrate Mass on St Joseph's feast day in 1719, a few weeks before his death;

- that just before his death, he recommended his Brothers to be known for their devotion to St Joseph, "a recommendation he had given them so many times during his lifetime".

#### 3.3. Motives for such a devotion

Blain tells us what the motives were for this special devotion: "What struck him most about the admirable life of the holy spouse of the Mother of God was his great docility regarding the guidance of divine Providence, his submission to the most disagreeable orders, his prompt obedience to the voice of the Lord, his hidden life, his angelical chastity, and finally his tenderness and love for Jesus and Mary. These were virtues in which he was determined to imitate this great saint" (CL 8,492).

Those who are familiar with the life and writings of De La Salle will have immediately recognised in these words an echo of innumerable other passages and events in the life of the Founder. His conviction must indeed have been very great, because Blain adds that "he was a living image of St Joseph".

### 3.4. The litanies of St Joseph

Blain goes on to say : “To satisfy his devotion to this great saint, he composed in his honour a long litany taken from Holy Scripture, which expresses unctuously the feelings of tenderness, affection and zeal which he had for this just man par excellence”.

The *Common Rules* prescribed : “At one o’clock, the Brothers will gather in the oratory to recite the litany of St Joseph, patron and protector of the community, to ask for his spirit and help for the Christian education of children” (RC 27,22).

What litany was this ? Blain does not tell us where the litany De La Salle recited comes from (CL 8,492). One cannot say, therefore, that it was the same one mentioned later which is expressly attributed to him. There existed at the time various litanies of St Joseph which were used by communities and individuals in their prayer. The article by Y. Poutet already referred to tries to throw some light on the question. One thing is certain : the Founder was so filled with devotion to St Joseph that he composed a litany in his honour in order to express the feelings that his example aroused in him.

*The place given to St Joseph in the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools from its origins has survived over the centuries. Practices of piety in his honour are still performed, his feast continues to be celebrated with great solemnity, and innumerable educational establishments and communities all over the world continue to be placed under his protection. In this long tradition of devotion, we can single out the foundation in the 19th century of the Confraternity — soon to be Archconfraternity — of St Joseph, whose principal aim was to promote devotion to this saint in the Church. Its influence soon spread beyond the confines of the Institute.*

*Today, in addition to “Joseph the educator” of the 17th century, we venerate also Joseph the craftsman, patron of workers, now honoured by a special feast. The piety of the Brothers, however, remains attached to St Joseph for having “participated in the work of salvation by providing for the upbringing and education of Jesus” and having been “faithful to death in his humble role as foster father” as the Rule has stated since 1967.*

#### Complementary themes

Guardian angels

Devotion

Marian Devotion

Saints

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