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SAINTS AND GASTRONOMY / 7

Joseph of Cupertino, the flying friar... and a cook

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The plane is jolting fearfully. Lightning occasionally illuminates the cockpit, giving the impression that tongues of fire are invading the cabin.
Joe, the pilot, with many hours of flying under his belt, prays under his breath, touching a small picture stuck on his side of the control panel. In all his years of work, he has never seen a storm so sudden and so dangerous, appearing out of nowhere, picked up

at the last second by the electronic equipment. While his young co-pilot, Karim, who is witnessing a storm in flight for the first time, is spasmodically gripping the controls and wonders who on earth Joe is talking to and what he is saying. Unwittingly, he notices the absolute silence of the passengers: strangely, when there is a scene like this in the movies, the passengers are screaming...

At long last, the big Delta plane gets through the turbulence and enters a calm zone. The passengers' sighs of relief can be heard and the murmur of their voices has a calming effect. Karim relaxes. Now the aircraft seems to be gliding over clear water, the sky is blue and the lightning is just a bad memory.
Joe wipes his forehead with a handkerchief and smiles at his co-pilot, pointing out that St Joseph of Cupertino has saved them again. Karim, a Muslim, asks him who he was and Joe explains.

Joseph Desa (who would later become St Joseph of Cupertino) was a rather simple-minded boy, born on 17 June 1603 in Cupertino, a small town located in a beautiful region of Italy, Apulia. Joe adds that his maternal grandfather came from there. Joseph was orphaned of his father (who was a carpenter) before he was even born. His debt-ridden, pregnant mother was thrown out of the house, her furniture seized and she gave birth to the baby in a stable. Joe cannot help but notice the similarities between Joseph's birth and that of Jesus. Moreover, from a very young age, the boy showed a spiritual inclination that was out of the ordinary for a child. At the age of five he prayed fervently, wherever he was, in dialogue with Jesus (whom his mother had described to him in great detail).

His mother worked as a labourer on the many farms in the area, specialising in olives, fruit and vegetables, and even wine. The pay was often in kind and although they were poor, the child lacked for nothing. He learned to cook at an early age and was already preparing food at the age of nine: vegetable soups, pulses cooked in ashes, pasta. Sometimes they had meat and he loved to prepare chicken with lemon. The friars of the Grotella (a monastery in the area, which passed to the Franciscans in 1613 thanks to a friar, Giovanni Donato Caputo) often welcomed him into the kitchen, where he helped the cook friar to prepare meals.
He loved the prayerful atmosphere of that small monastery and he spent a lot of time there. He was apprenticed to a shoemaker, who taught him the trade when he was 17.

Joseph was considered simple-minded, because he would become withdrawn even when surrounded by people and seemed lost in a world visible only to him, but he always smiled and was jovial in nature. At the Grotella, after helping in the kitchen, he

would isolate himself from everyone and kneel before the Holy Sacrament, praying for hours, his body still and his eyes raised to heaven.
The friars tried to teach him to read and write, without success: his intellect was very mediocre to say the least.
Despite this, the desire to embrace religious life grew stronger and stronger in his heart. Inspired by two of his uncles who had become Franciscans, he presented himself to the Conventual Franciscans in Naples, but could not be admitted there because of his intellectual deficiency.

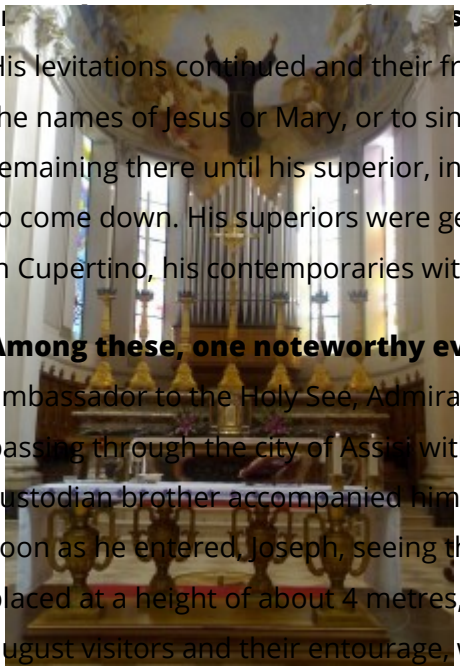
The Capuchin Friars Minor accepted him as a lay brother. But even there he made so many mistakes in the work entrusted to him that they dismissed him after eight months. Moreover, being frequently in ecstasy, he was unable to cope with his tasks. Natural incapacity and concentration on the supernatural created a mix that made him unfit for anything.

Joseph insisted with his request to be admitted to the convent as a religious and his mother, moved by compassion for her special son, managed to convince Brother Giovanni Donato Caputo to accept him into the Grottella convent in the village of Balsorano, near Cupertino, where the most he could do was to become a lay brother. He was given the task of looking after the convent's mule. Aware of his problems, he called himself, not without irony, 'Brother Ass'. Joseph, always cheerful and good-humoured, but still unable to learn to read and write properly, showed such obedience, piety and humility that his superiors decided to accept him: he received the habit of the order in Altamura, in June 1625.
He could not yet read or write and could not explain a single gospel except verse 27 of chapter 11 of the Gospel according to Luke, which begins with "Blessed is the womb that bore you…".

On 3 January 1627 Bishop de Franchis examined him with a view to his admission to the minor orders. In order make a decision, the bishop had opened the Bible at random and came across this very verse. To everyone's surprise, Joseph made a brilliant comment, which led the bishop to confer minor orders on him. He subsequently received the subdiaconate on 27 February and the diaconate on 20 March.

In 1630 Brother Joseph asked to be admitted to the priesthood. The first postulants who had taken the examination under Cardinal Giovanni Battista Deti (1580-1630), Bishop of Castro, had answered so brilliantly that the bishop, imagining that the others were as learned as the first, admitted all the candidates *en bloc*. Brother Joseph thus received priestly ordination on 4 March 1628, having been exempted, by pure

divine grace, from an examination that he would probably not have passed.
That year marked a major event in Brother Joseph's life: his first levitation took place. It was in Cupertino on 4 October 1630, during the procession in honour of St Francis of Assisi. He was watching the procession when he suddenly rose into the air, hovering above the heads of those present. When he returned to the ground and realised what had just happened to him, he became frightened and ran for cover.



Fr seph's life was completely turned upside down. His levitations continued and their frequency increased. It was enough for him to hear the names of Jesus or Mary, or to sing a psalm during Mass to float up into the air, remaining there until his superior, in the name of holy obedience, severely ordered him to come down. His superiors were generally disturbed by these displays. During his stay in Cupertino, his contemporaries witnessed about seventy such events.

Among these, one noteworthy event occurred in 1645, when the Spanish ambassador to the Holy See, Admiral of Castile Juan Alfonso Enríquez de Cabrera, passing through the city of Assisi with his wife, wanted to meet Father Joseph. The custodian brother accompanied him to the church to meet the illustrious guests. As soon as he entered, Joseph, seeing the statue of the Immaculate Virgin, which was placed at a height of about 4 metres, rose into the air, passing over the heads of the august visitors and their entourage, who were all shocked. After a while he descended back to the place where he had been standing and returned to his cell in confusion. The admiral and his retinue were left in shock; his wife fainted and it was necessary to resort to strong smelling salts to bring her back to her senses.

Another levitation attested to by witnesses took place in 1649, when Jean-Frédéric, Duke of Brunswick-Calenberg (1625-1679), then 24 years old, accompanied by his doctor and several cardinals, attended a Mass celebrated by Father Joseph; he saw the latter rise for a few minutes above the altar where he was celebrating the Eucharist. Fearing a trick, the Duke drew his sword and sliced the air under Father Joseph's feet, above his head, and around him, without discovering any subterfuge.

His most remarkable levitation, attested by the largest number of eyewitnesses, took place during a papal audience that Urban VIII (1568 - 1644) granted to the monks of the convent where Father Joseph lived. After kneeling down when his turn came to kiss the Pope's ring, he suddenly rose into the air above the papal throne where the Pontiff was sitting and remained like this for long moments, to the astonished silence of the whole audience, until his superior ordered him in a stern, dry voice to come down at once. Pope Urban VIII, who observed all this without batting an eyelid, in

impassive silence, then said to the Father Superior: “If Brother Joseph dies during our pontificate, we want to serve as witnesses at his [canonisation] process to testify to the miracle that we have just witnessed”.

The levitations, which were supernatural manifestations beyond Father Joseph’ s control, amazed the other monks and immensely displeased his hierarchical superiors, provoking the intervention and investigation of the Roman Inquisition under the reign of the new pope, Innocent X (1574 - 1655).
Father Joseph's fame, the phenomena to which he was subjected, the miracles of premonitions and healings attributed to him, raised the suspicions of the Inquisition. And so, in 1653, on the orders of Pope Innocent X, the Inquisitor of Perugia, the Dominican Fra' Vincenzo Maria Pellegrini had him locked in a cell for provisional observation, first in the Capuchin convent of Pietrarubbia, and then in that of Fossombrone, accusing him of drawing attention to himself, thus casting doubt (as long as he was alive and the Church had not pronounced on his case) on the truthfulness of the phenomena he was experiencing and the reality of his miracles. He was interrogated, detained for several weeks, and finally released because the inquisitorial judges found nothing to reproach him for.

After justifying himself before the Inquisition, Father Joseph was sent to Assisi. Despite the proximity of the tomb of St Francis, which he venerated, the distance saddened him greatly, and during this time his levitation phenomena temporarily ceased.
He remained in Assisi for nine years, was made an honorary citizen of the city, and was also visited by a great crowd, not only of lay people, but also of many religious figures; all were attracted by the wonders that were said about him, and by the miracles that many hoped for. He was happy to receive them, but the sadness of exile did not leave him, especially as he was not allowed to hear confessions or take part in processions. Nevertheless, his presence still attracted crowds.

When Pope Innocent X died in 1655, the Capuchin Friars Minor asked the new Pope Alexander VII (1599-1667) to end his exile and allow his return. But the new Pope also refused, like his predecessor, and sent him to Osimo where he was even forbidden to speak to anyone except the bishop, the vicar general of the Order, his confreres, and perhaps the doctor. Father Joseph never complained about this, even when, by secret order and to test him, his confrere the cook ‘forgot’ to bring food to his cell for two days.

On 10 August 1663 he had a high fever, but he maintained his cheerfulness by saying that he would soon be united with God. He levitated one last time while celebrating

Mass on 15 August, Feast of the Assumption. At the beginning of September, his confreres heard him murmur: “The ass is going up the mountain”, alluding to his imminent death, of which he had foreknowledge, and he took to his bed. The last rites were administered to him on 18 September 1663. He was 60 years old and died peacefully while reciting the “Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary”.

The two pilots begin their descent to Denver airport and Joe interrupts his story to say a few words to the passengers using the small on-board microphone. Karim is thoughtful and still fascinated by the story of Father Joseph's life. Hanging up the microphone, Joe adds that Father Joseph is the patron saint of pilots and that he worships and prays to him every time he has to board, not to mention in dangerous situations like the one they had just experienced on that flight. He also tells him that he has already been on a pilgrimage with his family to Cupertino, in Apulia. Karim then decides that his next holiday will be in Apulia, to visit the monastery and to learn more about Father Joseph, the patron saint of pilots, and therefore also his own.