

REDEMPTORIS CUSTOS / 9

## Saint Joseph, Master of Contemplatives

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**"Grant me the grace to love Jesus and Mary as they want to be loved.** Saint Joseph, pray for me. Teach me to pray." St. Bernadette's words tell us that one of the greatest favors, if not the greatest, that we can ask of St. Joseph is to be the teacher, the master of our interior life. Countless in number are the saints, who, before and after the humble visionary of Lourdes, have given voice to this truth about the Guardian of the

Redeemer. The great reformer of Carmel, Saint Teresa of Ávila, famous for her ecstasies and her teachings on prayer, had already explained the necessity of recommending oneself to Saint Joseph and increasing one's devotion to him in this way: "People who attend to prayer should love him especially, since I do not know how one can think of the Queen of Angels at the time when she suffered with the infant Jesus without thanking Saint Joseph for having been of great help to them. Whoever cannot find a master to teach him how to pray, let him take this glorious saint as a guide, and he will not go the wrong way".

**In light of these premises**, it is clear that it would be a mistake to consider Saint Joseph only as a **worker**, relegating his vocation exclusively to the active life. Rather, the father of Jesus reached the heights of contemplation to such a high degree as to be second only to Mary. This is evident if we stop for a moment to think about the reality of the Holy Family.

**The Incarnation of the Word, that is, God assuming the human condition**, is the way chosen by the Eternal One for the sanctification of men. The Gospels describe some of the innumerable fruits brought about by the presence of Jesus (from the exultation of John the Baptist in his mother's womb to many physical and spiritual healings), and especially for those who believed in him. St. Joseph, in addition to the grace of Mary's holy companionship, was able to enjoy the presence of Jesus in his home. He raised him, fed him, protected him, held him, kissed him, introduced him to social life and Jewish rituals, experiencing time after time the obedience and gratitude of that divine Son. Saint John Paul II writes:

*"Why should the "fatherly" love of Joseph not have had an influence upon the "filial" love of Jesus? And vice versa why should the "filial" love of Jesus not have had an influence upon the "fatherly" love of Joseph, thus leading to a further deepening of their unique relationship? Those souls most sensitive to the impulses of divine love have rightly seen in Joseph a brilliant example of the interior life". (Redemptoris Custos, 27).*

**Contemplation, as saint Thomas Aquinas teaches**, is essentially a matter for the intellect, but it has its beginning and its end in love. And the experience of the thing loved, the Doctor Angelicus further explains, "excites love. Hence Gregory says that *seeing one whom he loves, he is more inflamed with love for him*. And this is the ultimate perfection of the contemplative life: that not only the truth be seen, but also loved" (Summa Theologiae, II-II, q. 180, a.7 ad 1). Even the greatest mystics were able to savor God's presence only occasionally, "*when it pleases Him, by His most holy grace,*" as Saint Francis de Sales put it. Saint Joseph, on the other hand, by virtue of his paternal mission,

had this privilege on a continuous basis, even benefiting from it in his workshop, while passing on his trade to Jesus. Work itself, therefore, became an opportunity to directly serve God (who was for Joseph, with Mary, the closest of those close to him), contemplate Him and grow in love.

**This profound contemplation, favored precisely by the absolute uniqueness of the Holy Family, preserved Saint Joseph** "from the danger of that 'dissociation' which is caused in us by the occupations and worries of life," as Father Tarcisio Stramare observed. By keeping his mind and heart always oriented to God and His will, even in his daily work, Mary's spouse shows that there is no tension between the contemplative life and the active life if both have love as their beginning and end. Recalling St. Augustine's distinction between *caritas veritatis* and *necessitas caritatis*, Pope Wojtyla explained that "Joseph experienced both love of the truth - that pure contemplative love of the divine Truth which radiated from the humanity of Christ - and the demands of love - that equally pure and selfless love required for his vocation to safeguard and develop the humanity of Jesus, which was inseparably linked to his divinity" (RC 27).

**Let us recall that united to the divine nature, that humanity had been prepared in the silence of Nazareth** (and in the other places, from Bethlehem to Egypt, where the Holy Family had lived), for 30 long years, in view of the beginning of Jesus' public life that would culminate in his Passion, Death and Resurrection. If the Redemption reached its peak on Calvary, we must not forget that everything Jesus did during His hidden life, as the Catechism teaches, was already salvific. And His every deed took place under the paternal guidance of Joseph, who, in a supreme way, shared the knowledge of those mysteries that God would then give to the disciples (cf. Mt 13: 10-17). As Saint Bernard wrote: "The Lord found Joseph according to His heart and with complete certainty confided to him the most mysterious and sacred secret of His heart. To him He revealed the obscurities and secrets of His wisdom, granting him to know the mystery unknown to all the princes of this world."

**In order to know God**, the goal of contemplation, let us be guided by Saint Joseph. He certainly knows the Way.