

SOLEMNITY

Saint Joseph, model of manliness

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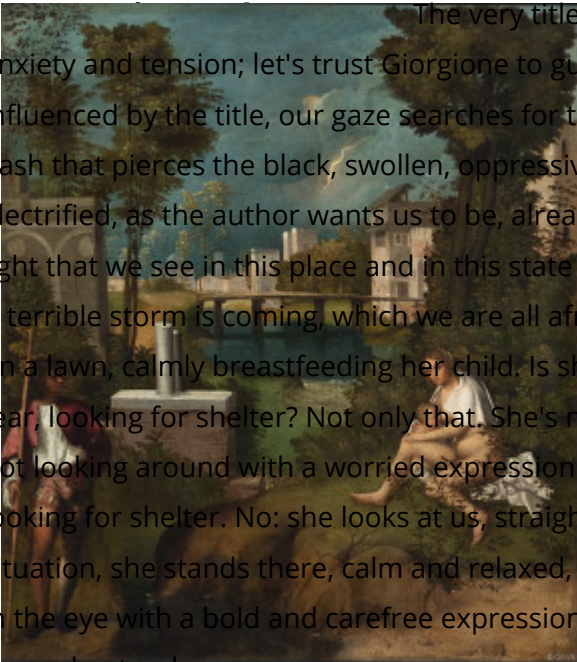
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So here we are, relatively few of us, the happy few, celebrating the solemnity of St Joseph, foster father of the Son of God. St Joseph doesn't enjoy the oceanic veneration of other fellow saints such as Padre Pio, St Anthony of Padua, etc. But not only did he personally know the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, but the Creator Himself entrusted Himself to him, a simple creature. What other saint, what other human being -

apart from the Virgin Mary - can boast such an earthly intimacy with Jesus? And yet he is a saint who keeps himself, shall we say, out of the way; he is known for his silence. The Gospels don't even mention Joseph the carpenter. What if this was his example of holiness, his way, his vocation? Silence, hiding, staying on the sidelines, leaving the limelight to others, always ready to act and intervene so that everything would work as God had commanded? Here we have it: Saint Joseph, model of manliness, patron saint of manliness.

A famous painting comes to mind, *The Tempest* by Giorgione (1478-1510). We know very well that a good painter guides and educates the eye of the beholder: we look where the painter wants us to look, we see things in the order established by the author. The most famous example of this pedagogical mastery is Caravaggio's (1571-1610) famous painting *The Calling of Saint Matthew*. We can only follow the ray of light that, coming from the window, rests on the hand of Jesus and strikes a distracted (by material things) Matthew. A static image is in fact a film, a story that unfolds over time, thanks to this didactic ability of the great painters.

B  The very title of the painting makes us feel a certain anxiety and tension; let's trust Giorgione to guide us through his story. Perhaps influenced by the title, our gaze searches for the first point of light and finds it in the flash that pierces the black, swollen, oppressive and threatening sky. We are already electrified, as the author wants us to be, already gripped by fear. The second point of light that we see in this place and in this state of mind is the woman. A strange woman. A terrible storm is coming, which we are all afraid of, and she is just sitting there, naked, on a lawn, calmly breastfeeding her child. Is she mad? Shouldn't she be running away in fear, looking for shelter? Not only that. She's not looking at the approaching storm, she's not looking around with a worried expression on her face (she's holding her baby), looking for shelter. No: she looks at us, straight in the eye. In this extremely tense situation, she stands there, calm and relaxed, naked and defenceless, looking us straight in the eye with a bold and carefree expression. Definitely a strange woman. Then, finally, we understand.

We finally see the third protagonist (after the storm and the woman) of this scene: him. The father, the husband, the man. He's standing at the edge of the group, out of sight. Not hidden, just out of the way. He's dressed as a soldier, holding a weapon, a stick. He's not looking at us, like the woman, he's not even looking at the storm. He mustn't be distracted by looking around, he must remain true to his task, his duty: to protect the woman and the child, ready to intervene in case of danger. He

stares at them. This is the task of the man, the husband and the father: to provide peace and security (more than protection). To ensure that nothing disturbs the serenity of the people entrusted to him. He is not serene. He is the only one who is tense, anxious, vigilant, so that the others will not be.

This, if we think about it, is the role of Saint Joseph: to stay out of the way, ready to intervene in case of danger (and he does intervene), so that Mary and her extraordinary son can cultivate their vital relationship in serenity and tranquillity. Let's look again at Giorgione's man: standing, with a stick in his hand. Isn't this the traditional iconography of Saint Joseph? Standing (ready to act) with a stick in his hand. Of course, in the Catholic tradition, the stick is not a weapon. It is said that the high priest, following the instructions of an angel, decided to find a husband for the young Mary. The suitors were to present themselves with a stick in their hand, and the Lord would reveal his will through a sign. Joseph's stick inexplicably blossomed, revealing God's will. In the Gnostic Gospels, a white dove appeared from Joseph's stick. These signs are generally interpreted as symbols of Joseph's virginity (this too is forgotten, while Mary's is even a dogma); but let's remember that what blooms is a stick, that is, an object that, among its many functions, also had that of defending oneself and others.

Saint Joseph is therefore a masculine archetype: a model and an example for all men. He teaches us to avoid the limelight and to remain in the background, in humble discretion; to remain concentrated, focused ("Men are not capable of doing two things at once..."); not to waste time with useless chatter ("Men must learn to communicate..."); to control their passions ("Men must learn to express their feelings..."). Saint Joseph doesn't care about his reputation, about what people say about him (he was probably "talked about" a lot): he has a mission and he is determined to fulfil it. That is why Saint Joseph, with all his not very modern characteristics, not very agreeable and not very likeable, is the model for every man. Saint Joseph pray for us.