

ST. JOSEPH, PATRON OF CARMEL

A Letter from the Prior General, O.Carm. and Superior General, O.C.D.
to the Carmelite Family on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the
proclamation of St. Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church.



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This year, 2020, we celebrated the feast of St. Joseph in the full throws of a pandemic, that forced us to remain in our own homes. Because of that, we felt the need even more to turn to that just and faithful man who knew the meaning of hardship, exile, and worries about tomorrow, but did not lose heart, but continued to believe and hope God, from whom he had received a very unique mission: he was to take care of Mary and the child Jesus, the family of Nazareth, the embryo of the new family that God was giving to the world. Pope Francis, preaching in Santa Marta, reminded us of some of the qualities of St. Joseph: the man of clear and practical vision, capable of doing his work with precision and professional skill, and one who at the same time penetrated the mystery of God, beyond all that was familiar to him or was under his control, and in the presence of which he kneels and adores.¹

It does us good to think about St. Joseph, to meditate on him as one whom our tradition has recognised as a patron and a model of Carmelite life. It is something we want to do together, as a Carmelite family, O.Carm. and O.C.D., because in our veneration of St. Joseph, and in our constant reference to him, we find one of the most precious aspects of our common heritage and spirituality. This year has the added motivation of a significant anniversary, namely, the proclamation of St.

¹ Pope Francis, Homily, Santa Marta, 19th of March, 2020.

Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church, by Pope Pius IX, on the 8th of December 1870, 150 years ago.

The place of St. Joseph in Carmel

The veneration of St. Joseph is an integral part of our Christian formation, tradition and culture. We are so accustomed to placing St. Joseph alongside Jesus and Mary, that we tend to think that the Church has always attributed to him, whose life was one of intimacy with the mystery of the incarnation, the dignity and the honours that we normally associate with him, but in reality, it was not always so. In the first millennium, the traces of a theological reflection on St. Joseph, or of any particular homage given to him are very rare. It was only with the advent of the mendicant orders that devotion to St. Joseph began to develop. In addition to the work of the French theologian, Jean Gerson, a decisive contribution was given by the Franciscans and by the Carmelites.

For Carmelites, interest in St. Joseph was a natural offshoot of its fundamental Marian orientation. Every member of the wider family of Mary (her parents, Joachim and Anne, the secondary protectors of Carmel, and his alleged sisters and brothers, Mary of James and Mary of Salome) were the recipients of particular attention in Carmel. In that context, Joseph, Mary's spouse, could not be ignored. Pious medieval legends, in order to underline the close link with the family of Nazareth, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, and based perhaps on the Apocryphal Gospel of Pseudo Matthew, make references to visits that the Holy Family made to the sons of the prophets, the descendants of the prophet Elijah, living on Mount Carmel. Others speak about a presumed visit that the Holy Family made on their return from Egypt². This connection must have looked so strong in the Church that

2 These pious legends inspired important works of art, e.g. paintings from the end of the

some of the ancient authors, like the Benedictine abbot, Giovanni Tritemio, thought that perhaps the veneration of St. Joseph in the Latin Church may well have been brought by the Carmelite hermits on their return to Europe.³ This idea, which is no longer accepted, is one that we find in the writings of Pope Benedict XIV, who suggested that the veneration of St. Joseph in the liturgy began with the Carmelites.⁴ What is certain is that devotion to St. Joseph among Carmelites had liturgical overtones from the very beginning. In later times, and right up to the present day, we find also a Eucharistic dimension in Carmelite devotion to St. Joseph, as the one who held in his hands the bread of life, our spiritual food and drink.

In truth, it is impossible to say exactly when people began to celebrate the feast of St. Joseph in Carmelite churches. In all probability, as early as the 14th century, there was strong local devotion, but by the 15th century we begin to see a Mass and a Divine Office proper to St. Joseph. The Flemish Carmelite, Arnold Bostius, in 1476, stated that Carmelites had a solemn celebration of his feast.⁵ The proper of the liturgy in honour of St. Joseph in the Carmelite tradition is thought by historians and liturgists to be the first monument of the Latin Church to the dignity of St. Joseph.

The ancient liturgy celebrates St. Joseph as the first among his contemporaries in Nazareth, the one chosen by Divine Wisdom to be the Spouse of the Virgin Mary, so that the Son of God might enter the world with honour, but without fanfare. Carmelite Preachers insisted that just

15th century that hang today in the Cathedral Museum in Frankfurt am Main.

3 LEONE DI SAN GIOACCHINO, *Il culto di San Giuseppe e l'Ordine del Carmelo*, Barcellona, 1905, 48. For the history of the development, cfr. E. BOAGA, O.Carm., 'Giuseppe, santo e sposo della B.V.M.', in *Dizionario Carmelitano*, ed. E. BOAGA e L. BORRIELLO, Città Nuova, Roma 2008, 443-446.

4 *De Serv. Dei beatif.*, I/iv, 11; I/xx, 17.

5 Cfr. B. M. XIBERTA, O.CARM., *Flores josefinas en la liturgia carmelitana antigua*, "Estudios Josefinos" 18, 1963-1964, pp. 301-319.

as Mary the Virgin conceived the Incarnate Word in her womb through the work of the Holy Spirit, so Joseph, through the work of the same Holy Spirit, conceived the Word through contemplation, and became the father of Jesus on this earth.⁶ The liturgy celebrated the nuptial union between Joseph and Mary the Virgin, and presented him as the protector of her virginity and of the life of the incarnate Son of God. With the sensitivity that is typical of the Carmelite contemplative charism, the ancient liturgy celebrated the purity of the Blessed Virgin and of St. Joseph, by highlighting their openness to God, which made it possible for them to welcome the mystery of the Incarnation. Formed by this liturgical spirituality, St. Mary Magdalen de'Pazzi would see Joseph's protection as a consequence of his purity: "In paradise Joseph's purity joins with the purity of Mary, and in that exchange of splendour, Joseph's purity shines a light on the even greater glory and splendour of Mary's purity. Saint Joseph is in the middle of Jesus and Mary as a resplendent star, and he takes particular care of our monastery because we are under the care of the Virgin Mary."⁷

St. Joseph is presented in Carmel's ancient liturgy as the virginal spouse of Mary, united to her through a real marriage, in which his authority as a spouse, protector and father is seen in his constant service. Moreover, St. Joseph is presented in his obedience to God. He is the just one, the worthy master of the house of the Lord, to whom a great responsibility is entrusted, that of giving a name to the child that is born. He gave him the divine name announced by the angel, the name Jesus. By doing this, Joseph became the first one to announce that in the child of Nazareth we are saved by God. In that same ancient liturgy we can detect a wealth of Carmelite spirituality under the image of St. Joseph: 1) *puritas cordis* that makes it possible to have

6 CHRISTOVAL DE AVENDAÑO, *Tomo primero sobre los evangelios de la quaresma, predicados en la corte de Madrid...*, Sebastian y Iayme Matevad, Barcelona 1630, 158-159.

7 SANTA MARIA MADDALENA DE PAZZI, 'Vigesimo secondo colloquio', in *I Colloqui: Tutte le opere...dai manoscritti originali* a cura di Claudio Catena, Fulvio Nardoni, Firenze 1961, 237-238.

a vision of God, 2) union with Mary, and 3) the fruitfulness of the mystical life understood in terms of the conception and birth of the incarnate Word in the soul that is pure. St. Joseph for that reason is celebrated as the image and reflection of the Carmelite mystical life in God.

Saint Teresa and Saint Joseph

As the heir of a rich tradition of veneration and devotion to St. Joseph in Carmel, St. Teresa of Jesus would give more breadth and depth to the tradition, to the great benefit of Carmel and of the universal Church. Indeed, it is undeniable that more than any other, Teresa of Jesus made devotion to Joseph one of the elements that characterizes the spiritual identity of Carmel. Her encounter with St. Joseph came about in one of the darkest periods in her life. She was about twenty-five years old. She had been suffering from a painful and endless illness, and the doctors had not only not cured her but made her worse. She was paralysed and worn out, both physically and psychologically. She felt that she was alone, without anybody to help her, when as if she felt something inside pushing her, she turned to St. Joseph as her “lord and father” (Life 6, 6; 33, 12). For the rest of her life, Joseph would remain for her and her work as the custodian and protector, taking her out of every difficulty that came her way. From being only a personal devotion, her devotion to Joseph would become in time a feature of the Teresian Reform centred on friendship with Jesus Christ. Just as Joseph watched over the relationship between Jesus and Mary, defending it from dangers from outside and protecting the home where they dwelt, likewise, he would watch over the Carmels that just like the family of Nazareth were intended to be places in which the humanity of Jesus would find a home, and Carmelites would live only for that end. For this reason, Joseph is not only a patron, but also the master of all who practice prayer,

(*Life* 6, 8) because there is no one who knows more than he what it means to live a life of intimacy with Jesus and Mary, because of the many years he lived with them and the way in which he made possible their life as a family in Nazareth. It is no surprise therefore that ten out of the fifteen Carmelite monasteries that Teresa herself founded bore the name of St. Joseph.

St. Joseph was so much a presence in the founding activities of Teresa (every time she travelled she brought with her a statue of St. Joseph) that he began to be known as the “Founder” of the Teresian Carmel.⁸ We should understand by that that he truly helped her in the founding of the Carmelite monasteries of the reform. It is certain, however, that alongside the traditional figure of the Prophet Elijah, there was now a place for St. Joseph, and this caused some questioning, as to which of these should be considered the principal patron and founder after the Blessed Virgin Mary.⁹ It is significant that in a letter to Fr. Gracián, Teresa in trying to decide what name should be given to the college that they were establishing in Salamanca, wrote: It would be right to call this college after St. Joseph (Letter, 22 May 1578) but the college will be called after Saint Elijah. The following year, in 1579, St. John of the Cross gave the name of St. Joseph to the college in Baeza, which made the college in Baeza the first male foundation that was dedicated to St. Joseph. The title, however, lasted only two years. From March 1581 onwards the college would be known as the college of St. Basil, one of the great fathers of the Church. It is clear to us that there was still some uncertainty around the role to be attributed to the carpenter of Nazareth

8 Gracián, in a well known passage from his work *Josefina* (1597), reached the point of stating that «(those who profess the Rule of the Discalced Carmelites) recognise glorious St. Joseph as the founder of this reform because St. Teresa founded it through her devotion to him, just as the Carmelite Order recognises as its foundress the Blessed Virgin Mary, in devotion to whom the prophet Elijah initiated the religious life of the prophets on Mount Carmel.» (l. V, cap. 4; ed. Silverio, 476).

9 Cfr. FORTUNATO DE JESÚS SACRAMENTADO, OCD, *San José en el Carmen Descalzo español en su primer siglo*, “Estudios Josefinos” 18, 1963-1964, 367.

in the Teresian reform of the Carmelites. Things became clearer a quarter of a century later when, in his *Instruction for Novices*, Fr. Giovanni di Gesù Maria explained that veneration of St. Joseph is second only to the Blessed Virgin and is followed by devotion to the great prophets, Elijah and Elisha, the “founders of our Order”. (*Istruzione dei novizi*, III, cap. 4, 29-30).

The patronage of St. Joseph

One of the characteristic thoughts of Teresa was that while other saints are destined by God to help in certain kinds of need, St. Joseph has a kind of universal mandate, to assist in any kind of need, material or spiritual. (*Life* 6, 6). It is on this conviction that the feast of the patronage of St. Joseph was founded, in a way that was typically Carmelite. In the year 1628, the intermediate General Chapter of the Spanish congregation of the Discalced Carmelites, declared St. Joseph as the principal patron of the Discalced Order. The initiative of celebrating the feast of the patronage of St. Joseph may be attributed to the discalced Carmelite Juan de la Concepción (1625-1700), who was the first Provincial of the Province of Catalonia and after that Superior General of the Spanish Congregation. He obtained from the General Chapter of 1679 the approval of the feast of the patronage of St. Joseph, the liturgical texts for which were composed by another Catalan discalced Carmelite, Juan de San José (1642-1718). The Congregation of Rites, after a comprehensive rewriting of the texts by Card. Casanate, approved them on the 6th of April 1680. The feast of St. Joseph's Patronage was set for the third Sunday after Easter, the day on which normally General and Provincial Chapters were convoked. Very soon after that the feast was taken up by the Carmelites of the Ancient Observance and it was celebrated under the title, *De Patrocinio S. Joseph Confessoris, Protectoris, et Patroni*

nostrae Religionis'.¹⁰ Already, for a long time, the terms, protector, and/or patron, were used without distinction to refer to St. Joseph. Very quickly this celebration spread to other orders and religious congregations, up until the time of the proclamation of his patronage of the universal Church.

The context of the proclamation and the liturgical celebration of the patronage of St. Joseph for Carmel as a whole has always been that of great trial and tribulation, due to both problems within the Order and aggression of the historical, political and religious circumstances of the time. Carmel, in those days, was experiencing great difficulty in its efforts to preserve its own identity and its values. It should be noted that as part of the renewal movements operating within the Carmelite Order, there was a proliferation of devotional writings about St. Joseph, that represented particular forms of expression of the kind of piety that warms the heart and gives impetus to the spiritual life. There were several Carmelite authors and preachers who worked untiringly in spreading devotion to Joseph and in promoting his patronage. Worthy of mention, Raffaele il Bavaro who wrote *Istoria di San Giuseppe* in 1723, in which he exhorted his readers who loved Jesus and Mary, to also love Joseph as one who was loved by both of them.¹¹ Giuseppe Maria Sardi, may be considered the great propagator of the patronage of St. Joseph, not only for the Order, but also for Christian parents and others who found in him a model of holiness.¹² It was not without reason that Joseph came to be known among Carmelite as the best of teachers and was held to be the protector and patron especially of those who are overburdened or who have lost their way in trying to follow Jesus Christ.

¹⁰ See, for example: *Missale Fratrum Ordinis Beatissimae Virginis Mariae de Monte Carmelo*, Roma 1759, 350.

¹¹ RAFFAELE MARIA BAVARO, *Istoria di San Giuseppe*, Antonio Abri, Napoli, 1723, 612; *Vita di San Giuseppe o sia Ristretto della sua Istoria ed Esercizi di Devozione per fruttuosamente venerare il medesimo Santo...*, Antonio Abri, Napoli 1724.

¹² GIUSEPPE MARIA SARDI (Veneto), 'Discorso sopra il Padrocinio di San Giuseppe Sposo di Maria', in *Sermoni*, Lorenzo Rivan Monti, Venezia 1742, 213-221.

On the 10th of September, 1847, with the decree of the Congregation for Rites, *Inclytus Patriarcha Joseph*, Pope Pius IX, at a time of great tribulation, extended to the whole Church the feast of the patronage of St. Joseph, to be celebrated on the Third Sunday of Easter. For the liturgy of the Mass, and the divine office, the texts used at that time by the Carmelites were adopted, with some modifications. It was the first gesture by Pius IX in honouring St. Joseph, and he was not yet one full year in office. It was due to his great devotion to the father of Jesus. At the time of convocation of the I Vatican Council, the Pope received a number of requests to increase even more the veneration of St. Joseph, especially by making him the patron of the universal church. The council which was interrupted unexpectedly in September 1870, did not allow enough time for the request to be granted. Therefore, on the 8th of December of that same year, Pius IX decided upon the solemn proclamation through a decree of the Congregation for Rites *Quemadmodum Deus*.

The feast of the patronage of St. Joseph was transferred in 1913 to Wednesday of the third week after Easter, and then in 1956 it was replaced by the memorial in honour of St. Joseph the Worker, to be celebrated on the 1st of May. Nevertheless, the Discalced Carmelites, with the approval of their liturgical calendar in 1957, were permitted to celebrate the feast of the patronage of St. Joseph, as “the protector and patron of our Order.”

Saint Joseph, patron of Carmel worldwide

The reform of the Liturgy that followed the Second Vatican Council, brought, among other things, a notable simplification of the liturgical calendar. In the calendar approved on the 14th of February 1969 the title “protector of the universal Church” disappeared from the principal feast of St. Joseph, celebrated on the 19th of March. Of course, it was not abolished,

but it was thought that it would be better to hold on to only the biblical title of “spouse of the Virgin Mary”, giving the individual bishops’ conferences and religious families the freedom to add other titles. Following the instruction of the Congregation for Divine Worship on particular calendars (29th of June 1969) the solemnity of the patronage of St. Joseph was removed also from the calendar of the Discalced Carmelites. The General Definitory (OCD) decided then to transfer the title of “protector of our Order” to the 19th of March solemnity. Similarly, it was decided that the optional memorial of St. Joseph the Worker should be celebrated throughout the whole Order.¹³ These decisions, it would seem, were very quickly forgotten. While the title, “protector of our Order” was kept in the liturgy of the Carmelites of the ancient observance, it disappeared very quickly from the liturgy of the Discalced Carmelites, given that in the particular calendar of the Order, neither the solemnity nor the memorial of St. Joseph appeared. Nevertheless, in the post conciliar constitutions of both Orders there is continued reference to St. Joseph as their protector (Cost. O.Carm., 91; Cost. OCD, 52). By this fact we may recognise an important element of unity in the Carmelite Family as a whole, that perhaps we have not sufficiently considered or appreciated.

Today’s world

We are living now in a period in which the Church is not so concerned with defending itself from an outside enemy but seeks to recognise its mission of giving authentic witness to the truth of the Gospel. Thus, in a

13 Cfr. ‘Normae de calendario liturgico OCD pro anno 1970’ (approved in the 128th session of the General Definitory, July 18, 1969), in *Ordo Divini Officii recitandi missaeque celebrandae iuxta calendarium romanum ac proprium Carmelitarum Discalceatorum [...] pro anno Domini 1970*, [Casa generalizia OCD] 1969, 29-32.

world where there is need for “concreteness and the sense of mystery”¹⁴, in a world in which we tend to flee from the bonds of stable relationships and commitments and to revert to a kind of sterile narcissism, Joseph shows us the way of self-denial, daily responsibility, the silent dedication to the care and growth of family. Any father of a family will want to heal the wounds of his own home. Our patron helps us to see the need to heal the wounds of humanity, and the wounds of the Church. There is no Church, there is no Carmel without people, who, forgetting themselves work day and night to give others a sure foundation in which they can trust. These people work away from the limelight, bearing in their own hearts all their own concerns and anxieties, very often, not seeing the fruits or even see the goal, trusting only in the one from whom their paternity comes and takes its name (Ef 3,15) These are the people who will always find in St. Joseph their patron and model, “their father and lord”.

The Word came to Joseph in a dream, which we may understand as his prayer, his interiority. We might say that every Carmel is a place of dreams: prayer is like a dream, that has within it a secret message. A Carmelite community is a group of people that dreams of making of its own home a new Jerusalem, people who share the dream of the prophet for a better world, people who allow themselves to be captured every day by the dream of salvation. In listening every day to the Word of Salvation, we are conformed to Christ in his obedience and in his desire to serve, as the one who did not come to be served, but to serve, as one who found in small children the example of how must be if we want to enter the kingdom of God. Carmelites, like Saint Joseph, know the dream and keep alight the flame of hope that shines for the new world promised to those who are attentive to the word of God, because God will make all things new.

Saint Joseph protects Carmel, not only because he protects it from

14 Pope Francis, Homily, Santa Marta, 19th of March, 2020.

hostile attack and from every adversity¹⁵, but also because he helps Carmel to remain firm in the simplicity and profundity of its identity. With his being just he points the way that we must follow and the goal for which we must strive. In this sense, there is no doubt that our veneration of Saint Joseph is not only a devotion or pious practice, but rather a life plan, that is an integral part of the charismatic heritage of Carmel. Together with Mary, Joseph is the gospel icon in which we Carmelites may see and understand what it means to live “in allegiance to Jesus Christ”. It is right then that we continue to turn to him as our father and patron, but also as a faithful friend and reliable guide in our following in the footsteps of Jesus.

As the world continues to deal with Covid-19, we unite in prayer for the doctors and nurses, for medical researchers, and for all who have fallen victim to this pandemic and for the families who are in mourning for the loss of loved ones. May Joseph, our protector, protect each one of us, and with the tender love of God, spread his protection throughout the whole world.

Fraternally in Carmel

P. Mícheál O'Neill O.Carm.
Prior General

P. Saverio Cannistrà O.C.D.
Superior General

¹⁵ Prayer to St. Joseph by Pope Leo XIII at the end of the encyclical, *Quamquam pluribus*.

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