

“GO TO JOSEPH”

***Brother George Schmitz, C.S.C.
Moreau Province***

Greetings in this year dedicated to Saint Joseph. I welcome this opportunity to share some reflections on the deep love of God and steadfast commitment to carrying out the will of God that we find in the heart of Saint Joseph.

Go to Joseph. We hear these words early in salvation history. In the Book of Genesis, these are the words of Pharaoh. Joseph, son of Jacob, the slave boy, interpreted Pharaoh's dream that seven years of plenty would be followed by seven years of famine. His prediction elevated him to a position like that of a prime minister. He wisely told the people to gather provisions in warehouses during the years of abundance. And when drought brought famine, and the people of Egypt cried out to Pharaoh for bread, he told them: "Go to Joseph and do what he tells you." And this same advice - Go to Joseph - was adopted by our founder and became the mantra of Saint Brother André. With such wise counsel, we, too, can go to Joseph with great confidence. We must never hesitate to go to Saint Joseph because he will be a faithful companion during our journey through life.

Another powerful saint who knew this was Saint Teresa of Avila. In her autobiography, she mentions that she was healed from a serious illness through the intercession of Saint Joseph. "I took the glorious Saint Joseph for my patron and lord and sincerely entrusted myself to him. I discovered that he freed me both from my illness, and also from other major problems related to my honor and the loss of my soul. He gave me more incredible blessings than I could ask of him. I do not remember ever asking something of him that he did not grant to me. I am in awe of the great favors that God has granted me through this blessed saint ..."

Saint Teresa is best known for her renewal work for the Congregation of Carmelites. She is the foundress of 17 monasteries, twelve of which she named for Saint Joseph.

The birth of a child brings great joy to parents. One year after birth, another happy moment occurs when the child speaks his first words. Parents get excited, trying to make the child repeat the word. What did he say? What did we hear? Say it again, mama, dada. It makes us wonder, 'What was the first word that Jesus spoke?' Was it the word 'Abba'? We know that Jesus referred to God as Abba and that Abba in Aramaic means something like 'daddy,' or whatever loving word we use with our fathers. Jesus had the confidence to call God Abba because Saint Joseph was his abba, his dad, his daddy - a tender, loving father. The image of God that Jesus had was formed from his image of Saint Joseph. The compassion, mercy, and love anchored in the heart of Jesus were planted and grew there as he watched Saint Joseph. As a child, Jesus saw Saint Joseph taking care of Mary; he observed how Saint Joseph related to his customers; he watched as Saint Joseph went out

of his way to assist a neighbor. Without a doubt, Jesus heard the story of his birth and realized the righteous actions of Saint Joseph. Could it be that Saint Joseph is the inspiration for what we hear in the parables of Jesus?

In a sermon that Blessed Basil Moreau preached on the feast of Saint Joseph, he said: "In the poverty and anguish of the Savior, Saint Joseph responded to the will of God and accepted the custody of Jesus. He took care of his needs; he showed him the affection of his heart; he fulfilled all the duties of a father to Jesus. Saint Joseph procured for Jesus the food that made his sacred body grow in strength and stature and that filled his veins with the precious blood that he shed for the salvation of the world. Therefore, God the Father gave divinity to Jesus Christ. Mary gave Jesus his body, and our patron saint preserved his existence. "

Reflecting on this excerpt from Father Moreau's sermon, I think of the passage from the Gospel according to Saint Matthew in which the evangelist tells us that Joseph was a just man with no inclination to expose Mary to the law. However, confident in the revelation of the angel Gabriel, Saint Joseph "... did as the angel of the Lord directed him and received her into his home as his wife." (Matthew 1:24)

Establishing a home is essential for familial love to develop and flourish. Our understanding of the everyday environment of that humble home in the small village of Nazareth is vital to our understanding of the mission of the boy whom Joseph named Jesus-Immanuel. We can ask ourselves: Where did Jesus get his knowledge of the Kingdom of God? It must be through the teaching of St. Joseph during those formative years in Nazareth. The house of the Holy Family was a humble home with a profound mission for the world and humanity. There, in Nazareth, the fundamental elements of the Gospel, the Good News that Jesus preached, had their beginning: God's love is without conditions and thus, we can trust in the plan God has for us. The selfless love of Saint Joseph, of Jesus' human abba-father became the unconditional love of his divine abba-father.

In our second constitution, we proclaim: "For the Kingdom to come to this world, disciples must have the competence to see and the courage to act." The Gospels show us that Joseph was a man with the courage to act for the Will of God. Saint Joseph was a man of action, always on the move in a manner that would fulfill God's plan: preparing to travel to Bethlehem for the census; fleeing to Egypt with Mary and the Child Jesus to escape Herod; traveling back to Nazareth at God's command after Herod's death. These were important events, but the scriptures record few details and no words of Saint Joseph. The only indication we have that Joseph was respected and known in the local community is the Gospel passage in which the townspeople were contemplating the source of Jesus' power and authority: "How did this man come up with this wisdom and miracles? Isn't this the carpenter's son? "(Matthew 13:54-55).

Although disturbed and confused by his dream, our patron Saint Joseph, the just man, accepted the amazing revelation of the Angel Gabriel and demonstrated through his action the depth of his capacity to see, and his courage to act. The Gospel tells us that Saint Joseph had already established a home before his encounter with the angel Gabriel. This

fact shows us a man wholly committed to his vocation to be a loving husband and provider of all the needs of his betrothed, and a dedicated father of a family.

Saint Joseph is not a central figure in the incarnation story simply because he was Mary's betrothed. The plans that God has for us are not happenstance or a coincidence. God chose Saint Joseph to teach Jesus more than a trade by which he could support himself. God chose Saint Joseph as an instrument in God's plan of salvation; Saint Joseph's charge, though unknown, was to form Jesus for the mission of God. As Saint Joseph learned to conform his heart to the will of God, so he taught Jesus. Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, 'not my will, but yours be done' is a prayer of trust that reflects the capacity to see and the courage to act of that same man who accepted Mary into his home as his wife.

In his sermon on the feast of Saint Joseph, Blessed Basil Moreau says that Saint Joseph showed Jesus the affection of his heart. Saint Joseph sowed in the heart of Jesus the seed of love that grew and resulted in our redemption. When we honor or pray to Saint Joseph, it is good to contemplate Father Moreau's theology of the heart and open ourselves, like Jesus did, to the love that flows from the heart of Saint Joseph. And what an excellent example of that practice we have in Saint Brother André.

Most of us learn about our ancestors from stories told to us by our parents. I think it was the same for Jesus. He learned his family history from Joseph. As Jesus grew in age and grace, he learned from Saint Joseph the history of his family, which, indeed, is the history of salvation.

They were descendants of slaves in Egypt, and, at the same time, they were children of the promise.

The prophets and psalmists were their ancestors.

An angel announced his birth.

The family suffered homelessness and threats.

They spent years as refugees outside of Palestine.

Imagine the impact of celebrating the Passover meal during their refuge in Egypt when Saint Joseph broke unleavened bread and shared the cup of blessing with Jesus!

The connections between Joseph, the Old Testament Prime Minister of Egypt, and Saint Joseph are profound. Surely Jesus recognized the connections.

The two Josephs:

Were descendants of Jacob.

Were royal - the first Joseph was a patriarch; Saint Joseph was a descendant of King David.

Both went to Egypt, the one sold as a slave, the other fleeing from Herod's persecution.

Both held positions of authority - the first Joseph in the house of Pharaoh; Saint Joseph in the house of the Holy Family.

Finally, as the Israelites went to the first Joseph in their need, we too can go to Saint Joseph with our needs. And who knew this better than Saint Brother André who advised those who asked for his assistance: Go to Joseph.

I said earlier that I believe Jesus' parables reflect the lessons he learned under Saint Joseph's care. I am going to close with a reference to three of these parables for your prayer and reflection.

The Good Samaritan. (Luke 10:30-37) How many times did Jesus observe Saint Joseph going out of his way to assist someone else? To what extent did he see Saint Joseph give of himself to help a friend or even a stranger in need?

The faithful servant. (Luke 12:35-40) "Let your belts be fastened around your waists and your lamps burning ready." This description of the faithful servant is what Jesus observed every day of his life in Egypt and in Nazareth -- Saint Joseph ready to serve, prepared to carry out God's will.

The Lost Sheep. (Matthew 18:12-14) Saint Joseph spent three anxious days searching for Jesus when he stayed in the temple. I like to imagine that Jesus' encounter with his parents after their three-day desperate search might not have been as pleasant as the Gospel depicts! However, that reunion had a great impact on Jesus. He returned with them and grew in age and wisdom. Every time I read the story of Saint Joseph looking for his son with concern, I think of the shepherd looking for the lost sheep.

Saint Joseph, pray for us faithful religious of Holy Cross. We go to you with confidence today and always.