

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Saint Joseph's Day
March 19, 2021

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The sum total of what Holy Scripture tells us about Saint Joseph can be collected in a few short sentences. Yet St Joseph's task on earth was as difficult as it was unique. By Divine plan he was instructed to provide for the sustenance of Jesus and Mary, and protect their honor.

Why then do the gospels show such brevity in their treatment and appreciation of Joseph? The answer is that in the early centuries of the Church, belief in Christ's Godhead and in Mary's virginal maternity had to be established beyond all doubt against heretical opinion. With those great dogmatic issues of Christology settled, and as a sequel to the consequent devotion to Our Lady, St Joseph's character and responsibilities began to be praised by popular preachers. Some of these treatments tended to exaggerate the claims of sound piety. But as in everything else, someone's saying what was wrong required the Church to put forth what was right.

There was much that was right about St Joseph! His fundamental privilege was that Almighty God chose him to be the husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary. And because Joseph was married to Our Lady, he received the title "father of Jesus." Those who disbelieved Christ's divinity applied that term to Joseph wrongly. But St Joseph was called "father of Jesus" by Saint Luke, and by the Blessed Virgin Mary herself, *both of whom knew the truth*. St Joseph's greatest honor is that, as part of God's "coming down" in the Incarnation, His condescension to the human race is seen in His bestowal of this title "father of Jesus," father of His Own Beloved Son, upon Joseph.

The bond of love in the Holy Family is a subject of deep and worthy meditation. No one else ever entered the circle of intimacy Joseph had with Jesus and Mary. Joseph beheld daily the example of God in human flesh. And daily he saw the life of the woman the archangel had declared "highly favored one." The unique character of St Joseph's sanctity was enriched and deepened by His life with Jesus and Mary. How could it be otherwise? For His part, Blessed Jesus loved Joseph, perfectly fulfilling His life as an adopted son. And Our Lady loved her husband with immaculate unselfishness.

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We do not know when St Joseph died, leaving Mary a widow and Jesus as head of household. Joseph was not with Mary to comfort her and protect her at Calvary. But Christ on the Cross paid one more tribute to His foster father. When Jesus said, "Woman, behold thy son" and to St John, "Behold thy mother," the Blessed Lord was showing His love for us by sharing the family love with which He cherished His Own mother. And this love was first modeled for Jesus by good Saint Joseph.

When Christ loves *it is Divine Love*. And Divine Love was once revealed by entrusting St Joseph with the double honor and responsibility of husband of Mary and legal father of Jesus. Joseph was then not only the man nearest to Christ. He was *the man after Jesus' Own Heart*, the human father chosen by God our Father for His Incarnate Son.