



The Immaculate Heart of Mary and the Conversion of Sinners

Oh, to serve God with our whole heart, mind and soul, how glorious this would be! In a world that encourages us to serve self and to expect God to serve our least, and at times, our immoral desires, the reverse sounds almost absurd. Yet, for Mary and Joseph, this was their only desire in life, to become total and perfect instruments of God, at His service, for love of Him alone and to become instruments by which God's love is spread throughout the world. Called as we all are, to know, love, and serve God in this world and be with Him in the next, all of us should examine how the Blessed Mother and St. Joseph fulfilled this call.

St. Augustine is quoted as saying, "The basis of married love is attachment of hearts" (p. 89, The World's First Love, by Bishop Fulton J. Sheen). In no marriage is this truer than that of Mary and Joseph. Their hearts, in married love, attached first and foremost to God and thereby to one another. As His instruments, their joy was in God, our Savior, and flowed out of their union to the whole world. But before they could respond to their call to be virgin, wife, and mother: virgin, husband and father, they first had to learn to love and obey God as individuals. We know very little about St. Joseph's pre-Mary years, or Mary's pre-Joseph years, but we can ascertain some information based upon how they responded to God's call. From early childhood, Joseph's parents must have prepared him and his siblings to know and obey the laws of the

Jewish faith. St. Joseph, like Mary knew the Scriptures, which tells us that he studied in the synagogue and Mary, according to tradition, studied in the Temple, both prayed and grew to understand the importance of putting the Law of God before all else, and making it the basis of daily life. They interrupted the daily activities to keep the times of prayer. They trusted God, knowing He would provide the means necessary for them to achieve other obligations. St. Louis Marie de Montfort wrote, "During the first fourteen years of her life the most holy Virgin Mary grew so marvelously in the grace and wisdom of God and responded so faithfully to His love that the angels and even God Himself were filled with rapturous admiration for her. Her humility, deep as an abyss, delighted Him. Her purity so otherworldly drew Him down to her. He found her love so irresistible that He was lovingly conquered by her appeals of love. 'So great was the love of Mary,' explains St. Augustine, 'that it conquered the omnipotent God.'" (Love of Eternal Wisdom #107)

Many of the ancient Fathers of the Church and the holy saints believed that both Mary and Joseph offered their virginity, to the service of God and the long expected Messiah, before their marriage was ever arraigned. We know not how or under what



circumstances they revealed this to each other. Obviously, in all humility, they did not know how God would make use of their consecrations, but simply wished to give all for love of God. Pondering on the Word of God and the meaning of Sacred Scripture, they listened with their hearts, conformed their minds and wills to God and let Him transform their lives. This happened even before God began, at times to send His messengers to deliver very specific requests, or commands, which, when fulfilled, would have a profound effect upon the world. Most of the time, these two young virgins lived their everyday lives by prayerfully applying Sacred Scripture to the daily events. In Luke 1:26-38, when we read about the appearance of Gabriel, with the message, "Hail, favored one? The Lord is with you...Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus..." Mary was not shocked and surprised at the appearance of an angel, nor does she seem disconcerted to be speaking with a messenger from Heaven. She was troubled by the title given her and questioned HOW this was to be fulfilled without breaking her consecration. Whereas in Matthew 1:18-25, St. Joseph, who was trying to understand how Mary a virgin could be with child, had no doubt that the angel speaking to him in a dream was from God. Both of the events lead us to understand that their relationship with God was already such that these might not have been the first time they had been addressed by heavenly beings.

Another point of observation, is the role obedience played in their being instruments of God. Tied to the Annunciation is what

some thought to be the idea of divorce. It is during this time that Mary, trusting in God's guidance, keeps the secrets of the King, while at the same time she waits and watches as Joseph suffer through his discernment process, trying to understand of how God is calling him to respond to her pregnancy. Joseph's obedience to the law of justice and the Torah caused him serious disconcertment. As a man of prayer, one who recognized the working of God in another, Joseph knew that Mary showed the signs of one who "carried the clear marks of a divine presence." (p. 90, *The Glories of Saint Joseph* by the Monks of St. Joseph Abbey). He also recognized that she was with child and knew that, since they were virgins, it could not be his. What should he do in this circumstance? Obedience to the Law required, if the husband found his wife guilty of adultery, she be denounced and publically stoned to death. Yet, the same law forbids the killing of an innocent person. Without a clear message from God, how is St. Joseph to keep one law without breaking another law. St. Jerome in *Commentary on St. Matthew, cap. i*, wrote "If it was a precept of the Law then, not only the guilty, but those who had knowledge of their guilt, were under the penalty of sin, how could Joseph, in concealing the sin of his wife, be styled Just?" (p. 199, *The Life and Glories of Saint Joseph*, by Edward Healy Thompson, M.A.) This leaves us to know that Joseph, having discerned she is without sin, and this being the time of the expected Messiah,



who is to be born of a virgin from the House of David, Mary must have conceived through the working of God. In humility, Joseph believed that he could best obey God by “*dimitted*” separating from her. “*Dimitted*” being the same word used in Matthew 19:5 “For this reason a man shall *dimitted*/leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife...” Joseph’s plan was not an act of repudiation of Mary or disobedience of the Law, but a sacrifice out of love for God and Mary. It was only when he, out of love and obedience, was willing to give up the person he loves more than life, that God gave Mary back to Joseph. In denying himself, Joseph received both the Mother of God and the Incarnate Word into his keeping. “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her.” (Matthew 1:20)

Through their marriage, the honor of God is protected by preserving the honor of Mary. Bishop Sheen wrote, “So far as public appearance went, it was thought that Our Blessed Lord was the son of Joseph. Thus the reputation of the Blessed Mother was conserved; if Mary had become a Mother without a spouse, it would have exposed the mystery of Christ’s birth to ridicule and would have become a scandal to the weak.” (Sheen, p. 90) From this point forward, even more than before, their lives were lived with generosity, obedience, faith and docility to the will of God in all things.

Webster’s Dictionary defines generosity as “marked by a noble or forbearing spirit,

benevolent, chivalrous, considerate, great-hearted, charitable, kindhearted, thoughtful, willing, helpful, honest, bounteous, unsparing, etc.” Can we think of anyone who showed this virtue more than Mary and Joseph? We see this virtue in the way that Joseph searched for a place for Mary to stay and give birth to our Lord. With what great gentleness he cared for her needs on the road to Bethlehem. His thoughts were not about his own comfort or rights, but about the needs of Mary. He was unsparing in his sacrifices to find her a safe shelter. When all he could find was a stable, how great must have been his effort to prepare it to become a worthy place for the birth of the King. Throughout this event, Mary gives us the example of being docile to the will of God. Steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the prophecies, Mary recognized that God willed for the Messiah to be born in Bethlehem. Trusting in the will of God, Mary has faith that God will lead Joseph and provide for their every need.

Even the trying events of travel, being unable to locate a home to live in, and seeking shelter in a stable were never used as an excuse to seek exemption or an extension concerning obeying God’s law. On the eighth day, Joseph oversaw the circumcision of Jesus. Joseph, who would willingly have shed all of his blood for Jesus and Mary, was called upon to shed the first drops of Jesus blood. And when it was time, they traveled to the temple in Jerusalem for the



rite of purification. Here Mary and Joseph are forewarned that many will reject Jesus and a sword shall pierce Mary's heart, yet St. Joseph is left out of this prophecy. To know that they would suffer and he, Joseph, would not be there to protect them was a suffering obedience that required absolute faith that God would provide.

A man of action, Joseph was called upon, to wake Mary and take the Holy Family to Egypt. He did not ask, "Where will I get the money?" or "How will I know the way?" or any of the other questions that might have come up. God was sending them out to a pagan land and He expected them to know how to act in this event. We are told that Joseph immediately got up, woke Mary and "...took the child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt." (Matthew 2:14). Mary never argued or asked for extra time, but docile to the will of God and respectful to Joseph's authority as head of the household she obeyed. Each was an example to the other of someone who loved and obeyed God in all things. Our Lady revealed to St. Bridget, that a favorite aspiration of Joseph's was "Heaven grant that I may live so as to accomplish the will of my God!" (St. Briggitt, Revelation., lib. 6, c lix, p. 80 in *The Divine Favors Granted to St. Joseph* by Pere Binet)

In Egypt, on the journey back to Bethlehem, when redirected by an angel go to Nazareth, and during the hidden years, St. Joseph gave the example of a man who worked to provide for the needs of his family, while Mary gave the example of a caring wife and mother, and gentle and loving homemaker. Though

infinitely inferior to the Incarnate Word of God, St. Joseph, in obedience to how God set up authority in the family and the role of service commanded of the husband and father, was made the superior of the family. Joseph humbly submitted to commanding Jesus and Mary, and they trustingly obeyed him. How difficult for this humble saint to be obeyed by God, the Word Incarnate, and the sinless Mother of God. "...he did so with the same reverence as that with which the angels served Him in whose presence the highest of creatures, the most exalted of the angelic hierarchies, the Seraphim and Cherubim, prostrated and annihilate themselves, casting their crowns at His feet." (p. 357, Healy)

The time eventually came when Joseph, the beloved saint was called to practice his obedience of suffering, no longer able to support and defend the Holy Family. In the end, St. Joseph served in prayer and suffering, accepting the comfort and care of his beloved wife, Mary. Joseph neared his death, wrapped in the love of Jesus and Mary, knowing that the prophecy of Simeon had not yet been fulfilled. Joseph knew that he must surrender to death leaving them to suffer the passion without him. He must trust in the merciful Father to provide someone to stand by them during this last trial. In this final fiat, Joseph became the patron saint of holy death. Mary became the example of how to stand with those who suffer, especially at Joseph's death and then even more at the foot of the Cross,



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lovingly docile to the will of God in all things. As a widow, she gave us the example of seeing God's will in loneliness and the heartache of missing someone who is greatly beloved and has returned to God before you. At the Cross, she became Mother of the Church and Joseph as her beloved spouse is now the patron saint and protector of the Church.

When we look at their lives, we realize that they, like all of us, had to learn to follow God through the good times and the great trials of life. Most of their acts of generosity, obedience, trust, faith and docility were lived out in the ordinary events of daily life. More of the years were what we would call the hidden years, but when their existence was made known to the powers, like Herod, they were able to apply the fruits of their prayers to recognizing God's will and make their actions correspond to His will. As hard working wife, and mother, husband and father, they experienced many of the same challenges as working parents and married couples go through today. It will be of great benefit to all of us, if we would examine and follow their examples in our homes, places of work, and parish. May they become our models so that we too may become instruments of God in all things!

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