

**Talk given by Fr. Matt Blake. OCD
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In this Year of St. Joseph we may like to consider how we as Carmelites look at him: indeed, St. Teresa of Jesus consecrated herself to devotion to St Joseph as her Patron. In so doing so Teresa delved into Carmelite tradition and entered into already well-established and lived tradition. In her own account in The Book of her Life, (Chapter 6) she recounts how at a critical time for her in the early stages of her religious life, in her early to mid-twenties, she was extremely ill, nearly died and then suffered four years of very serious physical illness.

This period in which she describes seeing herself as “so crippled and still so young” marked a time of growth in St. Teresa’s prayer life and she resolved to go the “doctors of heaven that they might cure me” turning to St. Joseph as “the Heavenly Physician” the only one of the saints whose concern is for the whole person and who heals her not only physically, but in addition heals certain relationships as well as healing her spiritually. Teresa also turns to St. Joseph as Advocate and Lord: she turns to him in every need she has and this turning to St Joseph very personally and directly in any situation for any kind of help continues throughout her life. This glorious saint helps us in all our needs for this reason because when Jesus was in this life He was subject to Joseph: Joseph was Jesus’s teacher and in Heaven he still bears the titles of ‘Father’ and ‘Tutor’ -the life lived in Nazareth continues there. St. Teresa’s thinking goes right back into Carmelite tradition which holds that Jesus, Mary and Joseph visited Mount Carmel on their way back to Nazareth from Egypt. The deeper truth the legend carries for we Carmelites, is how we belong to them and they to us: we are part of that family and just as within that family, Joseph was Jesus’s father and therefore teacher, if we ourselves belong to that family then he is our teacher as well.

The Carmelite tradition of Devotion to St. Joseph enriches St Teresa’s prayer life and she states: “I endeavored to celebrate his Feast with all solemnity possible.” In the early days of the Church the Feast of St. Joseph was not celebrated however this devotion took root in the East and then spread to the West; the Carmelites promoted the Feast within the Church from very early times and celebrated St. Joseph as their patron and later the feast was incorporated into the Calendar. In St Teresa’s own words: “I had the desire for all to be devoted to him.” and she is still one of the most important saints in terms of promoting devotion to St. Joseph and is still working on his behalf to achieve this: “for some years now I have asked him for on his feast day and my petition is always granted.” and she goes on to state, “especially persons of prayer should always be attached to him.”

St. Teresa attributes to St. Joseph’s intercession the many favours granted to her in terms of help in physical, relational and spiritual matters. Prayer is always being close to Jesus, however in terms of relationship to Jesus, after Mary, Joseph is the closest of all to Him: “For I don’t know how one can think

about the Queen of Angels and about when she went through so much with the Infant Jesus without giving thanks to St. Joseph for the good assistance he then provided them both with.” He guided Mary and Jesus, therefore he is a guide for us and will take care of our spiritual formation too.

The very first community St. Teresa established was named after St. Joseph and as Patron of the Carmelite Order he is our Patron too. In The Book of her Life (Chapter 32) she describes how ”One day after Communion, His Majesty earnestly commanded me to strive for this new monastery with all my powers and He made great promises that it would be founded and that He would be highly served in it. He said it should be called St Joseph’s....” Therefore Jesus was commanding Teresa to give honour to St. Joseph with Carmel an extension of the home at Nazareth as “this saint would keep watch over us at one door, and Our Lady at the other, that Christ would remain with us, and that it would be a star shining with great splendour.”

In The Book of Her Life (Chapter 33) St.Teresa describes a spiritual experience she received as she prepared for her First Vows: “I saw Our Lady at my right side and my father St. Joseph at my left...Our Lady took me by the hands. She told me I made her very happy in serving the glorious St. Joseph...” this takes us back to the Old Testament: The Second Book of the Kings. In this the Prophet Elijah is taken up just before he gives his cloak to his successor Elisha, giving him a double share of his spirit. (2 Kings 2:7-15). Throughout the ages, Carmelites have seen themselves as the successors of the prophets Elijah and Elisha and in the spiritual experience she describes, St. Teresa sees herself with Mary, Joseph and the prophets as all part of this one reality. As Mary praises her for what she is doing for St Joseph as Head of the Household, telling her that “what I was striving for in regard to the monastery would be accomplished...” it is the Holy Family which is the model. We are the family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph- that is what it means to be Christian.

When St Teresa became the Superior of the Monastery of the Incarnation in Avila, initially unwanted by her sisters, she eschewed the seats previously accorded to the Prioress or Sub-Prioress which were placed under paintings of Mary and Joseph. Deliberately leaving those places for Our Lady and St. Joseph, Teresa sat in her old place, an indication of the importance of Mary and of Joseph in Teresa’s life and the power and effectiveness of her intimate and direct relationship with St. Joseph to which this action bears witness. Her great devotion to him is entirely consistent with Carmelite tradition, which began in the land of The Bible: however she takes that tradition has always been a very biblical tradition and goes further and very deeply into it. Joseph, as St Matthew’s Gospel describes him, is “a just man” (Matt.1:19) and Jewish readers would know from this description that Joseph embodies the biblical ideal: God-fearing and upright. It was biblical tradition that drew Carmelites to live on Mount Carmel and is why St. Joseph is the pattern for Carmelites and their inspiration.