



The Holy Cross Institute
AT ST. EDWARD'S UNIVERSITY

Reflections: Feast of St. Joseph

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It could be considered something of a surprise that we have this feast at all. It's not that St. Joseph is unworthy, surely the history of the church has demonstrated that he is worthy; we just do not know much about him. In the Gospels, he never speaks. He appears in only three stories; otherwise he is simply mentioned in relation to Mary or Jesus. Then, he disappears.

But the three times he does appear tell us something about his character. We see him as he deals with Mary's pregnancy, leads his family from Herod to safety in Egypt and searches with Mary to find Jesus in the Temple. All three scenes are times of tension and confusion. We meet a man who remains close to Mary and Jesus, a man to whom God speaks, a man who believes God's promise. That theme of faith in God's promise links today's readings and represents Joseph well.

The one significant description we have of Joseph appears in the Gospel: "He was a righteous man." The etymology of righteous refers to "moving in a straight line, leading, directing, ruling." As a righteous man, Joseph ensured that the situations in which God placed him and his family would move in the right direction, in the way of God's will.

It is this quality of righteousness that Father Moreau finds so attractive in St. Joseph. In 19th-century France, Joseph was increasingly popular and important for everyday spirituality. Often he was chosen by groups as a principal patron, as he was by the Brothers of Saint Joseph and later, by Moreau, for the Brothers of Holy Cross. It was Father Moreau's plan that Holy Cross would establish a place of pilgrimage dedicated to St. Joseph, to which people could come for healing, comfort and prayer. Though more than four decades passed after Moreau expressed that hope, it was finally realized when Blessed Brother Andre' founded St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal.

Father Moreau sometimes speaks of St. Joseph in the context of the Holy Family and parallels it to the Trinity. He assigns Joseph the role of the Holy Spirit as the binding force of the family; the one who keeps it together in difficult times by his love and care.

And he sometimes speaks of Joseph as a model for educators because he had the responsibility of educating and guiding Jesus. On one level, this is clear: Joseph had been designated as the principal person for the Brothers and others involved in education. This even influenced the design of the original coat of arms for the family of Holy Cross with its three hearts for Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

On a deeper level, Moreau sees Joseph as the first custodian of the mission. A custodian is more than one who safeguards something; it is a person who has responsibility for a treasure and to assure that it can be cultivated and communicated. Joseph is sometimes referred to as the “silent” or “hidden” saint, precisely because we don’t know much about him. And yet, as a custodian, he does direct our attention to the mission, not to himself.

And so it is with us. The treasure for which we are responsible, the direction in which our efforts point, is the educational mission of Holy Cross. Moreau understood that mission to be a “work of resurrection,” a work of transforming, rebuilding the society and world in which we live and work. Why? He tells us, “to prepare for better times than ours.” This is one of those phrases we have yet to explore fully to discover its implication for our ministries. There was urgency about that mission in 19th-century France; it would be a mistake to think the mission is any less urgent today.

I have often thought of educators as heroic since you live on a low-affirmation diet. Like Joseph then, we must also believe in the promise, the promise that our world is transformable and the promise that each of us is capable - and indeed commissioned – to make a contribution to that transformation, to that work of resurrection. Father Moreau recommends that we look to St. Joseph and ask him specifically for “the grace of not hampering in any way the important work that God has entrusted to us.”

Our continuing response to that grace will become the mark of our righteousness, our way of doing God’s will, our part in preparing better times and our commitment to the mission before us.