

Tract 5:

St. Joseph, Terror of Demons and Protector of Holy Church

St. Joseph is the most obscure of saints. Not a word of his is recorded in Scripture. The Western Church's cult around this saint took centuries to be established. And yet one could argue that his excellence is higher even than that of the angels. This is precisely because of St. Joseph's relationship to Mary—the *Theotokos*, the Mother of God—and to her Divine Son.

It has long been a matter of established theology that Our Lady is afforded the highest veneration of the faithful because of her proximity to the hypostatic union. St. Thomas writes: "The Blessed Virgin from the fact that she is the mother of God . . . [has] a certain infinite dignity from the infinite good, which is God."¹ This is an unsurpassable good—Mary, though a creature like every other man and angel, is the one *most likened to God*, precisely because she is related to this hypostatic order. She shares the closest affinity with God, even above the angels.

Mary's maternity directly associates her with the hypostatic order. Her maternity is a higher good than even sanctifying grace or the beatific vision. Since the nature of a relation is determined by the dignity of the one to whom one is related, so too with Mary—Mary gives birth not to a human person, but to a divine person, the second person (hypostasis) of the Blessed Trinity, the Eternal Word. Thus, Mary's mission pertains by its term to the hypostatic order, through intrinsic physical and immediate cooperation—she is directly related to the Trinity, and this is greater than even the orders of grace and glory. And if this were not enough, Mary's dignity increased because, in her maternity, she consented to the whole

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 25, a. 6, ad 4.

of the redemptive order. As Fr. Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange puts it: “By her consent . . . she conceived her Son not only in body, *but also in spirit* because he awaited her consent.”² This act of consent was in the name of the whole human race. By consenting to her maternity, she consented to everything that would proceed from this—namely, the Passion and Cross—to which she is co-related. Her mediation is universal because, as St. Thomas writes: “The whole order of precedence is first and originally in God; and it is shared by creatures accordingly as they are nearer to God. For those creatures, which are more perfect and nearer to God, have the power to act on others.”³

But what of her most chaste spouse? Surely, the one who is bound to her in marriage and selected by our Lord himself to be his representative father on earth also shares in this great dignity. Leo XIII writes: “But as Joseph has been united to the Blessed Virgin by the ties of marriage, it may not be doubted that he approached nearer than any to the eminent dignity by which the Mother of God surpasses so nobly all created natures.”⁴

Consider how the Church speaks of St. Joseph in the versicle for First Vespers: “He appointed him lord of his household; and ruler of all his substance.”⁵ “Substance” can be understood in both the physical and the metaphysical senses, and surely the Church intends both when she appeals to St. Joseph in this manner. For St. Joseph was the master of Our Lord’s physical substance—his literal household—and the provider for the Holy Family. More importantly, St. Joseph was the lord of Christ’s very person, his sacred humanity. And this touches on the metaphysical meaning of substance. “Substance” signifies essence or nature insofar as it is that which exists in itself and serves as the basis for all else that possesses it.⁶ First substance is the “in itself” that does not exist in another.⁷ Second substance is the abstract, universal nature which has existence in reality only as concrete and individual—only when actualized as first substance.⁸ Thus, first substance realizes in terms of actual existence the essence or nature. When we say that Christ truly possesses human nature, we are concerned with first substance: he was an individual, concrete,

² Réginald Garrigou-LaGrange, O.P., *Reality: A Synthesis of Thomistic Thought*, trans. Patrick Cummins, O.S.B. (Lexington, KY: Ex Fontibus, 2015), 198.

³ *ST I*, q. 109, a. 4.

⁴ Leo XIII, *Quamquam Pluries* (1889), §3 (trans. from Vatican website).

⁵ *Roman Missal*, Feast of St. Joseph, March 19.

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *In VII metaphys.*, lec. 2, nos. 1270–76. Cf. *ST I*, q. 29, a. 1, ad 2; a. 2.

⁷ Aquinas, *In VII metaphys.*, lec. 2, no. 1273.

⁸ Aquinas, *In VII metaphys.*, lec. 2, no. 1274.

existing nature, complete and perfect in all that pertains to human nature, so perfect in itself that it cannot be predicated of another. Yet, first substance—even Christ’s—is not a person, it lacks the higher perfection of ontological personality.

A person is a substance: again, a being of a certain nature, concrete, individualized and existent, existing in itself without the support of another. But a person as an individuated substance is so perfected that it is incommunicable to another. Person is free, self-subsistent, and perfect; substance is not. The perfectly actualized metaphysical whole is the person.

What, ultimately, is the substance of the Word-become-flesh if not his divine hypostasis wed to his human nature? When St. Luke tells us that the child Jesus was subject to his parents, was he not subject as the one divine person with his divine nature present in his sacred humanity? For this is precisely the meaning of the hypostatic union. Thus, one could argue that St. Joseph, after Our Lady, has the highest relation to the divine hypostasis of any creature. It is true that Our Lady in a wholly unique way is daughter of the Father, mother of the Son, and spouse of the Holy Spirit; and yet by the will of Divine Providence, is not St. Joseph in some mysterious way the vicar of the Father in his role as foster father of Jesus? And, in his chaste union with Our Lady, he enters into the divine mystery in the most intimate way, a way that no angel could approach. For this reason, we can argue that in fact his dignity amongst creatures is second only to Mary, and that his assistance is therefore universal.

St. Joseph, as master of Our Lord’s substance, is not only the master of his earthly needs and his historical household, not only the shepherd of his sacred humanity, but also the ruler of his substance as it extends trans-historically: the Church. Again, we can appeal to Leo XIII: “Now the divine house which Joseph ruled with the authority of a father, contained within its limits the scarce-born Church.”⁹ For the Church is the mystical body of Christ, as St. Paul articulates so well: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, *so it is with Christ*. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of the one Spirit” (1 Cor 2:12; emphasis added). Christ is identical with his body the Church. Christ’s very substance *is* the Church. For this reason, St. Joseph, Protector of Christ, is rightly invoked as the Protector of Holy Church.

The Church is in a very real sense Christ himself living and acting in the

⁹ Leo XIII, *Quamquam Pluries*, §3.

world. The union between the Church and Christ, its invisible Head, is such that Christ remains with the Church in a real way, even after ascending to the Father and leaving the Church a visible head, his vicar on earth, the pope. Christ and his Church are *one thing*, or else what did Our Lord mean when he said to St. Paul on the road to Damascus: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?" (Acts 9:4). Christ and his followers form a whole. The Head and body form one organism; they form *one person*. The Head directs and guides the movements of the whole person. Hence, no matter the failings, degradations, sins, or scandals of her members, the Church herself is perfect, immaculate, indefectible, infallible, and holy. Christ, though invisible, vivifies the whole visible Church, which is the Church militant, and the invisible Church—the Church triumphant and the Church suffering. The Church is holy because Christ himself is holy.

St. Joseph is ruler over Christ's substance, the Church. What, then, is the substance of the Church? Her sacraments and her doctrine. There is no other purpose for the Church except the extension of Our Lord's salvific grace throughout all time in her "rational worship" (*logikēen latreian*) and in her teaching. St. Paul writes: "I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercy of God, that you present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing unto God, your rational worship" (Rom 12:1). Christianity is fundamentally a rational (though not rationalist) religion. And this is because it springs from the side of its Crucified Lord, who is the *Logos*. And this Word, this divine *Logos*, the one Word spoken from all eternity by the Father, is the foundation of all reality and of being. He is indeed Being itself. St. Thomas puts it eloquently in his Eucharistic hymn *Adore Te Devote*: "There is nothing truer than this Word of truth." In the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Mass, the fullness of the Christic kenosis and the power and grace of Christ's real presence become fundamentally real to us.

And yet, our culture is marked by a profound irrationality and an inability to recognize the real, which take the form of almost pathological self-assertion. The liturgy of the world is self-worship. And so the titles of St. Joseph that most recommend themselves to the modern age are Protector of Holy Church and Terror of Demons (from the *Litany of St. Joseph*).

What does it mean to be the Terror of Demons, and why should such a seemingly antiquated title be employed for St. Joseph today? To give answer, it would be instructive to turn to St. Thomas's treatment of the angels in his treatise on creation. The angels are pure intellect, unique in substance, created to serve God and fulfill the plans of Divine Providence. On the contrary, the demons, corrupted by sin, have perverted the end for

which they were made.¹⁰ Whereas the good angels assist the unfolding of God's plan on earth and provide direction and consolation to the faithful in their pilgrim wayfaring (*status viatoris*), so too do the demons exercise a kind of anti-ministry, seeking to erect a *corpus diaboli* on earth grounded in the hatred of God.¹¹

The hatred of God is also the hatred of reality, of Being and Truth and Goodness itself, and so the goal of the demons is the setting up of "an absolutely independent anti-reality,"¹² which is of course an impossibility, since it is contrary to Divine Providence. St. Thomas tells us that the principal intention of the demons is to prevent the salvation of men by tempting them to sin.¹³ Sin is the only evil thing, since it entails separation from God.

Another way to describe this anti-providential anti-reality is as an anti-Church, governed by false prophets, St. Augustine's alternate City of Evil. In his sermon on the third Sunday after the feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul,¹⁴ St. Thomas equates the false prophets of Matthew 7:15 with false *magistri* and gives a list of their characteristics: they preach and teach false things, like Arius, "who wanted to correct the doctrine of Christ"; they say things the world wants to hear; they call good evil and evil good; they are falsely inspired (either deluded by the devil or by their own will); they sow doubt and discord. And the principal vice of false *magistri* is hypocrisy.

In what way does Saint Joseph terrorize these demons of malice, discord, hypocrisy, and false teaching? Principally through his perfection of the evangelical counsels. His perfect poverty is evidenced by the humble cave of Christ's birth and the turtledoves offered at the Presentation in the Temple. His perfect chastity is demonstrated in his care for Our Lady, in his fatherly model for Jesus, and in his unfailing fortitude in the face of suffering. And his perfect obedience is evidenced by his unquestioning abandonment to Divine Providence. St. Joseph's secure faith and his perfect humility led him to trust in God even in the most obscure of circumstances. Because of his profound humility, we can accord him as the friend of the angels. For

¹⁰ See Serge-Thomas Bonino, O.P., *Angels and Demons: A Catholic Introduction*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 193.

¹¹ Bonino, *Angels and Demons*, 281. See also *ST I*, q. 114, a. 1.

¹² Bonino, *Angels and Demons*, 282.

¹³ *ST I*, q. 114, a. 1.

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, "Attendite A Falsis: Sermon on the Third Sunday After the Feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul," in *Thomas Aquinas: The Academic Sermons*, trans. Mark-Robin Hoogland, C.P., The Fathers of the Church, Medieval Continuation (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 195–213.

after all, it was an angel who instructed him to take Mary as his wife, an angel who commanded him to flee to Egypt to protect the Holy Family, to return to Israel after the death of Herod, and to go to Galilee (Matt 2:19–23). St. Joseph's mastery of the evangelical counsels and of the virtues is precisely what makes him the Terror of Demons. He is not grounded in self-assertion; he is grounded in God.

If the intention of the demons is, as St. Thomas writes, the loss of souls, then we need St. Joseph today more than ever. St. Paul reminds us that we are fighting against "principalities and powers, against the ruler of the world of darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in high places" (Eph 6:12). St. Joseph is the terror of the demons of every age, who seek the destruction of the Church, because they seek to destroy Christ. St. Joseph is in every age the terror of false *magistri*, who attempt to pervert the singular mission of the Church, the salvation of souls. If in every age the Church is tempted by worldly aims and to conformity to this world, then in every age there stands St. Joseph as Protector of Holy Church, pointing her to her supernatural mission. If in every age the Church is challenged by the hypocrisy of her own members, then in every age stands St. Joseph in his interior and exterior purity, as the Terror of Demons, ready to purify the Church through his intercession and to protect the authentic magisterium of the Church.

For this reason, we may confidently pray, as the Church does: "Defend, O most watchful guardian of the Holy Family, the chosen offspring of Jesus Christ. Keep from us, O most loving Father, all blight of error and corruption. Aid us from on high, most valiant defender, in this conflict with the powers of darkness. And even as of old thou didst rescue the Child Jesus from the peril of His life, so now defend God's Holy Church from the snares of the enemy and from all adversity."¹⁵ N·V

¹⁵ Leo XIII, *Quamquam Pluries*, concluding "Prayer to Saint Joseph."