

DOLOROSA

CHRISTMAS EDITION

ADVENT 2018



At the end of November, I flew from Albany to Albuquerque, New Mexico. The purpose of the trip was to join in marriage a young couple from our chapel in Durango, Colorado. After the wedding on Saturday morning, I set out on a four-hour drive to Durango, where I was scheduled to say Mass on Sunday. As I drove north on Interstate 25, I saw a sign for Santa Fe, New Mexico. The sign reminded me of the spiral staircase that was built in Santa Fe by a mysterious carpenter in the latter nineteenth century. It was the answer to the prayers of the Sisters of Loretto. Since Santa Fe was only about forty-five minutes out of my way and realizing I might not have this opportunity again, I decided to find the chapel which housed the staircase.

With the aid of the GPS, I made it to Santa Fe. When I arrived, some sort of festival was going on, so the streets were thronged. Eventually, I found a place to park and headed to the chapel.

The Loretto Chapel was built in the late nineteenth century for the Sisters of Loretto. The Order of Loretto was started in Kentucky in 1812. In 1852 at the request

of Bishop Jean Lamy, the Archbishop of Santa Fe, a group of Sisters was sent from Kentucky to New Mexico. There, they established a convent.

To help spread the Faith among the people of New Mexico, one of the first duties of the Sisters was to educate the children. And so, soon after their arrival, a school was built. About twenty years later, construction began on a chapel next to the school. It was completed five years later in 1878. However, upon completion, the Sisters discovered that an error had been made somewhere along the line.

The chapel was patterned after Sainte Chapelle in Paris—the private chapel of King Louis IX. It was rather exquisite, but there was one problem: there was no way to get to the choir loft, which stood twenty feet above the chapel floor. Apparently, the architect had forgotten to plan for a staircase to reach the loft. Another theory is that he died before having a chance to build the staircase. At any rate, the Sisters were in a predicament.

Since the chapel is somewhat small, an ordinary staircase would take up much space. A circular staircase was thus necessary. The



Sisters called in a number of carpenters, but each lacked the skill to construct such a staircase. The only solutions they had for the Sisters were to either rebuild the choir loft with a proper staircase or to use a ladder.

The Sisters did not know what to do. Having already placed the construction of their chapel under the care of Saint Joseph, they did the next logical thing—they began a nine-day novena to this great Patron of Carpenters. During the novena they prayed with special fervor, confident that Saint Joseph would intercede for them and help them out of their predicament.

On the ninth and final day of the novena, an old gray-haired, bearded man came to the chapel with a donkey and a toolbox. He asked the Sisters if he could be of any service. The Sisters explained the problem in the chapel. After hearing the story, the mysterious man offered to attempt to build a spiral staircase to the choir loft. This would solve the Sisters' problem because a spiral staircase would fit perfectly in the small chapel.

The old carpenter was hired on a verbal agreement. He then set to work immediately. The only tools he had with him, according to the archives of the Sisters of Loretto, were a saw, a carpenter's square, and a hammer. He worked alone inside the chapel with the doors locked, not allowing anyone to see his work.

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The staircase was meticulously built. It consists of thirty-three steps that are about twenty-two feet high. It makes two 360-degree turns, forming the shape of a spiral. Interestingly enough, the staircase was built using only square wooden pegs. Not a single nail or screw was used by the carpenter. Furthermore, the wood used to build the staircase was not native to that region. In fact, it was later discovered by the Sisters that the local lumberyard had no record of wood being purchased for the project. Over a hundred years later, in 1996, a wood analysis was performed by a wood technologist. After the fifteen-month study, it was concluded that the wood of the staircase is a species of spruce of unknown origin. It was thus given a scientific name in 1997: *Pinaceae Picea Josefii Easley*. It is more commonly known as Loretto Spruce.



At length, after the mysterious man finished the staircase, he left as abruptly as he had come. He was never again seen by the Sisters. He asked for no money; he looked for no gratitude. He simply picked up and left. The Sisters searched for the man, but they could find no trace of him. He apparently left Santa Fe never to return. It is thus piously believed—and not without good reason—that it was Saint Joseph himself who came in answer to the Sisters' prayers.

The identity of the carpenter, however, is not the only mystery surrounding this staircase. There is another mystery—a mystery as to its physical construction. What is most unique about it is that such a spiral staircase would normally require a support in the middle. This staircase has no pole or center support. All of its weight lies on the bottom step. According to one article, a number of engineers have examined the staircase, but they cannot discover how it can balance without any central support. There is no architectural explanation for it.

Now, you will find many non-believers who have tried to disprove this miraculous staircase. While it is true that the Church has never made any statement on the matter—for the Church always proceeds very cautiously in such things—the point is this: the Loretto Sisters prayed to Saint Joseph to solve

their problem, and on the last day of their novena, they unexpectedly received their answer; they received it in a most extraordinary way.

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In so many cases, this is precisely how Saint Joseph works. He has always been one to work behind the scenes, so to speak. He has always done his job out of the limelight, that is, with attracting as little attention as possible. This was true of him throughout his life, and this was especially true of him during the first Advent and Christmas. Saint Joseph is, you could say, the unsung saint of Christmas. He is an unsung saint for two reasons: first, because not a single word of his is recorded in Sacred Scripture, and second, because whenever one reads about the birth of Our Divine Savior, Saint Joseph is usually in the background. Even the shepherds, it would seem, get more recognition than Saint Joseph. On Christmas cards and in pictures which depict the Nativity, one will typically find Saint Joseph standing off to the side or in the back, if he is even included in the picture at all. But, as I said, this is what he prefers.

Although he is often hidden in the background during Advent and the Christmas season, he is



nonetheless an exemplary model of how we ought to keep Advent. By his actions and the virtues he practiced immediately preceding the birth of Christ, Saint Joseph gives us an admirable pattern of preparation for the celebration of Christmas.

Like Our Lady and Saint Joseph, we, too, are on a journey to Bethlehem. We are trekking through the four weeks of Advent to arrive at Bethlehem on Christmas Day. As we make our way through Advent striving to prepare our hearts to celebrate Christmas as perfectly as possible, let us take a closer look at how Saint Joseph traveled to Bethlehem with Our Lady. During that trip, he practiced to an eminent degree many virtues, but four that most stand out are his patience, recollection, confidence in God, and detachment.

Patience

Saint Joseph was first and foremost a model of patience on the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Patience is a virtue which helps us to bear sufferings and trials for the love of God. Patience thus helps us to avoid becoming upset when things go wrong. It assists us in our struggles and difficulties.

When Saint Joseph first learned of the census called by Caesar Augustus, he did not react by grumbling and complaining





the way many people would and probably did: “Why did Caesar have to call a census now?” “Doesn’t he know it’s winter and traveling will be difficult for many people?” “How arrogant! Call a census to discover how many subjects you have! What a proud man that Caesar is!” Saint Joseph did not complain like this. In fact, he did not let one word of criticism or complaint fall from his lips. He saw the census as the will of God, and he patiently accepted it. And so, with the Blessed Virgin Mary bearing the Eternal Son of God in her womb, he set out for Bethlehem.

“The journey was a long one,” says Saint Alphonsus in *The Incarnation, Birth, and Infancy of Our Lord Jesus Christ*. “[It was] long and difficult, for [Mary and Joseph] had to traverse mountains and steep paths, through the wind, the rain, and the cold” (141). Furthermore, the roads were probably thronged with people who were also traveling to Bethlehem. We see this in our own day—streets crowded with people, roads crowded with cars. How many people today lose their patience in the comfort of their cars when they are stuck in a traffic jam or when another person drives slowly or foolishly? How many people give way to anger in such situations? Not Saint Joseph—he did not lose his patience with the “traffic” en route to Bethlehem. He calmly carried on walking beside the donkey, guiding Our Lady to Bethlehem. He saw the difficulties of

the journey as coming from the hand of God, and he willingly accepted them for the love of God.

Saint Joseph’s patience on the way to Bethlehem, and even within the city, was admirable, but, at the same time, it is relatively easy to imitate. His patience consisted simply in bearing with resignation, and in silence, the trials and sorrows that each day brought upon him. In fact, Our Lady revealed to Saint Bridget, as Pere Binet tells us in *The Divine Favors Granted To*

Our Lady revealed to Saint Bridget that Saint Joseph had these words ever on his lips: “Heaven grant that I may live so as to accomplish the Will of my God.”

Saint Joseph, that Saint Joseph had these words ever on his lips: “Heaven grant that I may live so as to accomplish the Will of my God” (80). Thus, when the trials came, Saint Joseph saw them as a manifestation of God’s will.

◡ *Recollection* ◡

Another virtue that Saint Joseph practiced to a high degree on the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem was recollection. By recollection, I mean that Saint Joseph kept himself in the presence of God by cultivating a spirit of prayer and silence. He did not allow himself to be distracted or bothered by what was going on around him. When he spoke with the Blessed Virgin it was about God and heavenly things.

As we journey through Advent, let us, like Saint Joseph, strive to foster a spirit of recollection—a habit of silence and prayer. One way we can do this is by turning down the noise around us. By that I mean,



turn off the music, the television, and anything else that can distract us from thinking about Our Divine Savior and the purpose of Advent.

Another way we can foster recollection is by frequently raising our minds and hearts to God. This we can do by frequently praying little aspirations and invocations in our minds. We can pray: “My God, I love Thee,” or the aspiration of Saint Joseph: “Heaven grant that I may live so as to accomplish the Will of my God.” We can use invocations such as: “Sacred Heart of Jesus, I place my trust in Thee,” or “Mother Mary, ever virgin, help me to save my soul.”

During Advent, we can even use our material preparations for Christmas—the things with which we come into contact throughout the season—to raise our minds and hearts to God by thinking about their connection with the true meaning of Christmas.

≡ Confidence in God ≡

After four days of traveling, Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem. It is here that we see Saint Joseph’s confidence in God shine brightly.

As Mary and Joseph passed through the crowded, busy, and bustling city, they looked for a place to stay. Home after home, they approached. Door upon door, they knocked. Their quest to find a place for the night gave these inhabitants of Bethlehem an opportunity to receive one of the most sublime privileges in

history—that of having the Savior of the World born in their house. But this wondrous privilege was rejected. Door after door was closed to the Holy Family, and the only answer they received was this: “Sorry, no room.” Not a single person could be found with enough charity or generosity in his heart to open his home and give even a small room to an expecting mother. Not even the inn of Bethlehem, which had room for even the lowest class of people, had a place for Our Divine Savior, His Blessed Mother, and His foster father. In *The Life and Glories of Saint Joseph*, Edward Healey Thomson, M.A., relates that Saint Joseph tried no less than fifty homes, but everywhere he met with the same cold indifference (233).

How did Saint Joseph react in these adverse circumstances? Did he grow angry and impatient with the people who refused him lodging? Did he grow discouraged and sad? Did he begin to doubt God’s providence and question His holy will? No, he did not. Saint Joseph responded to this adversity by rising to the occasion and renewing His confidence in Almighty God. He knew that God was in charge and that He had led Our Lady and him that far. He understood that God had a plan. He was thus confident that God would lead them the rest of the way. They needed only to follow the divine plan.

So, it must be with us. When we are faced with adverse situations, such as suffering, hardship, sorrow, and even temptation, we must not lose hope. When discouragement sets in and the devil tempts us to doubt God’s loving providence and question His holy will, we must not yield. Rather, we must remember the holy example of Saint Joseph and take heart, placing our confidence in Our Divine Savior. Things are going to happen to us that we will not understand. Despite this, we must be convinced, as Saint Joseph was, that God has a plan for us, that He has led us this far, and that by His grace, He will lead us through whatever difficulties we may face.



≡ Detachment ≡

With midnight fast approaching, Our Lady and Saint Joseph sought a place of refuge outside the walls of Bethlehem. There they found a little grotto or cave, which, like so many others in that country, served as a stable for the animals that grazed in the surrounding fields. In this humble abode they stayed the night, and in this stable, the Eternal Son of God was born into the world.

The trip to Bethlehem began with poverty. Our Lady and Saint Joseph lived a simple life at Nazareth. They possessed neither much money nor many material goods. And so, when they set out for the city of David, they went with the bare minimum: a small supply of provisions sufficient to nourish them along the way, the swaddling clothes for the Divine Infant, and a donkey. The journey itself was marked with poverty. The sight of Our Lady seated upon the donkey with Saint Joseph, staff in hand, walking at her side through the cold, rain, and wind is evidence enough of the poverty of the Holy Family. Finally, the journey ended with poverty. It ended in a humble stable.

At Bethlehem and throughout his life, Saint Joseph had no desire for the riches and pleasures of this life. He desired God alone. He was thus content with whatever God gave Him and wanted nothing more. In a word, Saint Joseph was detached from the material things of this world. Yes, he used and enjoyed what God gave him and he was grateful for God's blessings, but he was not preoccupied with material things.

How we should strive to imitate his spirit of detachment from worldly cares! How we should strive to emulate his holy example, especially at this time of year when people are so preoccupied with the goods of this world that they forget the reason we celebrate Christmas and give gifts.

Very simply, detachment consists in living in the world without being absorbed by its goods, its cares, and its news. It is quite possible, then, for a wealthy person to be detached from the goods of the world and for a poor person to be attached or absorbed by the things of the world.

Detachment, therefore, involves using the material things with which God has blessed us and enjoying the pleasures of this life as befits Catholics. God wants us to have joy in this life. He wants us to partake in good, wholesome entertainment and recreation; He wants us to use the things of this world; but, He does not want us to become engrossed in these. In other words, He does not want us to become so

absorbed in the things and pleasures of the world that we begin to neglect our daily prayers and the practice of our Faith. He wants us to keep our priorities straight. Our Divine Savior is even delighted when we take part in the Christmas shopping and decorating, the music, the baking, and so on. He delights because these things contribute remarkably to the joy of the season and the celebration of the anniversary of His birth. However, we must partake of these material preparations as befits Catholics, remembering that the Christ Child is the reason for them.



These four virtues—patience, recollection, confidence in God, and detachment—were practiced by Saint Joseph throughout his life and to an eminent degree on the journey to Bethlehem. What strengthened him in the practice of virtue was, of course, his love for God, but it was also his undying love for and devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is no exaggeration to say that after Christ, Saint Joseph had the greatest devotion to Our Lady that anyone could ever have. He imitated her virtues. He did everything for her, with her, in her, and through her, as Saint Louis de Montfort teaches us to do. She, after Christ, was the cornerstone of his virtue and the secret of his sanctity. So, she should be for us.

As we undertake our journey through Advent to Christmas, let us strive to cultivate the virtues Saint Joseph practiced during that first Advent journey. Let us do this at Our Lady's side—with our hand in hers.

We can work on one of the virtues for each of the four weeks of Advent, or we can focus on one of them for the whole course of the season. But, whatever we decide to do, let us persevere in our holy resolution.

May Saint Joseph, the unsung saint of Christmas, assist us in our holy endeavor to prepare well for the anniversary of Christ's birth. May he help us, too, as he once helped the Sisters of Loretto. May

he assist us in building our spiral staircase of sanctity one virtue at a time, so that one day, having completed it, we may share in the happiness he now enjoys for all eternity.



NOVENA PRAYER TO SAINT JOSEPH
(As prayed by the Sisters of Loretto in 1878)

O glorious St. Joseph, * faithful follower of Jesus Christ, * to you we raise our hearts and hands * to implore your powerful intercession * in obtaining from the benign Heart of Jesus * all the helps and graces necessary * for our spiritual and temporal welfare, * particularly the grace of a happy death * and the special favor we now implore (*name it*).

O Guardian of the Word Incarnate, * we feel animated with confidence * that your prayers on our behalf * will be graciously heard before the throne of God.

(Then the following versicle is said seven times, in honor of the seven joys and sorrows of St. Joseph.)

V. O glorious St. Joseph, through the love you bear to Jesus Christ, and for the glory of His name,

R. Hear our prayers and obtain our petitions.

Let us pray.

O glorious St. Joseph, spouse of the immaculate Virgin * obtain for me a pure, humble and charitable mind * and perfect resignation to the Divine Will. * Be my guide, father and model through life * that I may merit to die as thou didst * in the arms of Jesus and Mary.

