

## WONDER 4

### VIRGINAL FATHER OF JESUS

Since there is nothing on record that he [St. Joseph] ever had any other spouse than the Virgin Mary, it is also certain that he remained a virgin all his life.

— St. Jerome

### Feast of the Holy Spouses

No husband and wife ever loved one another so much as Joseph and Mary.<sup>1</sup>

— Venerable Fulton J. Sheen

**D**id you know there is a liturgical feast that celebrates the marriage of Mary and Joseph? It's called the "Feast of the Holy Spouses" (sometimes also referred to as the "Feast of the Espousals of Mary and Joseph").

The Feast of the Holy Spouses has a long history going all the way back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The day traditionally designated for the feast is January 23. In a few countries, the feast is celebrated on January 22 or November 26, but those dates tend to be exceptions. Nobody is exactly sure why January 23 was chosen as the day for the feast, but we are given a fascinating insight into the date in the mystical visions of Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824).

In the accounts we have of her visions, Blessed Anne Catherine claims to have been transported to the marriage of Mary and Joseph and witnessed the ceremony. Blessed Anne Catherine offers details about the wedding and explicitly mentions the date of the marriage. She writes:

The espousals took place, I think, upon our 23rd of January. They were celebrated in Jerusalem, on Mount Zion, in a house used for such feasts.<sup>2</sup>

Another mystic, Venerable Mary of Ágreda (1602-1665), also claims to have had visions about the lives of Mary and Joseph. She wrote extensively about her mystical experiences and claims to also have been present at the wedding of Mary and St. Joseph. Her

account of the wedding provides detailed descriptions of such things as the dress Our Lady wore, the stateliness and attractiveness of St. Joseph, and the joy experienced by everyone in attendance. Venerable Mary of Ágreda wrote the following about what she witnessed at the wedding of Mary and St. Joseph:

By divine operation the two most holy and chaste spouses felt an incomparable joy and consolation [on their wedding day]. The heavenly princess, as one who is the Mistress of all virtues, lovingly corresponded to the desires of St. Joseph. The Most High also gave to St. Joseph new purity and complete command over his natural inclinations so that he might serve his spouse Mary.<sup>3</sup>

Why don't more people know about the liturgical feast of the Holy Spouses? Well, unfortunately, the feast is not on the universal liturgical calendar of the Church. The Feast of the Holy Spouses is only celebrated in a few shrines dedicated to St. Joseph (for example, the Oratory of St. Joseph in Montreal, Canada); a few dioceses where the local bishop has approved it; and in several religious communities dedicated to St. Joseph. One notable religious community that celebrates the Feast of the Holy Spouses is the Oblates of St. Joseph. Founded in Asti, Italy, by St. Joseph Marelló in 1878, the Oblates of St. Joseph are a wonderful religious community of men serving the Church, and they celebrate the feast annually on January 23. Their founder, St. Joseph Marelló, was a very holy bishop who had a tremendous love of and devotion to St. Joseph. He was canonized by St. John Paul II in 2001.

Interestingly, in 2002, St. John Paul II also offered the world the Luminous Mysteries of the rosary. The Luminous Mysteries were actually founded in 1957 by St. George Preca of Malta, but St. John Paul II offered them to the universal Church to help us call to mind important truths of Christianity that are under attack today. The Second Luminous Mystery is the Wedding Feast at Cana. In meditating on this mystery, we are reminded that marriage is between a man and a woman.

Since this perennial truth is so hotly contested today, the Church needs a universal liturgical feast that celebrates marriage. It would be truly wonderful if the Church placed the Feast of the Holy Spouses on the universal liturgical calendar. Such a feast would serve as a reminder to all men and women of the sanctity of Holy Matrimony. What a delight it would be to liturgically celebrate the holiest couple

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who ever lived! Let us pray that more places request permission to celebrate the Feast of the Holy Spouses, and that someday it may be placed on the universal liturgical calendar.

Everything that refers to that marriage [of Mary and Joseph] happened by an intimate disposition of the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

— St. Bonaventure

### Virginal Father of Jesus

It is perfectly in accordance with the faith and spirit of the Church, to honor as a virgin not only the Mother of God, but likewise Joseph.<sup>1</sup>

— St. Peter Damian

The mother of Jesus is a virgin, a perpetual virgin. The perpetual virginity of Mary has been a very important teaching of Christianity from the beginning. How important? Well, in the fourth century, a bishop named Bonoso from Illyricum (that is, modern day areas of Albania, Montenegro, and Croatia) was rebuked by his brother bishops and stripped of his episcopacy for teaching that Mary and Joseph had more children after Jesus was born. The pope at the time, St. Pope Siricius, wrote a letter to the faithful bishops in Illyricum thanking them for disciplining the errant bishop. He wrote:

We surely cannot deny that you were right in correcting the doctrine about children of Mary, and you are right in rejecting the idea that any other offspring should come from the same virginal womb from which Christ was born according to the flesh.<sup>2</sup>

The doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity is such an important teaching of Christianity that St. Pope Martin I made it a dogma of the faith at the Lateran Council in 649.

With this in mind, did you know that there is a tradition in the Church that holds that St. Joseph was a perpetual virgin as well? It is a tradition that has been adhered to and promoted by saints, holy mystics, and popes for centuries. Before delving into this tradition, it is necessary to address common objections that are often raised against the virginity of Mary. In addressing these objections, a clearer picture of the virginity of St. Joseph will emerge.