

WONDER 8

SILENT WITNESS

He [St. Joseph] is truly the saint who carried out his duty in silence but with angelic fervor.

— Blessed Gabriele Allegra

A Miraculous Staircase in New Mexico

He [St. Joseph] took his [Jesus'] little hands and raising them to heaven he said: "Stars of heaven, behold the hands which created you; O Sun, behold the arm that drew you out of nothingness."¹

— Blessed William Joseph Chaminade

Saint Joseph is the Guardian of Virgins. As a good father, he looks after their needs. An example of his fatherly protection is evidenced in what he did for a group of religious sisters in New Mexico in 1878.

In 1873, the Sisters of Loretto operated a girl's academy in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The academy was very successful, so the sisters wanted to build a new chapel. They hired a well-known architect to complete the task. The building project took five years to complete. However, once the chapel was finished, the sisters realized that the chapel lacked a way to get to the upper choir loft without the use of a very long ladder; the choir loft was 20 feet above the main floor. Climbing such a ladder was very difficult for the sisters, who wore a floor-length religious habit. They also realized that there was no room left in the main chapel area for a staircase to be built because of the many pews, and the sisters could not rehire the man who had built the chapel because he died shortly after the chapel was completed. What were they to do?

Well, the sisters prayed to St. Joseph for help. They began a novena to St. Joseph asking him to send a carpenter to help them. Remarkably, on the final day of the novena, a mysterious man arrived at the convent and stated that he was interested in building a staircase to the choir loft for the sisters. The gentleman had only one request: He wanted to work alone and behind closed doors. The sisters readily accepted his offer and hired him.

It took the man three months to build the staircase. Once the project was completed, the man could not be found. He simply vanished from the town. No one saw him leave, and no one knew who he was. The sisters looked for him everywhere but could not find him. They even ran an ad in the local newspaper to try and locate him. It didn't work.

Unsuccessful, the sisters went to the lumberyard to inquire who had obtained the lumber for the staircase, as well as to pay for the lumber. When questioned, not one person at the lumberyard knew what they were talking about. The sisters were informed that the lumberyard had never sold any wood to a man building a staircase for a chapel.

Perplexed, the sisters remembered how odd it was that the man had only had a T-square, a saw, a hammer, and a few other basic tools. Come to think of it, none of the sisters ever did see how the lumber arrived at the chapel either. Intrigued, the sisters and others from the town inspected the staircase and realized that the mysterious man had constructed something quite unique. It was a spiral staircase that didn't interfere with the pews on the main floor in any way. It had 30 steps, no center support or load-bearing column, and appeared to be floating in air. It also contained no nails! It was found to be held together by square wooden pegs. The staircase is an architectural wonder. It's a carpenter's masterpiece!

So where did the wood come from? Well, in 1996, a study was done by Forrest N. Easley, a forester and wood technologist for the United States Forest Service and the United States Naval Research Laboratory. His extensive study found that the wood of the staircase is spruce, but unlike any other spruce in the world. Additional studies were undertaken, and it was determined that the spruce that most resembles the kind found in the spiral staircase is only found in Israel.

Who was the mysterious man who built the staircase? The Sisters of Loretto believe that it was St. Joseph. After praying and asking their spiritual father to send someone to construct a staircase for them, St. Joseph came himself and built it for the consecrated virgins. The staircase remains intact to this day.