

Unfortunately, St. André did not live to see the completion of the basilica. He died in 1937 at the age of 91. However, for his efforts to spread devotion to St. Joseph, he is known throughout the world as the greatest “Apostle of St. Joseph” of the 20th century. He was so loved and respected that more than 1 million people passed by his open coffin before his funeral Mass took place. He was beatified by St. John Paul II in 1982 and canonized by Pope Benedict XVI in 2010. On the universal liturgical calendar, St. André’s feast day is celebrated on January 6, the day he died. In Canada, his feast is celebrated on January 7 because the Solemnity of the Epiphany is always celebrated on January 6, and solemnities take precedence.

Today, more than 2 million people visit St. Joseph’s Oratory annually. People travel on pilgrimage to St. Joseph’s Oratory from all over the world, asking for special graces through the intercession of St. Joseph and St. André Bessette. Whether they pray for health, assistance with difficult marriages, the conversion of wayward children, or other matters that weigh on the human heart, all who visit the basilica find peace, hope, and consolation in St. Joseph.

The earthly remains of St. André are reserved in the basilica, and a special reliquary contains his heart. In 1984, St. John Paul II journeyed to St. Joseph’s Oratory as a pilgrim while on a papal visit to Canada. Before the tomb of St. André, the saintly pope poured out his heart to St. André and St. Joseph. Below is a section from St. John Paul II’s beautiful prayer offered on that occasion:

Blessed [Saint] Brother André Bessette, porter of the college, and custodian of the Oratory of St. Joseph, give hope to all those who continue to seek your help. Teach them confidence in the virtue of prayer, and with it, the path of conversion and the Sacraments. Through you, and through St. Joseph, may God continue to pour out his blessings. Amen.³

Delight of Saints

With the exception of our loving Mother, St. Joseph stands above all the saints.¹

— St. Maximilian Kolbe

Saint Joseph is a unique saint. He is honored and loved as the man closest to Christ. His virtues and holiness are extraordinary.

Many Fathers of the Church — for example, St. Jerome and St. Augustine — praised St. Joseph as an example of love, humility, and dedication to Jesus and Mary. Saint Gregory Nazianzen considered St. Joseph to be so holy that he called him the most luminous of all the saints. He wrote:

The Almighty has concentrated in St. Joseph, as in a Sun of unrivalled luster, the combined light and splendor of all the other saints.²

Saint Gregory Nazianzen's statement is a bold one. As a Doctor of the Church, his teaching has perennial value. Is he claiming that St. Joseph's holiness exceeds even that of Our Lady? No, that's not what he is saying. There is, however, something very important to be learned from St. Gregory's exalted praise of St. Joseph.

Let me explain.

From the beginning of Christianity, all of Jesus' followers acknowledged the superlative holiness of Mary, the mother of Jesus. It was rare, however, for anyone in the early Church to refer to Mary as a saint. "Why is that?" you wonder. Well, the early Christians considered Mary to be so holy that they gave her a unique category of holiness. Her person and privileges are so great that she was given the title "All-Holy Mother of God." Even today, it is extremely rare for a Catholic to refer to the Virgin Mary as "St." Mary. When that title is used by Catholics, it is generally used for a building or an institution that has been named in honor of the Virgin Mary. For example, many churches, schools, and hospitals are named "St. Mary's." In everyday conversation, however, it is almost unheard of for a Catholic to refer to the Virgin Mary as "St. Mary." If a Catholic does call her "St. Mary," it is very likely that the person is a convert to Catholicism from one of the many Protestant denominations.

This helps us to understand why saints throughout history refer to St. Joseph as the greatest of all the saints; namely, the Virgin Mary is in a different category altogether. In the Kingdom of God, Mary is the most elevated of all creatures, but St. Joseph outranks all the other saints. Please keep this distinction in mind as you make your way through the rest of the book. At times, it will seem as though saints, blessed, and popes are claiming that St. Joseph is holier than Mary in their statements. Just remember — he isn't.

Okay. So the early Church understood St. Joseph to be the holiest human person after Mary, but what about the statement

Jesus himself made regarding the greatness of St. John the Baptist? Remember that? In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says: “I tell you, among those born of women, no one is greater than John [the Baptist] ... ” (Lk 7:28). Isn’t Jesus saying that St. John the Baptist is greater than St. Joseph?

Actually, that’s not what Jesus is saying at all. In the 16th century, St. Lawrence of Brindisi offered an articulate and well-thought-out response to this exact question. He wrote:

Though not his [Jesus’] father by generation, he [St. Joseph] was his father in his upbringing, his care, and the affection of his heart. It seems to me, therefore, that Joseph is clearly the holiest of all the saints, holier than the patriarchs, than the prophets, than the apostles, than all the other saints. The objection cannot be raised that the Lord said of John the Baptist: *Among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist* [Lk 7:28; see also Mt 11:11]. Just as this cannot be understood to mean that John is even holier than Christ or the Blessed Virgin, so it can’t be understood in reference to blessed Joseph, the spouse of the Virgin Mary and the father of Christ, for just as husband and wife are one flesh, so too Joseph and Mary were one heart, one soul, one spirit. And as in that first marriage God created Eve to be like Adam, so in this second marriage he made Joseph to be like the Blessed Virgin in holiness and justice.³

Saint Lawrence’s reasoning is theologically brilliant and flawless. After all, Jesus and Mary themselves were born of women. Jesus can’t possibly be stating that St. John the Baptist is greater than the Son of God and his Immaculate Mother!

To better understand why Jesus is not saying that John the Baptist is greater than St. Joseph, it is important to examine the entire statement made by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. It reads: “I tell you, among those born of women, no one is greater than John [the Baptist]; *yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he*” (Lk 7:28, emphasis added). When you read the entire passage, you realize that Jesus is making this statement *before the new covenant is established*.

Saint John the Baptist is the greatest Old Testament figure because he is the friend of the Bridegroom. He is the greatest man, not because he is the holiest man who ever lived, but because he is the “best man” at the wedding of the Messiah (see Jn 3:29). He is the greatest man of the old covenant, not the new covenant.

Who is the more important person at a wedding, the best man or the bride? The answer is obvious. The bride is the greatest. What

Jesus is saying, therefore, is that everyone, even the least person in the Kingdom of Heaven (that is, those who celebrate the wedding of the Lamb), is espoused to God and, therefore, greater than the best man at the wedding. In heaven, even the least person is greater than John the Baptist was held to be on earth because they are eternally espoused to God.

Another way of understanding the preeminence of St. Joseph over all the saints, including St. John the Baptist, is by acknowledging the supreme dignity of the fatherhood of St. Joseph. As great as John the Baptist is, he was not the father of Jesus Christ. Fatherhood has rights and privileges to accompany its duties and responsibilities, and the fatherly mission of St. Joseph required greater graces than any other saint has ever received.

In any kingdom not only the king and queen, who shine forth in the kingdom like the sun and the moon, but also the kingdom's princes, dukes, governors, etc., and especially the parents and blood relatives of the king, who shine like the stars in the sky, are held in honor by the king's good and faithful subjects. So, my friends, reason certainly demands that in the kingdom of Christ not only Christ and the Blessed Virgin be worthy of high esteem, but also all the saints and especially this blessed man, Joseph, the father of Christ and spouse of the most holy Virgin, be held in highest honor by Christ himself as his father and by the most holy Virgin as her husband.⁴

— St. Lawrence of Brindisi

Saint Lawrence is a remarkable apologist for St. Joseph! By the way, St. Lawrence is also a Doctor of the Church.

In the same sermon, St. Lawrence offers yet another reason why St. Joseph's exalted place in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than that of any other saint:

If Christ sits at the right hand of his Father in the glory of paradise above all the choirs of angels, because he is the first of all the predestined and was the holiest of the holiest in this world, and if the Blessed Virgin, by reason of her own holiness, holds the second place after Christ because she is also second by reason of predestination from eternity and grace in time, it seems to me that because Joseph holds the third place after Christ in eternal predestination and grace in time, so by the same reasoning he also holds the third place in the glory of paradise.⁵

Saint Joseph is the greatest saint in the Kingdom of Heaven because God predestined him for that position. This reality should make our hearts extremely joyful!

Rejoice, devout servants of St. Joseph, for you are close to paradise; the ladder leading up to it has but three rungs, Jesus, Mary, Joseph.⁶

— St. Leonard of Port Maurice

Who is not aware that, after the Blessed Mother, St. Joseph is, of all the saints, the one who is the dearest to God?⁷

— St. Alphonsus Liguori

The exalted status given to St. Joseph by Doctors of the Church has led to a particular way of describing the love and reverence due to St. Joseph. The following distinctions were created by theologians and are very helpful for understanding the reverence due to God and his saints.

latria (adoration) → God

hyperdulia (highest reverence) → Mary

protodulia (first revered) → St. Joseph

dulia (revered) → All other saints

In a unique place, over all others, is God. He alone is worthy of adoration. In Greek, the word for adoration is *latria*. Only God is worthy of *latria* (adoration). The Virgin Mary, below God but above everyone else (including the highest choirs of angels), is given a special form of veneration whose Greek name is *hyperdulia*, which means “highest reverence.” Saint Joseph, below Mary but above all the other saints, is accorded a form of veneration whose Greek name is *protodulia*, which means “first revered” among all the other saints. Last but not least are the saints. We acknowledge their holiness and honor them with a type of veneration whose Greek name is *dulia*, which means “reverence.”

One saint who loved and revered St. Joseph in an extraordinary manner is St. Teresa of Avila, another Doctor of the Church. In her autobiography, St. Teresa tells the story of how she was healed from a serious illness through the intercession of St. Joseph. Her miraculous healing led her to zealously spread devotion to St. Joseph. She was so convinced of the power and efficacy of St. Joseph’s intercession that she challenged people to put devotion to St. Joseph to the test.

Saint Teresa of Avila was a bold woman! This is what she wrote in her autobiography:

I wish I could persuade everyone to be devoted to the glorious St. Joseph, for I have great experience of the blessings which he can obtain from God. I do not remember that I have ever asked anything of him which he has failed to grant. I am astonished at the great favors which God has bestowed on me through this blessed saint, and at the perils from which he has delivered me, both in body and in soul. To other saints, the Lord seems to have given grace to help us in some of our necessities. But my experience is that St. Joseph helps us in them all; also that the Lord wishes to teach us that, as he was himself subject on earth to St. Joseph, so in heaven he now does all that Joseph asks. This has also been the experience of other persons whom I have advised to commend themselves to the saint. I only request, for the love of God, whoever will not believe me will test the truth of what I say, for he will see by experience how great a blessing it is to recommend oneself to this glorious patriarch and to be devoted to him.⁸

Many people have taken St. Teresa up on her devotional challenge. Saint Teresa's confidence in St. Joseph rests on firm theological foundations, too. Several centuries before St. Teresa, St. Thomas Aquinas, another Doctor of the Church and universally acclaimed as the greatest theologian in the history of the Church, called the powerful intercession of St. Joseph unlimited! He wrote:

There are many saints to whom God has given the power to assist us in the necessities of life, but the power given to St. Joseph is unlimited: It extends to all our needs, and all those who invoke him with confidence are sure to be heard.⁹

Truth be told, there are an endless number of holy men and women who have extolled the greatness of St. Joseph. All saints delight in him. To list all of the saints who loved and were devoted to him would be impossible, but there are a select few who really stand out:

St. Bernardine of Siena
 St. Lawrence of Brindisi
 St. Teresa of Avila
 St. Francis de Sales
 Venerable Mary of Ágreda
 St. Alphonsus Liguori
 Blessed William Joseph Chaminade
 Blessed Maria Repetto

St. Peter Julian Eymard
 Blessed Jean-Joseph Lataste
 St. Leonardo Murialdo
 St. Luigi Guanella
 Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich
 St. Joseph Marello
 Blessed Maria Teresa of St. Joseph
 Blessed Petra of St. Joseph
 St. André Bessette
 Venerable Fulton J. Sheen
 St. Josemaría Escrivá
 Blessed Gabriele Allegra

You might be familiar with some of the names on the list, but I bet there are some you have never heard of. Don't worry: You will find out more about many of them in this book. They are the champions of St. Joseph!

Saints, blessed, and mystics are not the only ones who have loved and delighted in St. Joseph. Many popes have also praised the greatness of St. Joseph.

Blessed Pope Pius IX
 Pope Leo XIII
 Pope Benedict XV
 Venerable Pope Pius XII
 St. Pope John XXIII
 St. John Paul II

The list of popes is considerably shorter than the list of saints, isn't it? The reason is because papal promotion of St. Joseph, while not entirely new, took centuries to develop. It took Church leaders a very long time to fully recognize the greatness of St. Joseph and proclaim that greatness in official documents. Nonetheless, once the papacy started to promote St. Joseph, it really took off! After Blessed Pope Pius IX, there hasn't been a single pope who has not praised the greatness and unique holiness of St. Joseph. (See page 318 for commissioned art depicting the above-mentioned 26 champions of St. Joseph.)

Did you know that Pope Leo XIII taught that the dignity of St. Joseph is so great that it can be considered higher than that of the angels, even the highest choirs of angels? He wrote:

The dignity of the Mother of God is so elevated that there can be no higher created one. But since St. Joseph was united to the Blessed Virgin by the conjugal bond, there is no doubt that

he approached nearer than any other to that super-eminent dignity of hers by which the Mother of God surpasses all created natures. Conjugal union is the greatest of all; by its very nature it is accompanied by a reciprocal communication of the goods of the spouses. If then God gave St. Joseph to Mary to be her spouse he certainly did not give him merely as a companion in life, a witness of her virginity, a guardian of her honor, but he made him also participate by the conjugal bond in the eminent dignity which was hers.¹⁰

Whoa! Pope Leo XIII's theological statement is one of the most powerful ever made about St. Joseph. Your spiritual father is higher than the angels!

In Catholic theology, it has always been taught that the Virgin Mary's love of God, and therefore her dignity and closeness to God, surpass those of all other created beings, including the angels. Her cooperation with God is unique because she collaborated materially (physically) in the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. For centuries, it was thought that, after Mary's great dignity, the nine choirs of angels were nearer to God than all other creatures because of their role and mission as servants and ministers of God's holy will. However, as the theology of St. Joseph has developed and become more prominent in the life of the Church, it has become clear that there is another human person who is above all the choirs of angels: St. Joseph.

O God, the glory of Joseph is known only by you and your angels. Men are not worthy to know it. This admirable saint is higher than the heavenly spirits.¹¹

— Blessed Bartolo Longo

The dignity of St. Joseph is so great that none can be greater.¹²

— St. George Preca

Saint Joseph has a dignity and closeness to God that surpasses that of all the holy angels. Angels are close to God because they are servants of his will; St. Joseph is close to God because he is the father of Jesus! Saint Joseph's cooperative role in the redemption required greater graces than any angel has ever received. Though not the biological father of Jesus (and therefore not someone who cooperated in the same way as Mary did in the Incarnation), St. Joseph nonetheless cooperated morally in the Incarnation by raising the God-Man with

perfect paternal love. Mary was not an unwed mother when she conceived the Savior of the world in her womb. She was married to St. Joseph. The Incarnation took place within the context of St. Joseph's marriage to Mary. Saint Joseph's role was planned from all eternity, even before the creation of the angels.

Furthermore, Jesus never called any angel "father." No angel, no matter how exalted, ever educated the God-Man. God does not obey angels. Saint Joseph, on the other hand, not only educated Jesus, but was privileged to command the God-Man in his role as father of the Messiah. This fatherly love, dignity, and authority is reserved for St. Joseph. It is such a wondrous dignity that God made St. Joseph the spiritual father of all humanity, as well as the Patron of the Universal Church. No angel, regardless of their ranking in the heavenly choirs, has such dignity.

The surpassing dignity of the fatherhood of St. Joseph is the reason Pope Pius XI stated that the intercession of St. Joseph is "all-powerful" before God. He wrote:

The intercession of St. Joseph is that of the husband, the putative father, the head of the family of Nazareth which was composed of himself, Mary, and Jesus. And as St. Joseph was truly the head or the master of that house, his intercession cannot be but all-powerful. For what could Jesus and Mary refuse to St. Joseph, he who was entirely consecrated to them all his life, and to whom they truly owed the means of their earthly existence?¹³

— Pope Pius XI

Saint Joseph is the delight of saints and popes. He should be your delight as well.

All the saints in glory assuredly merit honor and particular respect, but it is evident that, next to the Blessed Mother, St. Joseph possesses a just title to a more sweet, more intimate and penetrating place in our hearts, belonging to him alone.¹⁴

— St. Pope John XXIII

Saint Joseph, after Mary, is the greatest saint and the most dear to Jesus.¹⁵

— Blessed Bartolo Longo