

J. M. J.

CIRCULAR LETTER NO. 4

OF THE

Very Rev. SUPERIOR GENERAL

OF THE

Congregation of the Holy Cross.

NOTRE DAME, IND., March 6, 1886.

REV. FATHERS AND BELOVED CHILDREN IN JESUS CHRIST:

As we grow in years, we should all likewise grow in wisdom, in virtue and perfection; for each day brings us nearer to the Supreme Tribunal, whose sentence is irrevocably to fix our destiny for ever and ever. What a thought! or rather, what a reminder of an unavoidable fate! and yet, how often we forget it! Just now an excellent Sister of ours is dying!

There is, among thinking, serious minds, a prevalent impression that this present year of 1886 will be one out of the ordinary run; one that will make an epoch in history. Indeed, there are under our eyes some vital social problems, the solution of which seems urgent. They become, day by day, not only a greater puzzle, but a more formidable threat to the peace of society at large. Whilst I write these lines, 1000 working men in South Bend are actually striking.

But such grave social questions are not to be solved by poor, humble Religious, who have left the world, with all its troubles and vexations of temporary import, to fix, undisturbed, their minds and hearts on interests far more momentous. *They have chosen the best part.* They will not regret the change of the unreal for the real; of what passes as a shadow, for what will remain eternally.

Yet, when we see so many honest men anxiously searching in vain for a cure of grave, though transitory disorders, it leads us to pause and examine if we really feel as deeply concerned in the prosecution of our eternal interests as they are in trying to eradicate the various roots of poisonous temporary evils.

While we profoundly deplore such a sad state of things, and pray God to save society from ruin, we naturally feel an increasing responsibility urging us to come to the rescue of the human family, everywhere sensibly decaying, and, for its restoration to health and vigor, looking to nothing short of a miracle of Divine grace. Now is our time to show ourselves true soldiers of the Cross, fighting under our noble standard the battle of the Lord against all enemies, and, above all, placing and fixing our hopes of success, not in any human means, but unhesitatingly in the sure and infallible assistance from Heaven.

Now, to secure the powerful help we absolutely need in order to succeed in a task so far above our weakness, "to whom shall we go"? At the time and from the place I write, for a Religious Family whose origin and early training, whose very name for many years revealed only the glorious Patron to whom it was consecrated, there is scarcely a question; for you have all answered already: to St. Joseph! I love, indeed, to repeat it, to each and to all: *Ite ad Joseph*—"Go to Joseph!" Next to God and His Blessed Mother, he comes first, chosen by God Himself for a mission immensely above all missions ever entrusted to man; not only to be the worthy Spouse of the Mother of God, but to represent God Himself in the Holy Family, and to receive the obedience of the Blessed Mother with that of the Divine Child; for it is written: *Et erat subditus illis.* Where is the saint in heaven whom God ever honored on earth in this manner? There were illustrious men of God, Patriarchs and Prophets, High Priests and kings; but none of them was ever called father of Him who was the Son of God. Another Joseph—a figure of our incomparable Saint—had preserved for seven years the food of a whole nation, and of his own family; but to our great Saint was reserved the honor to preserve, for all nations and all ages, the Bread of Eternal Life. What can be refused in heaven to one whom God's Son Himself literally obeyed for thirty years on earth? "God's gifts," says Bossuet, "know of no change or repentance; what held good yesterday, holds the same to-day and forever." No Saint upon earth enjoyed the privileges conferred on St. Joseph, the Foster-Father of Jesus. Forever, in like manner, his power in heaven will remain unequalled, incomparable.

Who among the saints could be compared to St. Joseph? The place he occupies in the Divine plan of the Incarnation of the Eternal Word sets him in front of all, with the highest claim to our veneration and boundless confidence. This great mystery, from which the redemption of the world and man's glorification issued, visibly preceded all things in God's own mind. From all eternity His adorable wisdom had chosen Mary and Joseph to give to mankind His own Divine Son as a Redeemer; these three names were from the beginning so closely connected in the eternal designs that they could never be separated. From this alone, everyone may plainly see the sublime and exceptionable sanctity of these two privileged beings.

All readily admit that it was fitting that God should prepare the Blessed Virgin for her privileged office of the Divine Maternity by extraordinary graces—as that of the Immaculate Conception, and complete immunity from sin. The holiness and dignity of Jesus had made it a law of supreme fitness. But would it not be strange to suppose the same Divine wisdom neglected to prepare St. Joseph for the sublime functions to which he was called? Everything in creation reveals "measure, number and weight," or the most perfect order; from the highest angel to the humblest soul, all moves in admirable harmony. Hence the firm belief that St. Joseph, being destined from all ages to fulfil such an exceptional function in the plan of man's redemption, was accordingly and fittingly endowed, and blessed among and above all men in gifts and privileges of grace, next to his holy Spouse, the "blessed among women." No wonder that so many saintly and deep minds have firmly believed that, like St. John the Baptist, our holy Patron had been sanctified in his mother's womb.

Who could find in his humble condition of a carpenter an objection to the grandeur we attribute to our glorious Saint? The Blessed Virgin herself would suffer even more from such a thought. Listen to the great Bishop, already quoted, on this subject: "The Lord has sought unto Himself a man according to His own heart." Such a man, according to God's own heart, does not reveal himself exteriorly; nor does God choose him from appearances, nor at the voice of the public. When the time came for a choice, God looked for a man according to His heart, to deposit in his hands what He held dearest of all—His own Son, in person, and the virginity of His holy Mother, the Salvation of mankind, the Treasure of heaven and earth. He sets aside Jerusalem and other celebrated cities and the great ones of the earth. He fixes His eyes on Nazareth, and in that small, unknown village, He singles out a man unnoticed, a poor working man, called Joseph, to entrust to his modest hands a mission with which the highest angels would have felt most honored, that we might understand that a man according to God's heart is to be sought, not in the exterior, but in the heart; and that hidden virtues alone draw the attention and esteem of God—*Deus autem intuetur cor*. Hence the choice of Joseph to be the image of God the Father. What wisdom! what simplicity! what strength! "The world," says the Venerable M. Olier, "never saw such perfection."

This testimony of the saintly Founder of St. Sulpice deserves more than ordinary attention. "It was," he says, "an admirable sight to see the unprecedented virtues and perfections of this holy being." No: there had never been anything like him in this world; and this, because he was God's representative on earth, as no man had ever been.

All panegyrists agree that he had received the most perfect and richly endowed soul after that of the Blessed Virgin herself. St. Francis de Sales is foremost among them. "If the princes of this world," he says, "take such a laudable care to give their sons the very best governors in the land, why not admit that God, who could give His own Son, made Man, a Governor who would be the living embodiment of all perfection, to suit the dignity and excellence of the One to be governed—His glorious Son, the King of heaven and earth—has actually done it?" "No, there can be no doubt," he adds, "that St. Joseph was pre-eminently endowed with all the graces and gifts called forth by the unprecedented charge the Eternal Father intended to confer upon him."

St. Joseph has always been considered the grand model and most powerful protector of all Christian families, but especially of Religious Communities. Where could we find the vows of Chastity, Obedience and Poverty shining with more perfection and brilliancy? Oh! the worthy and glorious Patron of priests and teaching orders!

In the beginning of the 17th century, the Order of the Chartreux was most severely tried. Subjects were wanted in all its Houses, and the Novitiates were empty. Desolation was spreading; the great Order seemed to be at an end. No remedy could be found but prayer; when, all at once, a resolution is reached and confidence restored. The venerable Order is solemnly placed under the Patronage of St. Joseph. The decree is received, and carried out everywhere with religious enthusiasm. From this very moment candidates arrive from all parts; the Novitiates are filled, and very soon all vacancies are again abundantly supplied. This is a striking proof of our great Saint's marvellous readiness and power to assist Religious Congregations; but it is an example among thousands. Who could number the Houses or individual members individually saved from ruin by the same glorious Protector, piously invoked? When, and where, did he refuse an earnest and heartfelt supplication? St. Teresa alone would suffice to establish our boundless confidence in his extraordinary protection. Out of sixteen monasteries she founded, she consecrated thirteen to St. Joseph. "I do not remember," she writes, "a single instance of his refusing any of my requests. It is something marvellous to recall the favors of every kind that God has granted me; and the multiplied perils of soul and body from which He has delivered me, through the means of my beloved Saint. God seems to have granted each one of the other saints a special power to assist us in particular circumstances; but, visibly, St. Joseph may assist and save us in all necessities; experience proves it; and thereby our Blessed Lord reminds us that, as He was Himself submissive to him upon earth in everything, He is willing, even in heaven, to accede to all his desires. After the long experience I have had of his innumerable favors, I would wish to persuade everybody to take him for Protector. If any one finds it hard to believe me, for God's sake let him try him; experience will soon teach him how good it is to seek and secure the protection of this glorious Patriarch, and to be numbered among his devout clients."

Surely, we shall not rank among those who find it hard to believe the declaration of St. Teresa. . . . But, without proving unbelievers, can we say that we fully share in her boundless faith towards *her beloved Saint*? Oh! how I wish I could! Let every one of us try to imitate this noble soul in her devotion to St. Joseph. "She owed him," as she says, "an immense debt of gratitude." How did she pay it? admirably! Prompted by her generous and loving gratitude, she devoted her life to his service and to his praises, and more than any one, else, even among the saints of God, she made him known and loved as the choice of her seraphic soul, the first and greatest saint in heaven.

This naturally leads us to a test. "What have I done," each of us will say, "to prove my devotion and my gratitude to St. Joseph?" Anyone truly devoted to this great Saint, the first Protector of our Congregation, who has done so much, in both hemispheres, for us all, would have proved, with his help alone, a model Religious—an *acquisition* to the Community! What have I done in it and for it? Many have spent themselves for its welfare and success, and their names, under the direction and protection of St. Joseph, are, undoubtedly, registered in the Book of Life. But, alas! I never was but a poor, useless member, indolent, irregular, seeking for ease and comfort, praises and vainglory—a worldly man in the garb of Religion!

May God forgive me my numberless infidelities, this year of merciful forgiveness! May St. Joseph listen to the prayers, in my behalf, of his dear Family during this precious month consecrated to him! But I *must* and *will* repair the past: to my last breath, I will live a religious life, under the loving care of St. Joseph. I will pray to St. Joseph every day that, instead of poor me, he may bring to the Congregation all the help it needs to fulfil God's merciful designs. Oh! that I might procure dozens of true, devoted Christian souls to atone for my want of zeal and real piety! The above expressions may not voice the exact feelings of all; but they most certainly do mine.

Never did it appear to me more evident that if a saint had come here in my place, on the banks of St. Joseph's River, in St. Joseph's County, by the side of St. Joseph's dear and beautiful Lake, St. Joseph would have very soon given him a family of saints, ever increasing to meet every want of the land. May you all see how much you must pray for

Yours devotedly,

E. SORIN, C. S. C.,

Superior General.