

SAINT JOSEPH THE HESYCHAST

—Commemorated August 16th—

Saint Joseph the Hesychast was born on November 2, 1897 on the island of Paros, in Greece, and given the name Francis at holy baptism. The day Francis was born, his mother had a vision while lying in bed with her newborn baby boy. It seemed to her as if the roof of the house opened up, and an angel appeared who approached the infant and began writing his name on a tablet. Francis' mother inquired with concern: **“What are you doing there? Why are you writing his name?”** **“The King needs him,”** replied the angel. **“No! You can't take this baby. He's mine!”** Since her first children had died young, she surmised that the angel wanted to take Francis prematurely as well. However, as time passed and Francis grew up with dying, she realized that the enrollment meant that the King of Heaven was calling Francis to His earthly army of monasticism.

On account of the poverty on the island, Francis moved to Athens when he was seventeen years old to find a job. By hard work Francis quickly reached his financial goals and had a bright future ahead of him as a merchant. God, however, had other plans for him. One night in his sleep, he had the following dream, as he himself recounts: **“I dreamt that I was passing by the palace, and all at once two officers of the palace guard seized me and took me up into the palace. I did not understand why and protested, and they answered kindly not to be afraid but to go up, since it was the king's wish. We went up into a quite exceptional palace, beyond any palace on earth, and they dressed me in priceless clothing of pure white and told me, ‘From now on you will serve here’; and they took me to do obeisance to the king.”** Shortly after this, he read a book entitled *New Collection*, which contained the lives of various saints. Francis was astonished to learn about such people who struggled so intensely for the love of God and who with God's help performed miracles.

Henceforth, the words, **“From now on you will serve here,”** echoed within him constantly. He wrapped up his business as a merchant and began to

imitate the saints he had read about, leading a life of prayer and fasting, testing himself to see if he would be able to endure the toils of becoming a monk on Mount Athos. After living this way for two years, he went to the Mount Athos in early 1921, intending to find an Elder who would guide him in prayer and spiritual life. Despite his diligent search, he was unable to find a great ascetic to be his Elder and to teach him noetic prayer. He kept saying the Jesus Prayer out loud with his mouth, and constantly begged the Panagia and the Lord to give him the grace to say the prayer noetically as well. And the Lord did not take long to fulfill his petition. One evening he gazed at the chapel of the Transfiguration at the summit of Mount Athos and beseeched the Lord: **“O Lord, just as You were transfigured before Your disciples, transfigure Yourself also in my soul! Stop the passions and bring peace to my heart! Grant prayer to him who prays and restrain my unrestrained mind!”** As he was praying like this, a subtle breeze full of fragrance came to him from the chapel. His soul was filled with joy, light, and divine love; and from within his heart the Jesus Prayer began to flow forth with much bliss like clockwork, without any effort on his part. He then got up and went inside his cave and began saying the Jesus Prayer. As soon as he had said the prayer a few times, his nous was immediately caught up into the vision of God. This is how Saint Joseph describes this event in the third person, as if it happened to someone else: **“he bent his head upon his chest and began eating the sweetness that gushed forth from the prayer that he had been given. Immediately he was caught up into *theoria* and was totally beside himself. He wasn’t confined by walls and rocks; he was beyond all volition—without body and with a deep tranquility, in extraordinary light, and unlimited breadth. His mind contemplated only this thought: ‘May I never return to the body, but remain here forever.’”**

Francis eventually submitted himself to a simple Elder named Ephraim, whom he served as an angel, and to whom he did perfect obedience. Speaking on this matter of obedience later in life, Saint Joseph advised, **“You should know that he who has perfect obedience is totally free from cares... Therefore exert yourselves in blessed obedience where all these good things lie... I have tried all these things through experience, and I have**

eaten their fruit, and it is very sweet. Personally, I have never seen anything more comforting in my soul than perfect obedience.” Francis was tonsured a monk and given the name Joseph on August 31, 1925, by this Elder Ephraim, with whom he stayed up until Elder Ephraim reposed in the Lord.

After his elder passed away, Saint Joseph was free to live as a recluse with intensified ascetic struggles. He would do 3,000 prostrations a day and eat very little food, occupying himself with prayer and meditation of heavenly things. On account of his persistent struggles, he was deemed worthy of many heavenly visions and divine consolations. One night on a particular feast day, he was unable to go to church to receive Holy Communion because he was feeling exhausted. As he sat praying and weeping for his sins, suddenly his cell filled with light. The ceiling opened and an angel of the Lord descended and stood before him. **“I could barely see him,”** Saint Joseph remarked later, **“because his face was like lightning.”** The angel put his hand in his bosom and pulled out a box. He carefully opened the box and motioned Saint Joseph to prepare himself, as he took a piece of Holy Bread with a spoon. In his own words, this is what happened next: **“I involuntarily realized what God wanted me to do: I opened my mouth and the angel gave me Communion, saying, ‘The servant of God, Monk Joseph, receives the Body and Blood of Christ.’ Then the angel smiled modestly at me, closed the box, and ascended through the ceiling. After this, it was dark in my cell once again. I lowered my head and began to pray again. I felt more joy, bliss, and grace than I had ever experienced. For an entire week, I did not feel the need for food or drink. It was as if my regular bodily functions had stopped.”** The amazing thing is that Saint Joseph did not get puffed up with pride due to the various spiritual states and visions he experienced. On the contrary, he would develop greater humility each time, believing that he had accomplished nothing.

Despite the extraordinary grace that was given to him, God allowed the demons to wage a relentless and intense carnal warfare against him that lasted eight years—something that brought him close to the point of despair. But just then, the Lord delivered him from this battle in the following manner, as he

himself described: **“As I was sitting there wounded, despairing, and virtually dead, I perceived that the door opened and someone entered. I did not turn to see who it was, but kept saying the prayer. Suddenly I felt that beneath me someone was stimulating me toward sensual pleasure. I turned and saw the demon whose wounded head stank! Then like a wild beast I dashed to grab him. However, as soon as I grabbed him—he had hairs like a pig—he disappeared. He left the sensation of his hairs on my fingers and the smell of his stench in my nose. From that moment on, the war ended; all the turmoil ceased. Peace came to my soul, and I was completely freed from the filthy passions of the flesh.”** After this, he no longer differentiated between women and men, but looked upon everyone with complete dispassion.

Seeing that he could not make Saint Joseph sin directly with invisible warfare, the devil used people to wage a visible warfare against him. Neighboring monastics began to slander him. But the saint also endured this sustained injustice with patience, forgiving and wholeheartedly praying for his persecutors. During this period when he was experiencing many temptations and deep sorrow, Christ and His Immaculate Mother consoled him many times in extraordinary ways. Once, when he was overcome by sadness, he fell into ecstasy while praying. He saw the Lord Jesus nailed to the Cross all bathed in light. Then Christ turned towards him and said, **“Behold how much I have suffered for your love! What have you endured?”** And with these words his sadness vanished. He was filled with peace and joy, and shedding fountains of tears he marveled at the condescension of the Lord.

Despite Saint Joseph’s humility and silence, things became progressively worse. Another time, he felt as if his heart was about to burst from all the anguish. He went into his little chapel and began praying with many tears before the icon of the Panagia. Suddenly, her icon flashed with light, her image took on regular dimensions, and the Panagia stepped out of the icon. She was so bright and beautiful that he could not look at her. The divine Child in her arms shone like the sun. The Panagia kissed him in a warm and maternal way, and he was filled with inexpressible joy, and she said to him with a sweet voice: **“Didn’t I tell**

you to place your hope in me? Why do you despair?” She stretched out her arms to give him our most sweet Jesus, but he remained motionless out of amazement. Then the heavenly Infant approached him and caressed his entire face, and Saint Joseph kissed His chubby little hand. His soul filled with so much divine eros and light that he could no longer stand on his feet, and he collapsed. Then the Theotokos entered her icon once again, leaving behind an indescribable fragrance.

One February, Saint Joseph and his co-struggler Elder Arsenios climbed to the chapel of the Panagia, without having eaten anything. When they entered, they found the entire chapel fragrant with the smell of two huge, bright red apples that were in front of the Panagia’s icon. The apples had fresh green leaves on the stem, as if they had just been picked. It was impossible to have fresh apples with soft green leaves in the dead of winter. They realized that this was a miraculous gift sent to them by the Panagia, and fell down before Her icon with tears thanking her for her heavenly gift. Many years later, Saint Joseph stated, **“I still remember their taste. I can’t forget it because I never had such wonderful apples.”**

The repeated visions of the uncreated light and the sweetness of the prayer that filled his soul in due course became manifest in his body and spilled over into the surroundings as well. Many times after hours of prayer in his cell, his disciples would see that his face had become transfigured and bright. Concerning the fragrance of the saint’s prayers, his disciple Elder Ephraim of Arizona recalls: **“Once when Elder Joseph and I were outside with our prayer ropes, I could smell lilies and roses, even though there were no flowers there. I was sniffing intently, and so he said to me, ‘Why are you doing?’ ‘Geronda, I smell lilies and roses.’ ‘Why don’t you go over there to my door?’ So I went to his door and smelled his cell. The heavenly fragrance was so strong that it stuck to my beard and my clothes. Then he said, ‘It is from the prayer. The name of Christ is fragrance.’”**

Furthermore, on account of his holy and pure life, Saint Joseph received many gifts of the Holy Spirit (including discernment and clairvoyance), he acquired great boldness before the Lord, and his prayers performed miracles, as it is written in the Psalms: **“God will fulfill the request of them who fear Him.”** Once, Saint Joseph went to dwell along with Elder Arsenios in two caves on the side of a cliff. He soon realized that the rainwater that would be collected in two existing cisterns was not nearly enough for their essential needs. This meant that Elder Arsenios would have to haul water on his back from far away. One day when the sun was extremely hot, Saint Joseph felt sorry for Elder Arsenios, and he prayed to the Panagia: **“My dear Panagia, work something out so that we have a little more water because Father Arsenios is toiling very hard.”** As soon as he finished this prayer, he heard a loud bang from the boulder next to him. He turned to look, and he noticed that the boulder was perspiring and water was dripping from it. They put a vessel beneath where they would gather the water, and henceforth, Father Arsenios no longer need to haul water. In another instance, there was a possessed woman who also had a possessed daughter. The possessed daughter heard about Saint Joseph and wrote him a letter asking for his prayers for the two of them. Saint Joseph felt very sorry for her and fasted for forty days without eating anything except bread and water. After completing his fast, God informed him of what would occur, and he wrote to the girl: **“My child, your mother’s demon will leave, but yours will not.”** Indeed, her mother’s demon did leave, whereas hers did not. Nonetheless, she did get somewhat better and would merely growl a little when a demonic fit seized her.

Saint Joseph reached lofty levels of perfection, he came to know God from experience, and he acquired the love of God in his heart. Thereafter, his love overflowed to everyone around him and to the entire world, as evident from his writings, which reveal his sensitive heart full of paternal love and affection—a love that melts even the hardest and roughest of hearts. A collection of his letters, which were first published in Greek, have been translated into English in a book entitled *Monastic Wisdom*, and into many other languages as well have and continue to benefit thousands of souls.

After struggling his entire life to to obliterate the passions and to carry out everything according to God's will, Saint Joseph attained peace with his conscience, and he waited for death as if it were a festival, a joyous day. He couldn't wait to see the face of God, and to delight in His beauty. He had been entreating the Mother of God, whom he loved immensely, for a while to take him. Many times he would tightly embrace her icon and beg with warm tears: **"When will you come? When will you take my soul?"** God informed him that he would depart on August 15th, on the Dormition of the Theotokos. Two months before his repose, the Panagia visited him and told him: **"Prepare yourself. You will soon be in my brotherhood."** And in following, one day in July of 1959, the Archangel Michael appeared to inform him of the same. Elder Ephraim described this event thus: **"The door opened to the room where Elder Joseph and I were. I looked up and saw a giant beardless monk wearing a cowl with a cross on it. He was wearing the red angelic schema just like the angel that appeared to Saint Pachomios. His expression was both sweet and austere simultaneously, and he was completely white. Seeing him aroused feelings of both fear and love together. As soon as the door opened halfway, he looked at me straight in the eyes and then at Elder Joseph. He closed the door and left without saying anything; yet I felt as if he had said to us, 'until later.'"** I was one thousand percent certain that he was the Archangel Michael. Elder Joseph asked me, 'Did you see him?' 'I saw him. It was the Archangel Michael. He told us, 'until later.''" Sure enough, less than a month passed before he came back to take Saint Joseph's soul to the next life.

On the eve of the Dormition of the Theotokos, August 14th, 1959, a close friend of Saint Joseph named Sotiri passed by to see him. "How are you, Elder? How is your health?" **"Tomorrow, Sotiri, I am leaving for the eternal Fatherland. Remember my words tomorrow when you hear the bells toll."** Indeed, the next day as he was sitting in his chair outside in the yard, he called the fathers of his brotherhood to come and take his blessing for a final time. Shortly thereafter, he started to gaze up in the sky for about two minutes. And finally, full of serenity and indescribable spiritual amazement he said: "Everything

is finished. I am leaving. I am departing. Bless!" He then bent his head down and gave up his soul to Christ, Whom he loved and worked for since his youth.

In following, God continued to glorify Saint Joseph with signs and miracles. After the funeral, a certain Father Timothy planted several cypress trees around Saint Joseph's grave and one beside his head. The one he planted beside his head quickly grew very tall in a supernatural way. When the other fathers saw this, they were all amazed and said, "**How did it grow like that? It's a miracle!**"

When Saint Joseph's relics were exhumed three years after his repose, all of his bones were an amber color, which is a sign of sanctity. His relics are fragrant, and they work miracles for people according to their faith.

May we have his blessing and intercessions.

A prayer written by Saint Joseph which he would recite before beginning to pray

Lord Jesus Christ, sweetest Father, God and Lord of mercy, and Creator of the entire universe: Look upon my humility and forgive all my sins which I have committed all the years of my life up to this very day and hour. Send forth Thine All-Holy Spirit, the Comforter, so that He may teach, illuminate, and safeguard me so that I no longer sin, so that with a pure soul and heart I may adore, worship, glorify, thank, and love Thee with all my soul and heart, my sweetest Savior, Benefactor, and God, Who is worthy of all love and worship. Yes, good eternal Father, co-eternal Son, and All-Holy Spirit, count me worthy of enlightenment and divine spiritual knowledge, so that by beholding Thy sweet grace I may bear the burden of this vigil tonight, and render unto Thee my prayers and thanksgiving, through the intercessions of the Most Holy Theotokos and all the Saints. Amen

A second prayer by Saint Joseph the Hesychast

O Master, our sweetest Lord Jesus Christ, send forth Your grace and free me from the bonds of sin. Enlighten the darkness of my soul, so that I may comprehend Your infinite mercy, and so that I may love and thank You worthily, my sweetest Savior, Who is worthy of all love and gratitude. Yes, my good Benefactor and most merciful Lord; do not withdraw Your mercy from me, but have compassion upon Your creature. I acknowledge, o Lord, the weight of my transgressions, but I am also aware of Your inexhaustible mercy. I behold the darkness of my insensitive soul, but I have good hope and await for Your divine illumination and the deliverance from my evil deeds and destructive passions, through the intercession of Your sweetest Mother, our Lady the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary, and of all the Saints. Amen.

