



St. Joseph and the Rendering Unto Caesar

A fanatic, Santayana said, is one who redoubles his effort when he has forgotten his aim. It's a pretty fair description of the way Americans celebrate Saint Patrick's Day, which, as you may have noticed, includes scarcely a mention of Saint Patrick. It appears to be all about celebrating how wonderful the Irish are at drinking and singing songs, even if the beer is an unlovely shade of green and most of the singing is off key. Some of the songs are about how brutally wicked the English have been, as if to vindicate the popular definition of Irish Alzheimer's: "We forget everything but our grudges."



Or as G.K. Chesterton put it:

Here's to the Gaels of Ireland,
The race that God made mad.
For all their wars are happy
And all their songs are sad.

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But if the weekend just ended offered a convenient excuse for drinking and carousing for the sake of ethnic pride, today is a time for more sober reflection. March 19 is a day that much of the Christian world has on its calendar as the feast of Saint Joseph, the husband of Mary and foster father of Jesus. If the world at large overlooks the occasion, we may be reasonably certain most of his contemporaries overlooked Joseph as well. We can hardly imagine him drinking and carousing and loudly singing proud songs of his fine Jewish heritage, though the [Gospel accounts emphasize](#) his lineage from the tribe of Judah and his direct descent from King David, the greatest of Israel's rulers.

However exalted his lineage, Joseph seems unlikely to have boasted of it. He appears in the Gospels as the model of humility, one who is, in the words of Saint James, "quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger." He appears to have borne with great humility the burdens inherent in his role as head of the Holy Family. The Gospel portrait shows Joseph as the ultimate "strong, silent type," for we find in the Scriptures not a word uttered by him. His occupation as a carpenter, or a craftsman in wood, seems humble as well. No one, apparently, expected the Messiah to be the son of a carpenter. When Jesus was working miracles and speaking "with authority and not as the scribes," some wondered where and how he came by such authority: "Is this not the carpenter's son?" they asked.

The Church speaks of Joseph mainly during the season of Advent and at Christmas when the familiar story is told of how he learned that his betrothed, "before they had come together," was with child. Being a righteous man, he had decided to call off the marriage privately, so as not to expose her to shame. We are told that an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him Mary's child had been



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conceived of the Holy Ghost and that he would "be called holy, the Son of God." He would name the boy Jesus, "for he will save his people from their sins."

Later Joseph journeyed with Mary to Bethlehem because "[a decree went forth from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed](#)." Say what you will about our taxes today, at least the IRS does not require us to travel to the city of our ancestors in order to be enrolled. Joseph and Mary appear to have made what was no doubt a difficult journey for a man and his pregnant wife in quiet submission to the emperor's decree. Most of us moderns in similar circumstances would doubtless be grumbling and even cursing the emperor and his grand schemes with nearly every step.

We all know the story of the crowded inn that had no room for them (Children hearing the story today are prone to wonder why they didn't call ahead and make reservations) and how the Savior, announced by an angel as "Christ the King," was born in a stable and slept in a manger. Some time later Joseph, being [warned in a dream](#) that King Herod sought the child to kill him, flees with his wife and child to Egypt, remaining there until word arrives that the king himself is dead.

Joseph bears more than a coincidental resemblance to his [namesake in the Old Testament](#), the favorite son of Jacob, who is sold by his jealous brothers into slavery and is taken to Egypt. Like Joseph of Nazareth, he is a just man and chaste. Resisting the advances of Potiphar's wife, he is, nonetheless, thrown into prison because of her false accusation. His rare gift for interpreting dreams leads not only in his freedom, but to his elevation as Viceroy of Egypt, one whose wise husbanding of the nation's crops saves the land from famine during the seven lean years foretold in a dream. Eventually, even his brothers must "go to Joseph" in Egypt for food. Joseph, the son of Jacob, had become the guardian of the wheat that sustained life in the land. Joseph of Nazareth, the son of another Jacob, was the guardian of the Christ child, whose first bed was a feeding trough for animals and who would later announce, to the amazement of many, "[I am the bread of life...](#)"

We have mostly lost our capacity to be astonished at the words of Jesus, either because they are so familiar to many of us or, more commonly, because we have set them aside in a compartment of the mind labeled "religion," which, we imagine, has little to do with the rest of life, lived in the "real world." The words of Jesus that seem to have made the greatest impression on the modern world are those that tell us to "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God's." We have grown accustomed to hearing the "Render unto Caesar" part every year as April 15th approaches. Rendering unto God appears to be optional. The verse is often quoted in support of keeping religion and secular law apart from each other in what is commonly called "the separation of church and state." Some even believe lawmakers, when legislating, have a moral obligation to ignore altogether whatever religious or moral convictions they may have, lest they impose their their convictions on a pluralistic society. After all, "a decree went forth from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed." All of the world is at Caesar's command. God, at Caesar's sufferance, may have the prayer closet.

The early Christians did not believe that was what Jesus meant. They resisted unjust laws of Caesar that required them to violate the laws of God. Like so many of their Jewish brethren, they refused to offer sacrifice to idols and many were martyred because of it. They resisted emperor worship and refused to deify the power of the State. They obeyed Caesar's laws to the extent that conscience and the laws of God would permit, but there were limits. When forced to choose between conflicting claims, they would [obey God rather than men](#).

Here, too, Saint Joseph serves as an example. When the decree came to be enrolled, he obeyed the law of Caesar, at considerable trouble to himself and his wife. But when Herod sought the child to kill him,



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Joseph protected the child and thwarted the will of the king. The image on the coin claimed by the tax collectors was Caesar's, but man in his humanity bears the image and likeness of God. The gift of life was not given to be arbitrarily destroyed for the imagined safety and security of the king and his realm.

Our modern Caesars are no less eager than the rulers of old to take what belongs to God. In our republic, a government established to protect and defend life and liberty now threatens both. Congress recently passed and the President signed legislation that authorizes the President to use the military, even here in "the homeland," to arrest U.S. citizens and keep them indefinitely in military prisons, without trial, if they are suspected of rendering aid to terrorists and are labeled by the President "enemy combatants." The attorney general supports the President's claim of a right to target terror suspects, including American citizens, for execution, with the only "due process" an executive review of each case, with no chance for the accused to be heard, to challenge the evidence, question witnesses or otherwise impede the juggernaut of the State from running over the Bill of Rights.

In the ongoing culture war, the government claims the right to require even religious-affiliated institutions to see to it that the health insurance provided their employees includes, free of charge and with no deductible, coverage for contraception, sterilization and drugs that kill infants in their earliest stage of development. Catholic bishops and others who oppose the mandate are accused of waging a "war on women" by denying their "reproductive rights." But where in the Constitution do we find an authorization for government to be promoting contraception, let alone forcing it on private religious institutions? When did "We the People" decide that is a legitimate function and duty of the federal government?

Saint Joseph, the guardian and protector of life, serves as an example of resistance to the culture of death. His faithful service to the Lord of Life is a standing rebuke to those who acknowledge no higher authority than the State and who, in the name of new and deadly "rights," cry out for an omnipotent government to run roughshod over all dissent. Their cry is an echo of one heard long ago, when a Roman procurator ceremoniously washed his hands of innocent blood and religious leaders cried out for the execution of a man who had "stirred up the people" with his teaching of a God far greater than the kings of this world. They surrendered to emperor worship after all.

["We have no king but Caesar!"](#)

Illustration: "Saint Joseph with the Infant Jesus," Guido Reni (c. 1635)



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