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Seasoning the Seasons™

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Saint Joseph, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary

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Saint Joseph was the husband of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and was Jesus' earthly father. The Feast of Saint Joseph, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary, is called a solemnity. A solemnity is the highest ranking feast day we celebrate in our Catholic Church Year. The Feast of Saint Joseph, Husband of Mary is celebrated on March 19*. This has been true for over a thousand years! (*If March 19 falls on a Sunday during Lent or during one of the days of Holy Week, these days are so important that we do not celebrate other feast days on these days.

But because Saint Joseph's feast day is a solemnity, it is too important not to celebrate at all! So in a year when March 19 falls on a Sunday during Lent or during one of the days of Holy Week, the Church transfers the Solemnity of Saint Joseph, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary to another date.)

There are many wonderful ways we can celebrate the Solemnity of Saint Joseph, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary. One special way is to celebrate with a Saint Joseph Table. Have you ever participated in the Saint Joseph Table?

The tradition of the Saint Joseph Table comes to us from Sicily, an island in southern Italy. There is a story that once, a long time ago, there was a terrible drought in Sicily. There had been no rain for a long time, and very few crops could grow. All the plants and fruits and vegetables were dying, and there was very little to eat. One thing that continued to grow was the fava bean, and this was used to feed the cattle. People ate these beans, too.

Saint Joseph was the Patron Saint of Sicily. The people



began to pray to Saint Joseph, asking Saint Joseph to intercede for a miracle – that they would have rain. In their prayer, the people promised Saint Joseph that if it rained, and their crops grew, they would gather their harvest and have a huge banquet in the town center. They would invite everyone to come – especially those who were very poor and hungry.

The prayers of the people were answered. It began to rain! The people kept their promise to Saint Joseph. On March 19, Saint Joseph's Feast Day, the people of Sicily hosted a large banquet in the town square. They had many good things to eat. They had fruit and vegetables, pasta, bread and wine, cakes, pastries, and dishes made with fava beans. They also had many kinds of fish and seafood. Being an island, seafood was plentiful. But the one thing they didn't have at their banquet was meat. Meat was not plentiful in Sicily, plus it was the season of Lent, and at that time people ate no meat at all during Lent.



Everyone attended the banquet. The poor and hungry were especially happy to be there. Because this banquet was done to fulfill a promise the people had made to Saint Joseph, the banquet was called a Saint Joseph Table. After that, every year on the Feast of Saint Joseph, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the people would do a Saint Joseph Table.

After several hundred years, some people from Sicily came to America. Here in the United States they continued their tradition of the Saint Joseph Table. Grandparents taught their children and grandchildren about this tradition.



Today, we still celebrate the tradition of the Saint Joseph Table. Sometimes a family or several families come together and open up their home to host a Saint Joseph Table. Sometimes a parish community hosts a Saint Joseph Table. Everyone is invited to the Saint Joseph Table. It is especially important that those people who might be hungry or lonely are invited to share our food and companionship.

The foods we eat at the Saint Joseph Table are traditional foods from Sicily. There are special recipes made with fish, and pasta, and fava beans, and fruits and vegetables that grow in Sicily. There are traditional breads and pastries served. In fact, there is even special bread called Saint Joseph Bread. Sometimes this bread is baked in special shapes to remind us of Saint Joseph. It might be baked in the shape of Saint Joseph's beard, or his staff. What other shapes can you think of that would remind you of Saint Joseph? There are even bread crumbs served to put on the pasta. The bread crumbs look a little bit like saw dust – don't forget that Saint Joseph was a carpenter by trade!



At the Saint Joseph Table celebration, there is also a special Saint Joseph Altar set up and decorated. This is often a three-tiered altar to remind us of the Holy Trinity. Sometimes the altar is so big that all the food is put on it! There is usually an icon or statue of Saint Joseph on the altar. And there are flowers – always including lilies. Often in religious art, Saint Joseph is depicted holding a lily.

Sometimes the fruits and vegetables and other items are arranged on the Saint Joseph Altar in a significant way. There are lemons and oranges and grapes, and there are fava beans and fennel and olives and artichokes and eggplants – all sorts of wonderful foods that are grown in Sicily. You might find seven lemons on a plate symbolizing the seven sacraments. Perhaps you will find twelve whole fish reminding us of the twelve apostles. How else could you arrange the foods in a symbolic way?



And there are special "altar ornaments" decorating the altar. These aren't made to be eaten, but are like the cookie-dough ornaments you may make at Christmas. These ornaments might be shaped like the carpenter's tools Saint Joseph might have

used. Or they might be religious symbols, like a dove for the Holy Spirit, or a cross. Sometimes these ornaments are decorated with a special paste made from figs, another food that grows in Sicily. You could make some ornaments for the Saint Joseph Table. What shape will you make your ornaments?

At the Saint Joseph Table celebration, something else special happens. This is called the “Tupa Tupa.” In Italian, *Tupa* means *knock*. Children or teens dress up like Joseph and Mary. They might have a doll, or even a real baby or toddler, who represents Jesus. Then the Holy Family tries to come to the celebration.

Saint Joseph knocks on the door, and someone asks who he is and what he wants. He responds that he is Saint Joseph and he is looking for shelter for himself and Mary and Jesus. Usually he is turned away the first time, and has to knock two more times until the Holy Family is invited in. This reminds us of when Mary was getting ready to give birth to Jesus and Saint Joseph was trying to find a place for them to stay. Luke’s Gospel tells us that Jesus was born in a manger, because there was no room in the inn.



Sometimes everyone at the Saint Joseph Table gets a “goodie bag” to take home. The goodie bag might contain some of the following: a piece of blessed Saint Joseph Bread, a blessed fava bean (it is said that fava beans are lucky since they continued to grow during the drought in Sicily), a Saint Joseph medal or holy card, a prayer to Saint Joseph, and maybe even an orange to remind us of the sweetness of Saint Joseph! What do you think should go in a Saint Joseph Goodie Bag to help us remember Saint Joseph?

The Solemnity of Saint Joseph, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary is a very special Feast Day. Are you going to go to a Saint Joseph Table this year? You might even set up a special Saint Joseph Table in your own home!

Saint Joseph is the Patron Saint of many people and places, including fathers and the entire Church! Every day when you pray, ask Saint Joseph to watch over all fathers and to guide our Church. Saint Joseph will intercede for us, just as he did for the

people of Sicily when they had their drought! Saint Joseph, pray for us!

