A Church of Immigrants in a Nation of Immigrants

Waves of immigrants in the 19th century dramatically increased the population of the United States. Since most emigres came from the Catholic regions of Europe, the number of Catholics in this country likewise swelled throughout the 1800s. Among the difficulties they experienced was the prejudice and violence of nativists who conveniently overlooked the irony that they themselves were the descendants of immigrants. Rabid anti-Catholicism was often indistinguishable from the xenophobic hatred of immigrants that was prevalent in many places. Within the Church, ethnic rivalries bred internal discord, and although national parishes were established to preserve the language, customs and traditions of various ethnic constituencies, the Americanist controversy provided a platform for the debate over whether Catholic immigrants must fully assimilate to be accepted into a predominantly Protestant American culture, and also into certain prelates’ aspirations for a unified and dynamic American Catholic Church.

Changes in immigration law after World War I diminished the flow of immigrants through the mid-20th century; however, further revision of U.S. immigration policy in 1965 once again opened the way for ever-larger numbers of newcomers to this land. They mostly come not from Europe, but from Latin American and Asia; and they have had a significant impact on America’s religious landscape. Recent immigrants have increased the visibility and contact with the world’s non-Christian...
Joseph, Model for Laity

His origins shrouded in mystery, his vocation born in a dream, Joseph steps out from the penumbra of God's ordinary presence and into the light of God's extraordinary grace.

How so like the vocation of the laity? No ceremony marks it; no special title conferred; just a conviction that God asks us to step up, to step out, to make His Son known and loved in the world. Out of a dream, the drama begins: fits and starts, progress and regress, sometimes prepared, sometimes unprepared, yet the Lord instructs us in Matt 28:19: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

While the Lord had Mary's eyes, he had Joseph's way of seeing things: familial, to the son of Joseph? Memories of long days in his company and labor, and how he cared for the children of God, like a father and son, farmer and fields, worship, women and wisdom.

How so like the task of the laity! Foster-fathers of the children of God, we give shape and substance to that form of God's grace now. Grace made permanent in priests and each other is made up through the expression of our words, our actions, our prayers, our partnerships. Joseph reminds us that where God is born anew, “We are together.”

Even in His final hours, thoughts of Joseph must have come flooding back — not in the familiar faces now bent over the logic of the crowd, not in the neighbors now strangers, nor in the common chorus of fellowship made mob — but in the wood, the feel and fragrance of the wood. To take up rough-hewn timber, what could have been more familiar, familial, to the son of Joseph? Memories of long days in his company with nothing said but, “Our common task is love.”

How so like the situation of the laity! To take up the familiar, again and again. After all, they come and go; we remain. Exotic in their ways; ours is a simpler tale of staying put. The jangle of keys, the smell of wax and dust, the squeak of the copier. How so like the fragrance of wood to a carpenter and a carpenter's son. How so like the cross at times?

Joseph assures us: I am with you. We are together. Our common task is love.

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