

FRANCISCAN SAINTS

St. Joseph of Cupertino (1603-1663)

By Liz Kelly

Tomorrow I'm getting on a plane and flying away in an attempt to retreat from the current stresses of my life, not least of which is trying to balance several jobs, including working on a horse farm in 100-degree heat. Given my chosen mode of transportation, it's only fitting that I should write about St. Joseph of Cupertino, the patron saint of air travelers and pilots.

Most saints seem completely out of reach to me. St. Joseph, however, reminds me that saints not only act as examples of pious living, they also offer us insight and encouragement—that none of us is hopeless. Known for his simplicity and “weirdness,” St. Joseph is my kind of saint.

On June 17, 1603, Joseph Desa entered the world. His parents were so poor that their home had been put up for sale, and Joseph was born in a shed behind the house. Although he was noted for his religious fervor even as a child, in other aspects of life, Joseph developed an unusual absent-mindedness and inertia. His widowed mother treated him with “great severity” and rejected him as a nuisance. As he wandered the village, sometimes open-mouthed and aimless, he earned the nickname, “Boccaperta,” or the Gaper.

He was apprenticed to a shoemaker, yet failed despite his best efforts. As a young man, several attempts at joining a religious order also proved unsuccessful for Joseph. His absentmindedness made him a poor worker. He would forget even the simplest

of tasks and often dropped dishes or broke things in his clumsiness. Through the influence of an uncle, a Conventual Franciscan, Joseph joined that order as a servant. They offered him a tertiary habit and put him to work in the stables. In the quiet company of a barn full of gentle beasts, Joseph began to change.

His work in the stables not only appears to have altered his temperament, giving him a greater sweetness and humility, but it also appears to have acted as the gateway to a lifetime of ecstasies, miracles of healing, and “fits of giddiness.” Any reference to God or the mysteries of religion would catch St. Joseph up into profound contemplation, causing him to lose his bearings with the world around him.

In one of the more noted stories of St. Joseph and his absolute innocence, the sight of a lamb is said to have caught him up into so pure a contemplation of the spotless Lamb of God that he was physically carried into the air with the lamb in his arms.

Given to fits of levitation (over 70 episodes were recorded in one 17-year period), especially during Mass or the Divine Office, St. Joseph was often considered an outcast and an oddity. He was the focus of several inquisitions, one that led to the chambers of Pope Urban VIII himself. But upon sight of the Vicar of Christ, St. Joseph went into ecstasy and Pope Urban declared that he would offer evidence to the experience.

In another well-authenticated instance, his fellow religious saw him fly up seven feet into the air to kiss the statue of the infant Jesus that stood over the altar. They then watched as he gathered the statue in his arms and floated away with it to his cell.

More impressive than his physical levity, St. Joseph possessed a childlike emotional and spiritual levity. His extraordinary command over animals reportedly surpassed even St. Francis himself. Sheep were said to gather round him and listen to his prayers, a sparrow at a convent came and went at his command.

When asked for spiritual direction, St. Joseph would often tell the weary-hearted, “Pray. If you are troubled by dryness or distractions, just say an Our Father. Then you make both vocal and mental prayer.”

Next week, I will return to the stables and the heat. All the while, I will be thinking about my dear, levitating St. Joseph working in his own stables. Then I will be greatly comforted and perhaps made even a little giddy by the fact that God shows great favor to his children, even the hopeless, simple, and “weird.” And as I sit back in my seat, traytable in the upright position, and think about St. Joseph flying through his own friendly skies, I'll say, “St. Joseph of Cupertino, pray for us.” †

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