

## St. Joseph's Table (altar)

The Feast of St. Joseph, which always falls in the middle of Lent, is especially commemorated and celebrated in Italy in general, and Sicily in particular, where St. Joseph has been long-regarded as the island's Patron saint. It is there, among Sicilians, that the tradition of the "St. Joseph's Table" has its origins. This celebration is a symbolic "thank you" and a renewal of the Sicilian people's devotion to Saint Joseph.

It is a *shared* celebration with the entire community where the riches of food are given as alms to the poor: traditional etiquette is that *no one* can be turned away from this table.

### *Origins*

Legends from the Middle Ages attributed the end of a devastating drought to a prayer-devotion that the Sicilian people made to St. Joseph. During a time of drought and famine, no rain fell on Medieval Sicily. Food crops for both people and livestock withered and died. The people prayed to St. Joseph for help. When the clouds opened, the desperately-needed rain poured down, and there was much rejoicing! After the harvest, to show their gratitude, they prepared a table with special foods to honour St. Joseph and to share with the poor. After thanking and honouring the saint, they distributed the food to the less fortunate. This celebration became an annual tradition. Each year, wealthy families prepared huge buffets. The less fortunate people of the community, especially the homeless and sick, were invited, and all the remaining food and proceeds were given to the poor.

### *Three-Fold Purpose*

The heart of this tradition can be found in these three aspects:

*Veneration*—special recognition of St. Joseph during Mass and at the "table."

*The Table*—both a kind of "altar of reverence", and a community celebration. This year this would need to be worked out keeping Covid guidelines.

*The Poor*—The intention of all the gifts is to help those in need.

### *Veneration*

The festive nature of the table celebration is all about St. Joseph, but the primary veneration is during Mass. When the "table" is part of a parish activity, the "celebration" follows Mass. At Mass, St. Joseph, Mary and the child Jesus bring up the gifts; parishioners dressed as the Holy Family emphasize the stewardship of St. Joseph's gifts to the Church. Included with the normal sacramental gifts are some representative food items from the "table", especially hand-fashioned breads. In many parishes, after Mass, the statue of St. Joseph is carried, procession-style, into the parish hall to be placed in a prominent spot on the "altar", surrounded by lilies and other items.

### *The Table*

#### *Preparation and Symbolism*

A St. Joseph's Day "Table" or "Altar" is a makeshift shrine/dinner festival that can be held in a church hall or community open space. The parish team/community team may decide the background art work depending where the table is being held.

A parish St. Joseph's Table is typically a three-tiered display covered with white linen tablecloths. The three tiers represent the Holy Trinity, and the ascent from earth to heaven. A statue of St. Joseph is placed on the top tier.

The other tiers might hold flowers (especially lilies), candles, statues and holy cards. Then an array of symbolic breads and pastries are displayed. There may also be wine, symbolising the wedding feast at Cana; pineapple symbolising hospitality; lemons and limes and other fruit. At one end of the table there may be woodwork articles symbolising St. Joseph a model for workers. There is typically a basket in which the faithful place prayer petitions.

As a community you may follow the same themes, and is often the setting for a gathering of several families to celebrate together. The effect of the table design is meant to be dignified, solemn, yet festive, grand and inspiring.

Much symbolism should be incorporated into the shape and decoration of the table. For example, vigil lights of green, brown and deep yellow, representing St. Joseph's attire, can be placed all around, and the table can be surrounded by palms reminiscent of the Holy Land.

The poor and needy in the community are then invited to the table keeping Covid guidelines and take a meal / article they may eat / use.

Kindly note *the "Table" is also a celebration. Being the season of lent, it is advised to have veg food.* Breads, baked into symbolic shapes, are the centrepiece of the food table and the altar. You could use the creativity of the team in setting table.

#### **Some Artisan Bread ideas:**

Some of the most typical "artistic" breads are:

- **The Latin Cross:** The ultimate symbol of our Lord's suffering and salvation.
- **St. Joseph's Staff:** Legend has it that St. Joseph's staff blossomed into a lily, a symbol both of life and death.
- **St. Joseph's Purse:** This symbol is a reminder to give alms to the poor during Lent.
- **A Sheaf of Wheat:** Wheat is a reminder that, when a single, tiny grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it bears much more food at harvest time—and that the early spring harvest of greens is almost here.
- **St. Joseph himself:** He is always represented in profile and hunched over with a cane, symbolizing that he was (according to tradition) an old man, while Mary was a much younger woman.
- **Heart:** A symbol of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary.
- **The Crown of Thorns:** This is in remembrance of Christ's passion and a reminder that, despite the day's feasting among Lent's fasting, Lent is still a season of sorrow—but of hope, too!

*Gratefully acknowledged*

*adapted from*

*<https://yearofstjoseph.org/devotions/st-joseph-table/>*

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