

St. Joseph Altars

What is it?

Just what is a St. Joseph Altar we may briefly describe it thus:

It is a large table covered with food of all kinds, in the center of which is a large framed picture or statue of St. Joseph. This Altar occupies practically the whole floor space of an ordinary room.

It may be of interest to note some of the principal kinds of food. Large loaves of Italian homemade bread, in diverse shapes and forms, are placed in different sections of the table. Fruits and vegetables of every description, in season and out of season, practically cover it. You will find a great quantity of fish, but no meat is allowed. Italian pastries of all sorts add the finishing touch to the Altar.

The good people begin their preparations many days before the feast. Friends of the families, who are erecting the tables, help in the cooking and preparing of the food. The day before the feast, candles are lit and placed around the room, after which the priest is called in to bless the Altar. He is usually given an offering of money or a basket of food from the table.

In Palermo

The feast is not observed in the same manner everywhere, but these are three of the most common ways of observance. Near the city of Palermo, the custom is as follows: The Altar is prepared and blessed as stated above. On the feast itself, a small boy and a small girl are chosen to represent Jesus and Mary, and an old man to represent St. Joseph. A procession to the church, in stocking feet, takes place. Everyone goes to Mass and Communion. On the return home, the little ones representing Jesus and Mary enter, and the doors of the house are shut. The old man depicting St. Joseph, walks around the house three times. At the end of each round, he knocks on the door. Those within ask: "Who is there?", he responds: "A poor Man." They retort: "There is nothing for you here." At the end of the third round, he is admitted and begins the distribution of food to the poor.

In Alia

In the little town of Alia, Sicily, there is a church named St. Joseph's. On the 19th of March the faithful flock to it in order to pay honor to St. Joseph by hearing Mass and going to Communion. Mass having ended, the good people gather for a procession. A large statue of the Saint is placed on a platform, and those taking part visit the different Altars, where food is distributed to the poor. The large loaves of bread are broken and given to those who care for it. This bread is kept in the home the same as Blessed Palm. Tradition or legend has it, that in several instances during storms, a piece of it, thrown out into the weather, calmed the winds and rains. It has been related of a pious soul, that, during a severe storm, her home was in danger of collapsing. She broke a portion of this bread into four pieces, then placed a piece in each corner of the house and at once the violent trembling of the building ceased. The occupants immediately fell on their knees and gave thanks to God who protected them through His great Saint.

In America

The third and most ordinary way of keeping the feast, chiefly among many Italians in the Southern States, is as follows:

The preparations are made in the usual manner. A priest is called in the day before, and the Altar is blessed. Pious souls sit up, throughout the night, reciting rosaries, litanies and singing hymns. Nothing on the table is touched until the next day. Mass is heard and Communion received. Afterwards the food is given to the crowds who visit the Altars during the course of the day. Baskets and bags of food are sent to the poor and to friends of the families.

ST. JOSEPH'S ALTAR CUSTOMS

Three –Tiered Altar

The altar is constructed in three tiers, representing the three Persons in the Blessed Trinity. A statue of St. Joseph or a picture of the Holy Family is always placed on the top tier surrounded by flowers, greenery and fruit.

Blessing of the Altar

All of the items on the altar – food, candles, medals, holy cards, and fava beans – are blessed by a priest in a special ceremony the afternoon before an altar is “broken.” That evening people may visit to pray and leave petitions. Donations are collected for the poor.

Fresh Green Branch

At the place where the altar is erected, a fresh green branch is placed over the door. This indicates that the public is invited to be involved in the ceremony and to share the food.

St. Joseph's Bread

A specially prepared bread is blessed and distributed at the altar. This bread is baked in symbolic shapes. It may be eaten, but it is often saved. During a storm, a small piece is thrown out and prayers are said in hopes that the storm will abate.

Meatless

There are several speculations as to why meat is never served at a St. Joseph's Altar. First of all, the feast occurs during the Lenten season, and this meal also serves as a reminder of the Last Supper. But research reveals that the Sicilians' ancestors ate mostly bread, vegetables and fish.

“Broken”

The term “broken” means that the beautiful decorative food is served to the families and friends gathered at the ceremony.

Bags

Small bags are given as keepsakes to all who visit the altar. Each bag may contain a blessed medal, holy card, fava bean, cookies or bread.

Begging

All food on the altar is obtained by begging for donations. The altar must not incur any expense. In the spirit of St. Joseph, those who have been favored with good fortune continue to share these blessings with those in need. Donations and food on the altar are sent to the poor. There is never personal profit gained from the altar.

The Fava Bean

The gift of a blessed bean is the most well known of the customs associated with the St. Joseph's Altar. During one of Sicily's severe famines, the fava bean thrived while other crops failed. It was originally grown for animal fodder, but because of its amazing resilience, it became the sustained food of the farmers and their families. The dried bean is commonly called the “lucky bean.” Legend has it that the person who carries a “lucky bean” will never be without coins. The fava bean is also a token of the St. Joseph's Altar, and a reminder to pray to St. Joseph.

ST. JOSEPH'S ALTAR – SYMBOLS

Christian Symbols (breads and cakes)

Monstrance--(Spada) – holds the Sacred Host.

Chalice--Consecration of the Bread and Wine at the Last Supper.

Cross--Crucifixion of Christ.

Dove--The Holy Spirit.

Lamb--Jesus, the Lamb of God.

Fish--Christian symbol of Jesus Christ.

Bible--Large cake that is one of the focal points of the altar.

Hearts--Sacred Heart of Jesus, Immaculate Heart of Mary.

Wreaths--Crown of thorns, also symbol of eternal love.

Palms--Palm of martyrdom, also the palms cast at the feet of Jesus as He entered Jerusalem.

Symbols of St. Joseph (breads and cakes)

Lilies	Ladder	
Staff	Saw	
Sandals		Hammer
Beard	Nail	

Other Symbols

Mudica—browned and seasoned bread crumbs sprinkled over the Pasta Milanese representing the sawdust of Joseph, the carpenter.

Pignolatti—fried pastry molded in the shape of pine cones represent the pine cones that Jesus played with as a child.

Twelve Whole Fish—represents the twelve apostles or the miracle of the loaves and the fishes.

Pupaculova—baked bread filled with dyed Easter eggs symbolized coming of Easter.

Wine—miracle at Cana.

Grapes—vineyards of Sicily.

Olive Oil and Olive Salad—olive orchards of Sicily.

Dried Figs—fig orchards of Sicily.

