

Saint Joseph Altar – A Catholic Custom



A St. Joseph Altar is a Sicilian custom as an offering of Love, Labor and Sacrifice in honor of the Patron Saint of the Sicilians and Universal Church.

According to legend, the St. Joseph Altar originated in Sicily many centuries ago during a period of drought and famine. In desperation, the people turned to St. Joseph asking his help and intercession. When the rains came and crops prospered, their prayers were answered. In thanksgiving, the community made offerings to St. Joseph of their most prized possession - FOOD!

In his honor, they erected a lovely altar with three levels to represent the Holy Trinity. They draped it simply and beautifully in white, adorned it with flowers, the finest grain, fruits, vegetables, seafood and wine. The poor were invited to share in their prayer and festivity.

The custom and devotion continue to this day. Each year, altars laden with food (meatless) are prepared on March 19th to celebrate St. Joseph's Feast Day. Reasons for having the altars vary – to fulfill a promise, to give thanks for a favor granted, such as the safe return of a loved one from war, for healing the sick, for a happy family, for success in studies or business. It is also an opportunity for the prosperous to share with those less fortunate.

There are many traditions associated with a St. Joseph Altar. One is the traditional dried, roasted and blessed fava bean. It has been known as the very popular “lucky bean.” St. Joseph reportedly sent the rains, which nourished the fava beans, which in turn fed the famished Sicilians. Legend has it that you will never be broke as long as you carry a “lucky bean.” The custom is to carry a fava bean in your wallet or handbag for luck.

Another is the blessed St. Joseph's bread. Recipients keep the blessed bread in their houses for protection. If there is a storm, believers crumble the bread and scatter the crumbs to protect their homes from the storm.

These are just a few of the traditions and customs that surround the St. Joseph Altar.

At most altars, visitors are given a lucky bean to take home with them, so please feel free to take one. We are starting out very slow and small. We hope to grow this tradition, introducing something new every year.

The Feast of St. Joseph is March 19th.