

29 May

Joseph Gerard

- A Father of All -

Birth:	12 th March 1831
Baptism:	13 th March 1831
First communion:	2 nd February 18
Confirmation:	24 th March 1844
Novitiate:	9 th May 1851
Perpetual vows:	10 th May 1852
Diaconate:	3 rd April 1853
Ordination:	18 th February 1854
Death:	29 th May 1914
Place of burial:	Roma Ha 'Ma-Jesu

Biblical Texts

Is 52: 7-10

Ps 15

I Cor 5: 14-20

Mt 29: 16-20

Mk 16: 15-20

Meditation

Blessed Joseph Gerard was born in the regional capital of Lorraine in France, a few kilometers northeast of Nancy in a village called Bouxières-aux-Chênes. He was born into a Christian family. His father Jean Gerard was a hard-working countryman, and very supportive of his parish priest for the parish's charities. This influenced Joseph to be a hard-working man as well. His mother Ursule Gerard, on the other hand, implanted in him a diligent and delicate piety which became the predominant characteristic of his life. She played a very important role in the saintly life of her son, Joseph. In most cases, what we learn from our parents greatly influences who we are today. The same thing happened to Father Gerard, thanks to his parents who made sure that he became a good man.

Young Joseph used to look after his father's horses, oxen and sheep. As a shepherd, Joseph began to learn responsibility and gained some strength because he used to spend the whole day alone looking after animals. He was not used to being in the company of his age mates. He enjoyed being on his own so that he could make time to pray. At home, they used to pray together as a

family and more often he was the one leading prayers as an elder son. Since his childhood prayer became part of his life.

Joseph went to school just like any other child of his age. We are told that he was entrusted to a nun called sister Odile who taught him catechism. Joseph was so devoted to the Sacred Heart, to the Holy Eucharist and to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Sister Odile journeyed with the young Joseph in preparation for his first communion. Sister Odile's work became so fruitful in such a way that even at the age of 82, Father Gerard could not forget that beautiful day of his first communion. That is where Father Gerard deepened his love for Mother Mary and the Holy Eucharist. At the age of eight, Joseph heard a call to the priesthood. All that he learned from his parents and sister Odile influenced him to desire to offer his life for the salvation of souls.

In 1839 Joseph Gerard went to the Minor Seminary, Pont-A-Mousson and later on to the Major Seminary for his Theological Studies. While he was at the Major Seminary, two Oblate Priests visited them, Father Jean-Nicolas Laverlochère and Father Leonard Baveux. These two Oblates were sharing their missionary experience in Canada and the great need to preach the good news to the poor. He learned about their congregation and he decided to join them regardless of their difficult experiences. The reasons why he decided to join the Oblates were that the congregation was named after the Blessed Virgin Mary and that it was a missionary congregation. With his deep love for Mother Mary, he was already willing to become a missionary without no hesitation. When his parents had blessed his desire to join the Oblates, he made his vow before the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Church called Notre Dame de Sion. To be a missionary is a great challenge that can only be overcome by deep faith and profound love of the Church, especially in those days when it was not easy even to get basic needs met.

While in the formation house, his formators saw him as a saintly man. His Novice Master wrote to Bishop De Mazenod about him saying: "I believe that Our Lady wants to make a little saint of him". It was clear that Brother Joseph wanted to become a saint from a young age. The fact that he used to enjoy being on his own in prayer while looking at his father's animals, shows that he was already responding to God's call for holiness. He was so happy on the day of his perpetual vows on May 10, 1852.

Brother Joseph Gerard was ordained a deacon by the Bishop of Marseilles, Bishop Eugene De Mazenod on April 3, 1853. Burning with the zeal for the salvation of souls and the love of the congregation, Brother Joseph and his confreres together with Bishop De Mazenod were so touched that they shed tears that day. No doubt they cried because they were realizing the seriousness of their decision; the ardent need for the salvation of souls and their total surrender to God.

Deacon Joseph Gerard left everything behind and went to a place where he had never been before, South Africa. A 22-year-old young man leaving his parents, siblings, relatives and friends forever in the name of the gospel. What was on his mind that day when he was saying 'goodbye' to his loved ones? Perhaps it was through his strong faith that all these things happened. With strong faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). These words express the desire of Joseph Gerard too. Otherwise, he wouldn't be so strong and enthusiastic in his apostolic work.

From the day of his departure from France up to the day of his last breath, we see a man who was depending on God for his mission. Through the Power of God, he became a father, a healer and a saint.

Brother Joseph's voyage to South Africa was not easy at all. We learned that the wind drove their ship off-course to Mauritius where they spent some months before they reached their destination.

On January 25th 1854, Brother Joseph Gerard and his confreres arrived in the port of Durban. After his ordination on February 18th, 1854, Father Gerard full of energy began his work of evangelization. His missionary work among the AmaZulu was not easy at all. For ten full years, he did not get even a single convert. He suffered a lot to see the people who hardened their hearts because of their prejudices against the missionaries. His work seemed to be a total failure among the AmaZulu, but the fruits came later. Even in those dark moments at the beginning of his missionary experience, Father Gerard never lost hope.

In those difficult times, Father Gerard did not think of returning to Europe but through the advice of the Founder, they decided to go even further. To those who put their trust in the Lord, God will always be on their side. When they arrived at the place of Chief Moshoeshoe, the light of hope shone with the warm welcome of the Chief and his people. The Basotho opened their heart to welcome the good news. In a very short time in October 1865, seven adults were baptized.

Father Joseph Gerard, the Apostle of the poor and the sick. The increasing number of Christians made Father Gerard to be even stronger in his missionary work. He was a well-informed priest in terms of the teaching of the Church and his fervent love for the sick and the poor. In 1865, the first Catechism was published in the Sesotho language. He would make sure that people knew all that is contained in the teaching of the Church and that they knew how to pray. Father Gerard would celebrate mass so devotedly that people felt they were in the spirit of prayer even though they could not understand Latin.

Another thing that Father Gerard was well-known about was visiting the sick and the poor. He used to ride his horse Artaban and go everywhere to look for the lost sheep. His people were always in his heart. He even used to enter the huts that some people would not enter. He was the counsellor of the dying; he would listen to your confession and give them the anointing of the sick before they die. Even in his old age when he could not climb on his horse, he would be assisted by men to ride, and again when he needed to get down from the horse. He would not allow his physical deterioration to stop him from doing God's work.

When his body couldn't allow him anymore, he retired from his apostolic work and remained a devoted man of prayer and a Spiritual Director of the Christians. Because of the heavy challenges and sickness that he went through, Father Gerard looked older than his age.

When the time came, the Apostle of Basotho died happy because he had done all that he could for the salvation of souls. He was well-prepared and ready to go to heaven. He offered his last mass on Sunday, May 24, 1914. That same day Bishop Jules Cenez, OMI offered him the last rites which he accepted with great joy. He also renewed his religious vows. On Friday 29, 1914 in the evening, our beloved father Gerard was surrounded by his superior Father Justin Pannerath, OMI and three nuns when he threw his last breath. Father Justin wrote to Father's niece in

France sister Anne Magdalene saying, "His death was sweet and calm because his life was marked by holiness".

Prayer

O Blessed Joseph Gerard,
in the difficulties of life,
we remember your goodness
for people who suffer
and who need the Lord's love.
Intercede for us peace, unity and health,
and give us the grace of faith, love and hope.
May we, like you,
become an acceptable offering to the
Immaculate Heart of Mary
and the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus,
who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Amen.