



## St. Joseph Altar Customs for the Three Tiered Altar

The altar is constructed in three tiers, representing the three Persons of 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 the altar is "broken". That evening people may visit to pray and to 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 in the food.

### **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 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 sustaining food of the farmers and their families. The dried bean is commonly called the lucky bean. Legend has it that the person who carried a lucky bean will never be without coins. The fava bean is also a token of St. Joseph's Altar and a reminder to pray to St. Joseph.

**NOTE :** *There are several speculations as to why meat is never served at a St. Joseph 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 the 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.

### **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 is often saved. During a storm, a small piece is thrown out and prayers are said in hopes that the storm will abate.

### **St. Joseph Altar Symbols**

*(breads and cakes)*

#### **Christian Symbols**

**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 focal point of the altar

**Hearts**

Sacred Heart of Jesus and 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**

**Lillies**                      **Ladder**

**Staff**                        **Saw**

**Sandals**                    **Hammer**

**Beard**                      **Nail**

#### **Other Altar 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 Jesus played with as a child.

**Twelve Whole Fish**

Represents the twelve apostles or the miracle of the loaves and fishes.

**Pupaculo**

Baked bread filled with dried Easter eggs symbolizing the coming of Easter.

**Wine**

The miracle of Cana

**Grapes**

Vineyards of Sicily

**Olive Oil and Olive Salad**

Olive orchards of Sicily or the Garden of Olives where Jesus had his agony in the garden.

**Dried Figs**

Fig Orchards of Sicily