


# From Ordinary to Extraordinary

## Saying Yes to Duty

Father Joseph Eddy, O. de M.



**I wanted to be  
special at something.**

Father Joseph Eddy is not from any of the places I expected.

He's not from a jumbo-sized family. In fact, he is the youngest of three, and his parents, Thomas and Mary, were rather surprised by his arrival. They called him the "bonus baby." Mrs. Eddy had so much trouble delivering

his two sisters that doctors said it was dangerous for her to have any more. Thus, as Joseph came into the world, his parish priest was already offering Mass for his life and that of his mom.

Young Joe wasn't homeschooled. He wasn't educated at a specialized academy run by high-minded, counter-cultural laymen or religious. He didn't go to a parochial school. His parents sent him to the only school in town, which was public. He didn't attend any of the small mega-Catholic colleges, such as Franciscan University of Steubenville, where students major in theology and minor in matrimony or Holy Orders. He didn't grow up with the Latin Mass. And I'm willing to bet his home wasn't decorated to look like a shrine.

He and I do have one thing in common though: a devotion to St. Joseph. His beats mine. It goes back to before he was born and is, in fact, how he got his name.

Joseph Eddy was the child of a promise. After his parents were married, Mr. Eddy had difficulty finding work. He is a disabled Vietnam veteran, shot in his left arm—mere inches from his heart. So, Joe's mom enrolled her husband in the St. Joseph Union, which promised prayers to help him find a job. In two weeks he had three offers. He took one as a technician at IBM. Thus, St. Joseph, the patron of workers and the patron of fathers, became the patron of the Eddys' only son.

Of course, most Catholics have a devotion to St. Joseph's better half. Father Joseph recalls, "We had a large statue of Our Lady of Grace in our home. As a child, I would look at her and recognize Mary as another Mother who was assigned to take care of me."

Neighbors didn't need to tour the statuary to notice that the Eddys were not Baptist like most of their

neighbors. A simple recitation of the family litany would do: Thomas, Mary, Maria, Teresa, and Joseph.

They maintained a close relationship with the parish, which, thanks to an old-fashioned pastor, might as well have been called St. Smells and Bells. Young Joe spent a lot of time with this quiet, sober man since Joe's great-aunt ran the rectory. She was one of those formidable great-aunts that make standard-issue aunts look harmless and doddering. Together, she and Father Antediluvian were not a lot of fun, but their sobriety made for a solid parish.

So far everything about the Eddys seems to have been plainer than parsnips. Or was it? To understand the depth of their native Catholicism, you have to go back another generation to the families of Mary and Thomas.

Mary was born into a family of farmers. Her parents were in their forties when she was born. She was an only child. As if farmers weren't a down-to-earth lot already, Mary's folks grew up with the shortages of the Depression and World War II. In those hard times, farmers marked their fences so that hoboes knew where they could get a hot meal and a night's rest. Mary's family still kept the fence marked well after the war. Men often got off the train, did some work on the farm, ate, rested, and were off again the next day. Mary grew up simply, with no pretensions. Her folks' idea of a good time involved visiting neighboring relatives for a chat. Father Joseph recalls his grandparents as people who would do anything to help anyone.

Mary raised her children the same way, even though the circumstances were quite different. Joseph grew up in the prosperous 1980s in a comfortable, new housing

development. Behind it was a trailer park full of poor families.

“Mom would drag us to the neighbors’ houses often,” says Father Joseph. She made Joe and his sisters help the neighbors shovel snow or cut their grass. “One old woman had dementia, and one old man was kind of nasty. But there we were, the three children, doing chores for them. Of course, we complained. But Mom just insisted that it was the right thing to do.”

St. Francis de Sales tells us that those who are rich can practice poverty just the way Mrs. Eddy did:

The servant is less than the master; therefore make yourself a servant of the poor. Go and wait on them when they are sick in bed, wait on them, I say, with your own hands. Prepare their food for them yourself and at your own expense. Be their seamstress and laundress. Philothea, such service is more glorious than that of a king. (*Introduction to the Devout Life*)

Such was the unassuming Mrs. Eddy. She was a farm girl who loved homespun wisdom (“You’ve gotta kiss a lot of frogs before you find your prince”) and backwoods sayings (“I haven’t seen you in a coon’s age!”). “It embarrassed us,” says Father Joseph. (Hey, what are parents for?) “But we always knew she was the real deal. What you see is what you get.”

Joe’s father, Thomas, brought something very different to the family. Some would call it “baggage.” He is introspective and quiet—not without cause. His childhood had not been peaceful. Grandpa Eddy was aggressive and sometimes violent. Grandma Eddy was passive aggressive. But Grandma, for all her controlling ways, was Catholic. She faithfully took her children to Mass.

Go ahead. Go ahead and say it: “If her religion doesn’t make her a nice person, it’s a failure.” That’s what people always say.

I prefer to look at it the way Evelyn Waugh, the author of *Brideshead Revisited*, did: “You have no idea how much nastier I would be if I was not a Catholic.”

That was Grandma. It was no small grace that she was steadfast in the Faith. Such perseverance does not go unrewarded. As she lay dying, her future-priest grandson prayed the Chaplet of Divine Mercy at her bedside.

Perhaps an even greater victory was when Grandpa, an unchurched Baptist all his life, became a Catholic. He then prepared for his death with frequent confession. If the heavens are moved at the conversion of this one sinner, imagine what hope it instilled in Thomas and his family.

As Mrs. Eddy brought heroic generosity into her marriage, Mr. Eddy brought heroic suffering. His heart was formed in silence. Father Joseph says that his father isn’t one to speak of his pain, which is perhaps typical of previous generations when men did not cry. He isn’t one to speak of his accomplishments, though, either, as men across the generations love to do. Perhaps it’s something left over from boyhood. Whenever I hear a grown man get excited and announce an achievement, it reminds me of an exchange I once heard between two homeschooled boys:

“I read *The Three Musketeers*—unabridged.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, I read it in *French*.”

Kids oppressed by angry households tend to go the other way. They do not seek attention. It’s safer to be invisible.

I once wrote a story about a recovering alcoholic named Jerry, whose father was an angry alcoholic. He described his childhood living with this man: "If you got hurt and cried or were having a good time and laughed, he got angry and you got beat." Jerry stayed safe by not showing any emotions. "You learn to turn off your emotions. You do not know how to turn them on."

Father Joseph confesses being ashamed that it took so many years, into his young adulthood, for him to appreciate his unassuming father. "Dad was a man of fidelity, a quiet leader, a great provider, and a good protector. I imagine that St. Joseph was a quiet man who just did his thing."

*Who just did his thing*—take a look around, and you'll see how big this really is. Many men today do not know the meaning of the word "sacrifice." They seek only to be pleased. As Jerry's own battle against anger and alcoholism shows, those from abusive homes often become abusive. Down the line it goes, from generation to generation. Only the bravest of them stop the cycle. Joe's dad was that man.

"Dad was not perfect, he had a temper, but he always asked for forgiveness, and I always remember him getting into his truck on Saturdays and going alone to confession." Only the humblest of them repent. Joe's dad was that man.

No doubt, the Eddys think they are ordinary Americans. Nothing special. In their house, grace was found through ordinary means: the sacraments, the Rosary. Yet, "ordinary" does not mean "nothing special." It means that these are the channels of grace the Church recommends for all Christians.

Like their neighbors, the Eddys pursued the American Dream. They wanted to give their kids everything they didn't have. They raised their family in the era when more and more women were working outside the home, not from necessity, but for personal satisfaction. Mrs. Eddy, who was a trained teacher, was right there with them. Yet, there were periods, a year or two at a time, when she decided the job just wasn't worth it—when it was wearing her out or when it seemed that the kids needed more of her. Family always came first.

To counteract the culture of materialism, Joe and his sisters were expected to get jobs when they were twelve. Designer clothes were in—but if Joe wanted them he would have to spend his own money on them. He did that—once.

It was a good lesson to adjust his desires to fit his budget. More importantly, he learned to build an identity based on more than appearances. Like most kids, it was a lesson he didn't want to learn. "As I got into junior high and high school, I felt a bit lost. My friends were changing and I didn't fit in with anyone. I felt plain and was embarrassed by my quiet family." So he set out to build an identity based on achievement.

"I wanted to be special at something. I was average at sports, had average looks, and was an average student. I wanted to show everyone that I was more than average, that I could be special. I began to focus intensely on being perfect. I would outwork everyone in sports, school, and whatever else."

Joe's family wasn't sure what to make of this. Who wouldn't want an achiever for a son? On the other hand, the kid was driving himself nuts.

It reminds me of the story of Venerable Walter Ciszek, S.J. As a young seminarian, he competed with himself to

be tougher than he already was—swimming in icy water, fasting on bread and water during Lent, suffering self-imposed loneliness, all just to see if he could take it. It was part of his preparation to be a priest who would spend twenty-three years behind the Iron Curtain, most of them in the gulag of Siberia. Great—except he didn't have his superior's permission for any of it. His headstrong ways almost got him kicked out of the Jesuit novitiate. What God really wanted from him was obedience—the toughest thing of all.

Joe's superiors found him stubborn, too. "Mom, Dad, and Grandma tried to talk to me about it, but they had little effect on my strong disposition. I think it was my grandmother's prayers (a Rosary for each grandchild) that eventually got me out of my destructive mindset."

As Providence would have it, Joe's dad was there for him at this turning point in his life. Thomas's latest cross was losing his job of twenty-one years. Since he was close to earning his retirement, his job was cut first. This was a crushing blow to his identity as provider. But God wanted him to provide for his family in a different way—by being more present to his children. Joe wasn't the only one who needed him especially at that time. "My sisters were rebellious," he recalls. "My dad became more involved in the parenting then, and they responded to him."

This trial by fire also allowed Thomas to finally open himself up emotionally and show his human love for his family. Joe used to think his father wasn't affectionate. He admits his concept of affection was conditioned by the emotive trends on TV and in school. "Dad would show affection to my sisters with hugs, but it was different with me. He would shake my hand, and we would see who



had a stronger grip, or we would wrestle—that is, until I accidentally broke his ribs.”

Everyone in Joe’s family now sees the layoff as a blessing in disguise. “We finally got the father that we needed.”

Joe also joined a Protestant youth group and met Christian friends, such as Dan, whose dad was an evangelical pastor. Wait a minute. A red flag just went straight up the pole and is flapping in a high wind. As a home-schooler, I know what these folks are like. They are friendly and respectful and highly unlikely to sneak your teenager out of the house for a midnight drinking binge. They may, however, try to argue him straight out of the Catholic Church. Dan was all of the above. Joe’s mom allowed the kids to belong to the youth group but warned them against being recruited.

Joe took the good he saw in Dan and made it his own. Dan never used bad language; he was never cruel; he was genuine and unashamed of being Christian. Best of all, Dan’s zeal to convert Joe backfired. “He challenged me. We had many discussions and arguments about the Catholic Church and what Christianity is.” This spurred Joe to start studying his faith more. The friendship was just what Joe needed to emerge as the leader he was born to be.

Still, the thought of doing anything as public as being a priest terrified him. “I was so deathly shy about public speaking or even public walking!” His high school class of 130 students voted him “Most Shy Male.” Apparently, Divine Providence enjoys a challenge.

Father Joseph recalls, “One day after serving Mass, a well-respected man from the parish came up to me and told me that God spoke to him at Mass. God told him that

I was called to become a priest. To me this was amazing, because I thought that there were many better candidates among the altar servers. I was the shy, nervous one. Why would God choose me?"

Perhaps good St. Joseph once asked himself the same question. A famously quiet, dutiful soul, he probably felt he was nobody special. If there had been a village year-book, he would have been voted "Most Unlikely to Make Sudden Epic Journeys." Yet, it was just this plainness, this stability, really, that God wanted for his service. As patron saints go, how spot-on can you get?

I am convinced that God is a fan of dutiful ordinariness. He uses it to do miracles. How else could an amateur, family choir such as ours render the soaring Palestrina? How else could a plain-as-parsnips family give a son to the sacred priesthood? How else could we and they—strangers from different worlds—come together to celebrate that sacred day as members of one and the same Church?

## Saying Yes to Duty

I arrived on the motherhood scene with zip experience. My list of previous engagements read:

- No younger siblings.
- One summer in role of warm body, aka babysitter. Job description: eating in front of reruns, hoping kids are not drowning in pool. (What did they expect for a dollar an hour?)
- Cameo appearance as teenage aunt—playing opposite niece and nephew who knock on bedroom door to play at 9 a.m. before I am up. Response: turn Walkman up higher.