

## Christmas 2018 “Fr. Joseph Mohr and His Christmas Gift to the World”

Fr. Frank Schuster

For those of us who struggle at Christmas from time to time, I want to introduce to you a man named Joseph Mohr.<sup>1</sup> He was born in Salzburg in 1792. His father deserted from the military and abandoned his mother before Joseph was even born. Joseph and his three siblings grew up in poverty as a result, doing what they could to help their mother. This made for a very difficult childhood. Like many kids, music was an escape for him. However, back then there was no such thing as iTunes so Joseph took to singing. He spent much of his free time at church, probably because there was a nice community there, great music, and the priests cared for the poor. It didn't take long before young Joseph found himself singing in the choir. A priest benefactor noticed his talent and ensured that Joseph was able to afford music lessons and such. Joseph was so talented with his voice and violin that he eventually became the choir director at the Salzburg Cathedral.

I like to think it was the priest's kindness that helped Joseph hear a vocation from the Lord to become a priest himself. It was a difficult process for him to get into seminary in those days as he came from a penniless background and from a broken home. Thank goodness he had a lot of support and encouragement. After years of study he was ordained a priest in 1815. His priesthood began as an assistant to a number of pastors, as was customary in those days. He would be two years in one place and then two years in another. Eventually he became a pastor in his own right and even built a school. He died without a penny to his name after giving everything to the poor. But I am getting ahead of myself. I want to focus on his first two assignments.

His health wasn't very good. His first assignment in Mariapfarr ended in Joseph needing recuperation in Salzburg. After which, during his second assignment at Oberndorf, he found himself working for a grumpy pastor by the name of Fr. Nöstler. During this time, to keep the peace, Fr. Joseph slept in the caretaker's quarters and had his meals at the local pub. Perhaps what irritated Fr. Nöstler the most was that times were tough in the parish and Fr. Joseph cared less about the collection plate and more about giving assistance to those in need. Fr. Joseph was very generous to the poor, probably because he spent his entire childhood in poverty. A priest helped him when he was a child and so that was the kind of priest he wanted to be. Fr. Joseph also enjoyed the arts and would frequent the travelling music shows that would come through town.

Fr. Nöstler became so irritated with Fr. Joseph during his time there that he openly accused him, and I quote, of “neglecting his priestly duties, frequenting drinking locales, joking with persons of the opposite sex, and singing songs which do not edify.” A local deacon, and a number of town folk, came to Fr. Joseph's defense. They put into writing their opinion that Fr. Nöstler's harsh words about Fr. Joseph were unfounded. That was the situation leading up to Christmas that year in Oberndorf. It was a very toxic, frustrating, and disheartening time.

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<sup>1</sup> The article that inspired this homily and if you are interested in learning more:  
<https://www.stillenacht.at/en/history/joseph-mohr>

Fr. Joseph however was given the responsibility of celebrating the Midnight Mass at the parish, which he was happy to do. He loved music and had a good relationship with the organist Franz Gruber. Fr. Joseph and Gruber planned a wonderful liturgy with hymns set to beautiful organ music. Just when you think nothing else could go wrong, the organ broke down and couldn't be repaired by Christmas. Some say it was due to rats and others say it was due to rust. I blame the grumpy pastor Fr. Nöstler.

Since Fr. Joseph was a good liturgist and loved music, he decided to meet with Gruber only hours before mass to discern how to proceed without the organ that night. You see, Fr. Joseph was inspired to share with Gruber a poem about Christmas that he had written in his first assignment at Mariapfarr. Only hours before Midnight Mass, Gruber came up with a tune that could be played on his guitar and also go well with the poem. And that night, Christmas of 1818, that little town heard the song "Silent Night" for the first time. The rest is history. This year, the year of our Lord 2018, marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the precious gift Fr. Joseph Mohr and Franz Gruber gave to the world.

I share this story about Fr. Joseph Mohr with you because when we sing "Silent Night" it is good to remember that the Christmas this carol was introduced was not an easy one for him or for the people in his parish. Of course, it is fair to say that the events leading to the first Christmas weren't easy either. I think it is important to remember this, especially if we are struggling ourselves this Christmas. The Church offers four different masses with their own Gospel readings on Christmas and all of them emphasize this point in one way or another.

At the Vigil Mass, the Gospel of Matthew shares with us how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. "When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly." Let's stop right there. Do you think for a moment that life wasn't stressful for both Mary and Joseph during Mary's pregnancy? Joseph, however, does the right thing, thanks be to God, and welcomes Mary and Jesus into his home.

At the Midnight Mass, the Gospel of Luke shares with us that when it was nearly time for Mary to give birth to Jesus they had to make the trip to Bethlehem for the census ordered by the Roman conquerors. When they got there, there was no room for them in the inn. They had to settle for a stable filled with animals. Do you think this evening might have been a bit stressful for Mary and Joseph? It is good to remember at times what the first Christmas was like.

At the Mass for Christmas Morning, Luke's Gospel recalls how shepherds who were working through the night came to knowledge of Jesus' birth and shared that news with joy throughout the countryside. At the Mass for Christmas day, St. John boldly begins his Gospel referring to Jesus as the light that enters into our darkness and, even though the people preferred darkness over light, the darkness will not overcome the light. Where am I going with this, you wonder?

My friends, the Church celebrates Advent and Christmas during the darkest time of year, a time when it is cold. And I believe it is fair to say that there are times in everyone's life that can feel that way, even this time of year, dark and cold. There are times when we can feel stressed out with what is going on at home, at work, or in the world around us. There are times when we feel sad about the real losses we have experienced, whether it is the loss of a loved one, or the loss of our health, or the loss of a job, or the loss of direction. At this time of year we can feel like a people wandering in the darkness, seeking the light of Christ. It is during this time of year that the Church gives us Christmas.

You see, it is during the darkest, coldest time of year that the Church celebrates the birth of our savior Jesus Christ. You know what this makes Christmas for me at times? And I think by now you all know what I am about to say because you have heard this from me before. For me, Christmas is a feast day of defiant joy. Please stay with me here. All of us can come up with a lot of just reasons to not be joyful this Christmas. All of us can come up with a lot of reasons to be sincerely frustrated with some of the people in our lives, or in our country and world today, and even with the Church these days if we are perfectly honest with ourselves. As a priest, let me tell you, if I really wanted to, it would be rather easy for me to come up with a lot of reasons to not be joyful this Christmas. This is why the story of Joseph Mohr is such good medicine for me personally.

When Fr. Joseph was dealing with a cantankerous pastor, bad health and a broken down organ, instead of succumbing to depression or despair, he made a choice to keep his focus on Jesus. And as a result of his closeness to the Lord, he was able to give the world the hymn "Silent Night". When St. Joseph was unsure of himself and his marriage in the Christmas story according to St. Matthew, he trusted in the word of an Angel, and chose to joyfully welcome Mary and Jesus into his home. He was glad he did...and so are we! When Joseph and Mary found themselves giving birth to Jesus in a stable in the Christmas story according to St. Luke, they made the best of it and joyfully welcomed the Lord into the world. Angels and shepherds joined them in song and spread the news throughout the countryside! For the Gospel of St. John, when the world couldn't get any darker from the power of sin and death, Christmas welcomed Christ the light into our world to shine defiantly in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it. We need this light, my friends. We sincerely do. You see, the love of Christ at Christmas time is a stubborn love. Darkness cannot overcome it.

And so, what is holding us back? Let's take a moment to think what could possibly be holding us back from receiving the joy of Christmas? When we sing "Silent Night" this Christmas, I invite us to remember the witness of Fr. Joseph Mohr 200 years ago. Despite everything he suffered that year, he and Franz Gruber gave the world a gift that points our hearts to Jesus who alone is the way, the truth and the life.