

# ST. JOSEPH





**St. Joseph, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary  
and foster-father of Our Lord Jesus Christ,  
Feast March 19, July 20,  
December 25, 26, and the two Sundays before and after  
Christmas and Theophany**

**LIFE**

**Sources.** The chief sources of information on the life of St. Joseph are the first chapters of our first and third Gospels; they are practically also the only reliable sources, for, while the apocryphal literature is full of details, the non-admittance of these works into the Canon of the Sacred Books casts a strong suspicion upon their contents; and, even granted that some of the facts recorded by them may be founded on trustworthy traditions, it is in most instances next to impossible to discern and sift these particles of true history from the fancies with which they are associated. Among these apocryphal productions dealing more or less extensively with some episodes of St. Joseph's life may be noted the so-called "Gospel of James", the "Pseudo-Matthew", the "Gospel of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary", the "Story of Joseph the Carpenter", and the "Life of the Virgin and Death of Joseph".

**Genealogy.** St. Matthew (1:16) calls St. Joseph the son of Jacob; according to St. Luke (3:23), Heli was his father. This is not the place to recite the many and most various endeavours to solve the vexing questions arising from the divergences between both genealogies; nor is it necessary to point out the explanation which meets best all the requirements of the problem. Contrary to what was once advocated, most modern scholars readily admit that in both documents we possess the genealogy of Joseph, and that it is quite possible to reconcile their data.

**Residence.** Bethlehem, the city of David and his descendants, appears to have been the birth-place of Joseph. When, however, the Gospel history opens, namely, a few months before the Annunciation, Joseph was settled at Nazareth. Why and when he forsook his home-place to betake himself to Galilee is not

ascertained; some suppose -- and the supposition is by no means improbable -- that the then moderate circumstances of the family and the necessity of earning a living may have brought about the change. St. Joseph, indeed, was a *tekton*, as we learn from Matthew 13:55, and Mark 6:3. The word means both mechanic in general and carpenter in particular; St. Justin vouches for the latter sense (Dial. cum Tryph., lxxxviii, in P.G., VI, 688), and tradition has accepted this interpretation, which is followed in the English Bible.

**Marriage.** It is probably at Nazareth that Joseph betrothed and married her who was to become the Mother of God. When the marriage took place, whether before or after the Incarnation, is no easy matter to settle, and on this point the masters of exegesis have at all times been at variance. Most modern commentators, following the footsteps of St. Thomas, understand that, at the epoch of the Annunciation, the Blessed Virgin was only affianced to Joseph; as St. Thomas notices, this interpretation suits better all the evangelical data.

The stories concerning St. Joseph's marriage contained in the apocryphal writings state that when forty years of age, Joseph married a woman called Melcha or Escha by some, Salome by others; they lived forty-nine years together and had six children, two daughters and four sons, the youngest of whom was James (the Less, "the Lord's brother"). A year after his wife's death, as the priests announced through Judea that they wished to find in the tribe of Juda a respectable man to espouse Mary, then twelve to fourteen years of age. Joseph, who was at the time ninety years old, went up to Jerusalem among the candidates; a miracle manifested the choice God had made of Joseph, and two years later the Annunciation took place. These dreams, as St. Jerome styles them, from which many a Christian artist has drawn his inspiration (e.g.: Raphael's "Espousals of the Virgin"), are void of authority; they nevertheless acquired in the course of ages some popularity; in them some ecclesiastical writers sought the answer to the well-known difficulty arising from the mention in the Gospel of "the Lord's brothers"; from them also popular (though not scholastic) credulity has retained the belief that St. Joseph was an old man at

the time of marriage with the Mother of God.

**The Incarnation.** This marriage, true and complete, was, in the intention of the spouses, to be virgin marriage (cf. St. Aug., "De cons. Evang.", II, i in P.L. XXXIV, 1071-72; "Cont. Julian.", V, xii, 45 in P.L. XLIV, 810; St. Thomas, III:28; III:29:2). But soon the faith of Joseph in his spouse was sorely tried: she was with child. However painful the discovery must have been for him, unaware as he was of the mystery of the Incarnation, his delicate feelings forbade him to defame his affianced, and he resolved "to put her away privately; but while he thought on these things, behold the angel of the Lord appeared to him in his sleep, saying: Joseph, son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife, for that which is conceived in her, is of the Holy Ghost. . . And Joseph, rising from his sleep, did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him, and took unto him his wife" (Matthew 1:19, 20, 24).

**The Nativity and the Flight to Egypt.** A few months later, the time came for Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem, to be enrolled, according to the decree issued by Caesar Augustus: a new source of anxiety for Joseph, for "her days were accomplished, that she should be delivered", and "there was no room for them in the inn (Luke 2:1-7). What must have been the thoughts of the holy man at the birth of the Saviour, the coming of the shepherds and of the wise men, and at the events which occurred at the time of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, we can merely guess. St. Luke tells only that he was "wondering at those things which were spoken concerning him" (2:33). New trials were soon to follow. The news that a king of the Jews was born could not but kindle in the wicked heart of the old and bloody tyrant, Herod, the fire of jealousy. Again "an angel of the Lord appeared in sleep to Joseph, saying: Arise, and take the child and his mother, and fly into Egypt: and be there until I shall tell thee" (Matthew 2:13).

**Return to Nazareth.** The summons to go back to Palestine came only after a few years, and the Holy Family settled again at Nazareth. St. Joseph's was henceforth the simple and uneventful life of an humble Jew, supporting himself and his family by his work,

and faithful to the religious practices commanded by the Law or observed by pious Israelites. The only noteworthy incident recorded by the Gospel is the loss of, and anxious quest for, Jesus, then twelve years of old, when He had strayed during the yearly pilgrimage to the Holy City (Luke 2:42-51).

**Death.** This is the last we hear of St. Joseph in the sacred writings, and we may well suppose that Jesus's foster-father died before the beginning of Savior's public life. In several circumstances, indeed, the Gospels speak of the latter's mother and brothers (Matthew 12:46; Mark 3:31; Luke 8:19; John 7:3), but never do they speak of His father in connection with the rest of the family; they tell us only that Our Lord, during His public life was referred to as the son of Joseph (John 1:45; 6:42; Luke 4:22) the carpenter (Matthew 13:55). Would Jesus, moreover, when about die on the Cross, have entrusted His mother to John's care, had St. Joseph been still alive? According to the apocryphal "Story of Joseph the Carpenter", the holy man reached his hundred and eleventh year when he died, on 20 July (A. D. 18 or 19). St. Epiphanius gives him ninety years of age at the time of his demise; and if we are to believe the Venerable Bede, he was buried in the Valley of Josaphat. In truth we do not know when St. Joseph died; it is most unlikely that he attained the ripe old age spoken of by the "Story of Joseph" and St. Epiphanius. The probability is that he died and was buried at Nazareth.

## **DEVOTION TO SAINT JOSEPH**

Joseph was "a just man". This praise bestowed by the Holy Ghost, and the privilege of having been chosen by God to be the foster-father of Jesus and the Spouse of the Virgin Mother, are the foundations of the honour paid to St. Joseph by the Church.

So well-grounded are these foundations that it is not a little surprising that devotion to St. Joseph was so slow in winning recognition. Foremost among the causes of this is the fact that "during the first centuries of the Church's existence, it was only the martyrs who enjoyed veneration" (Kellner).

Far from being ignored or passed over in silence during the early

Christian ages, St. Joseph's prerogatives were occasionally descanted upon by the Fathers; even such eulogies as cannot be attributed to the writers among whose works they found admittance bear witness that the ideas and devotion therein expressed were familiar, not only to the theologians and preachers, and must have been readily welcomed by the people.

The earliest traces of public recognition of the sanctity of St. Joseph are to be found in the East. His feast, if we may trust the assertions of Papebroch, was kept by the Copts as early as the beginning of the fourth century. Nicephorus Callistus tells likewise -- on what authority we do not know -- that in the great basilica erected at Bethlehem by St. Helena, there was a gorgeous oratory dedicated to the honour of our saint. Certain it is, at all events, that the feast of "Joseph the Carpenter" is entered, on 20 July, in one of the old Coptic Calendars in our possession, as also in a Synazarium of the eighth and ninth century published by Cardinal Mai (Script. Vet. Nova Coll., IV, 15 sqq.).

Greek menologies of a later date at least mention St. Joseph on 25 or 26 December, and a twofold commemoration of him along with other saints was made on the two Sundays next before and after Christmas.

In the West the name of the foster-father of Our Lord (*Nutritor Domini*) appears in local martyrologies of the ninth and tenth centuries, and we find in 1129, for the first time, a church dedicated to his honour at Bologna. The devotion, then merely private, as it seems, gained a great impetus owing to the influence and zeal of such saintly persons as St. Bernard, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Gertrude (d. 1310), and St. Bridget of Sweden (d. 1373). According to Benedict XIV (*De Serv. Dei beatif.*, I, iv, n. 11; xx, n. 17), "the general opinion of the learned is that the Fathers of Carmel were the first to import from the East into the West the laudable practice of giving the fullest cultus to St. Joseph". His feast, introduced towards the end shortly afterwards, into the Dominican Calendar, gradually gained a foothold in various dioceses of Western Europe. Among the most zealous promoters

of the devotion at epoch, St. Vincent Ferrer (d. 1419), Peter d'Ailly (d. 1420), St. Bernadine of Siena (d. 1444), and Jehan Charlier Gerson (d. 1429) deserve an especial mention. Gerson, who had, in 1400, composed an Office of the Espousals of Joseph particularly at the Council of Constance (1414), in promoting the public recognition of devotion to St. Joseph. Only under the pontificate of Sixtus IV (1471-84), were the efforts of these holy men rewarded by Roman Calendar (19 March). From that time the devotion acquired greater and greater popularity, the dignity of the feast keeping pace with this steady growth. At first only a *festum simplex*, it was soon elevated to a double rite by Innocent VIII (1484-92), declared by Gregory XV, in 1621, a festival of obligation, at the instance of the Emperors Ferdinand III and Leopold I and of King Charles II of Spain, and raised to the rank of a double of the second class by Clement XI (1700-21). Further, Benedict XIII, in 1726, inserted the name into the Litany of the Saints.

One festival in the year, however, was not deemed enough to satisfy the piety of the people. The feast of the Espousals of the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph, so strenuously advocated by Gerson, and permitted first by Paul III to the Franciscans, then to other religious orders and individual dioceses, was, in 1725, granted to all countries that solicited it, a proper Office, compiled by the Dominican Pierto Aurato, being assigned, and the day appointed being 23 January. Nor was this all, for the reformed Order of Carmelites, into which St. Teresa had infused her great devotion to the foster-father of Jesus, chose him, in 1621, for their patron, and in 1689, were allowed to celebrate the feast of his Patronage on the third Sunday after Easter. This feast, soon, adopted throughout the Spanish Kingdom, was later on extended to all states and dioceses which asked for the privilege. No devotion, perhaps, has grown so universal, none seems to have appealed so forcibly to the heart of the Christian people, and particularly of the labouring classes, during the nineteenth century, as that of St. Joseph.

This wonderful and unprecedented increase of popularity called for



a new lustre to be added to devotion to the saint. Accordingly, one of the first acts of the pontificate of Pius IX, himself singularly devoted to St. Joseph, was to extend to the whole Church the feast of the Patronage (1847), and in December, 1870, according to the wishes of the bishops and of all the faithful, he solemnly declared the Holy Patriarch Joseph, patron of the Catholic Church, and enjoined that his feast (19 March) should henceforth be celebrated as a double of the first class (but without octave, on account of Lent). Following the footsteps of their predecessor, Leo XIII and Pius X have shown an equal desire to add their own jewel to the crown of St. Joseph: the former, by permitting on certain days the reading of the votive Office of the saint; and the latter by approving, on 18 March, 1909, a litany in honour of him whose name he had received in baptism.

### **ACCORDING TO TRADITION: (apocryphal literature)**

According to some traditions, Joseph the Carpenter, spouse of the Blessed Ever Virgin Mary, the Holy Theotokos, was married to Salome before he married the Ever Virgin Mary. Before she died he had four sons by his wife Salome: James, Hosea, Simon and Jude (see Luke 6:16, Acts 1:13;)

The Holy Apostle Jude, the Brother of the Lord, was one of the Twelve and a kinsman of the Lord according to the flesh. As an Apostle, St Jude preached in Mesopotamia, Arabia and Syria, and met a Martyr's end in Beirut. He is the author of the New Testament Epistle that bears his name. His name ("Judas" in Greek, from "Judah" in Hebrew) means "praise".

The Holy Myrrh-bearer Salome, was also by tradition, a daughter of Saint Joseph and his wife Salome. The Holy Myrrh-bearer Salome was the mother of the Apostles James and John, the wife of Zebedee, and the daughter of Joseph the Betrothed, who was a widower when he became betrothed to the Mother of God. She was a disciple of the Lord and one of the Myrrh-bearing women who first brought tidings of the Resurrection to the world.

**That St. Joseph was elderly:**

The New Testament Apocrypha speak of Joseph as an elderly man, a widower with adult children, who was quite reluctant to be included among those from among whom a protector for Mary would be chosen. Although the Apocrypha were not included in the canon of Scripture their importance is great and much in evidence in the liturgical texts of some of the great Feasts.

However, the Gospels too give evidence for an elderly Joseph. For example he is no longer mentioned after Jesus' trip to the temple as an adolescent. Note also that as Jesus was dying upon the Cross He asked John to look after His mother. That would have been unnecessary - and even insulting to Joseph had he been alive. But as an elderly man he would have reposed well before Jesus' crucifixion at the age of 33. Mary, however, would only have been in her middle age.

The New Testament clearly speaks of Jesus' brothers and sisters. Had they been Mary's as well as Joseph's they would have been able to take care of their mother and again, He would not have had to entrust her to John's care. (Life for a woman without a male protector would have been enormously difficult in those days). These brothers and sisters must have been Joseph's children from his previous marriage. As such they would still have been considered Jesus' brothers and sisters.

It is not strange, as things usually go with us imperfect (but perfectible!) humans, that they would have looked with disapproval upon Jesus and His Mother - who was likely younger than they were! This would especially be the case since Jesus' origins would be the subject of suspicion all His life (and indeed for as long as His story would be told) - for only by faith would people accept that His conception was of the Holy Spirit and not as a result of Mary's infidelity to her betrothed, Joseph.

Joseph himself had problems with doubts, as is portrayed in his posture in the Icon of the Nativity (and also in the liturgical texts for that glorious Feast). It is interesting that Mary is looking towards him as he is sitting deep in thought, addressed by a man dressed in an animal skin (some say Adam, some say the Tempter).

She is praying for him to find victory over his doubt of what she alone KNOWS by personal experience to be true - that this wonderful Son comes from the Most High Himself without the mediation of a human father. Joseph did indeed win that victory and his faith, love and dedication remained consistent all his life - and for all eternity!

Apparently Joseph's children also came to believe as he did - especially after Jesus' Crucifixion and Resurrection. Of them all James seemed to be most like his wonderful, kind, merciful, loving father, Joseph, for (again based on the Apocrypha) he declared that Jesus was his Brother when his siblings were disputing with Joseph about whether or not Jesus should be included among his inheritors.

James told his father not to be troubled about this for whatever he received he would share with Jesus, His brother. Hence the title "Brother of Jesus" - at first a mocking epithet which later became the honorific "Brother of the Lord", when James' siblings also came to believe that the young fellow they had thought they knew - and resented - was indeed the Messiah, the Lord from Heaven! James is still called this by the Church and is celebrated in the East together with Joseph His father on the Sunday after the Nativity (also Jesus', Mary's and their ancestor, David the King)

### **St. Joseph's Repose**

The apocryphal account, *The History of Joseph*, a 4th century document, describes Joseph's last years: At length, the elder arrived at a very advanced age. He did not, however, labor under any bodily weakness, nor had his sight failed, nor were any of his teeth missing. His mind was still clear and never wandered and, like a youth, he displayed youthful vigor in his business. His limbs remained unimpaired and free of pain. But his old age was greatly prolonged.

When Joseph knew that he would soon repose, he arose and went to Jerusalem, into the temple of the Lord, and poured out his prayer before the sanctuary. He besought the Lord to send the great

Michael, the prince of the holy angels, to remain with him when his soul would depart. He begged forgiveness for his sins and besought the Lord's compassion.

He then returned to Nazareth and was suddenly seized by disease, making him keep to his bed. The sickness weighed heavily upon him. According to the most ancient tradition, dating from the time of the Apostles, Christ Himself heard the righteous man's confession, an account of his entire life. Then, going beside his bed, Jesus said, "Hail, my father Joseph, thou righteous man." And Joseph answered him, "Hail, my well-beloved Son. Indeed the agony and fear of death has encompassed me. But as soon as I heard Thy voice, my soul was at rest. O Jesus of Nazareth! Jesus, my Saviour! Jesus, O sweetest name in my mouth, and in the mouth of all that love it! O Eye that seest and Ear that hearest, hear me! I am Thy servant; this day I most humbly reverence Thee and before Thy face I pour out my tears. Thou art altogether my God."

The soul of Joseph then departed peacefully to his ancestors, where he gave witness to the joyful news of the long-awaited Messiah. According to St. Epiphanius of Cyprus (c315-403), the Elder Joseph lived to a profound old age, having entered into rest at the age of one hundred and ten years old. He reposed just before Christ entered His public ministry to preach the Gospel.

Saint Joseph's virtue is summed up in the words of the Evangelist Matthew that he was "a just man" (deekaos). This was the eulogy of Holy Writ itself.

## COMMENTS

Saint Ephraim writes that Joseph caressed the Son as a babe; he ministered to Him as God. He rejoiced in Him as the Good One, yet he was greatly bewildered and awestruck at Him as the Just One (Eastern Orthodox Hymns on the Nativity).

St. Ephraim depicts Joseph holding the Christ Child, saying, "Who hath given me the Son of the Most High to be a Son to me? I was jealous of Thy Mother, and I thought to put her away, and I knew

not that in her womb was hidden a mighty treasure, that should suddenly enrich my poor estate. David the king sprang from my race, and wore the crown; and I have come to a very low estate, who instead of a king am a carpenter. Yet a crown hath come to me, for in my bosom is the Lord of crowns."

Blessed Jerome says, "In His boundless wisdom, God employs the simplest of means. What was the best way to effect the incarnation of the Son of God? To reveal openly the all-holy Virgin's virginal state would have meant to bring attention to the Lord Jesus prematurely, without proper preparation. A threefold purpose was accomplished by Joseph's betrothal to the Virgin: quiet obscurity was assured for Christ until the appointed moment, an impenetrable defense was provided for both her and the divine infant. All this was accomplished by the sacred betrothal of St. Joseph to the Virgin-Mother."

What do we assert by the multi-faceted role Joseph would play? Biblical Israel had a patriarchal or father-centered form of family life. From biblical times, as a father and husband, a man would defend his family's right before the judges when necessary (Deut. 22:13-19). We also know that "the fatherless and the widow," who had no man to defend their rights, were often denied justice (cf. Deut. 10:19). The stigma of an illegitimate child would have thwarted the divine plan. Furthermore, Mary now had a responsible and respectable man who would provide food, clothing and shelter for her and her infant Son. God ordained the family unit as a vital part of human society. And what a great reward and honor awaited Joseph and all his house! One of his sons would be of the inner Twelve Apostles (Jude); one would become the first Bishop of Jerusalem (James); and his daughter Salome, the myrrh-bearer, would give birth to the two Apostles. Then there was Cleopas' son, Symeon, the second martyred Bishop of Jerusalem. Whether Symeon was Joseph's son or his nephew, it is clear that salvation, honor and glory came to their house.

When the magi were present, St. Romanos the Melodist, puts forth Mary's explanation to the magi concerning the presence of Joseph

in the house.

Theotokos: "I shall remind you, O magi, for what reason I have Joseph in my dwelling. It is for the refutation of all who doubt. He himself will tell what he heard about my child. For in his sleep he saw a holy angel who told him whence I conceived (Mt. 1:20). A divine being, shining like fire, reassured him in the night and settled his thorny doubts. Therefore Joseph is with me to reveal that here is a young child, the pre-eternal God. Clearly he will report the things that he himself saw among the heavenly beings and mortals on earth--how the shepherds sang songs, and the shining ones sang with men of clay; how the star ran ahead of you to light your way and guide you."

Saint Basil the Great (c.330-379) confirms this explanation and description of Joseph as a witness to her purity and whose presence would preserve her from calumny. St. Basil also remarks that the "The virginity of Mary would be hidden from the prince of the world."

The venerable Bede (c.673-735) summarized patristic teaching on their marriage, writing: "Blessed Mary had then a husband who would be the most reliable witness of her integrity and most faithful custodian of our Lord and Saviour. For the Child Jesus, Joseph would bring to the temple the victims of sacrifice prescribed by the law; in the hour of persecution he would take Him and His Mother into Egypt and bring them back; and finally he would provide many other services called for by the fragility of the nature assumed." Bede also gives, "The guarantee afforded by Joseph's genealogy, the protection of Mary against stoning as an adulteress, and the concealment of the virginal birth from the evil one," as another reason for the marriage.

Saint Ignatios (circa 110 A.D.) made the valuable observation that "Now the virginity of Mary was hidden from the prince of this world, as was also her Offspring, and the death of the Lord. Thus, three mysteries of renown, which were wrought in silence, but have been revealed to us."

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