

Joseph: From Man with the Lily to Patron of the Universal Church

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Veneration of Joseph was slow to develop in the first 1500 years of Christianity. His name was not added to the Litany of Saints until 1726. However, an artistic image of Joseph from the early centuries is still found in many Roman Catholic churches. The image, Joseph holding a lily, originated in an apocryphal writing, the Protoevangelium of James, written around 150 C.E. In this legend God's guidance was sought to choose a husband for Mary. A loud voice called all the men of the House of David who had not taken a wife to come to the temple and bring a branch to lay on the altar. The voice said that one of the branches would bloom with flowers. Joseph's branch immediately blossomed. Thus he was the one chosen to take the virgin Mary as his spouse. The flowers symbolized Joseph's chastity. The legend captured imaginations and expressed the belief that Mary and Joseph were indeed chosen by God for their special roles as the mother and foster father of Jesus. The artistic image that resulted from this legend focused on Joseph as a chaste guardian but, in this writer's opinion, was sorely lacking in its full portrayal of him. So much more was required of the man chosen as Jesus' earthly father!



Joseph by Sr. Richard Mehren, CSJ. Courtesy of the Congregation of St. Joseph.

Joseph, Patron of the Universal Church: A Leap from Obscurity

“Go to Joseph,” declared Pope Pius IX on December 8, 1870 when, shortly after the close of Vatican Council I, he named Saint Joseph as Protector of the Universal Church. At the time there were political and ideological threats that endangered the position and influence of the Roman Catholic Church in the world. Rome was no longer ruled by the pope. The influential writings of Frederick Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Karl Marx criticized traditional morality. Charles Darwin introduced the theory of evolution, with its moral implications. The industrial revolution was well underway in parts of the world. Aware of challenges ahead, the church needed a protector and guardian; Joseph was the perfect model of both.

The closing decades of the nineteenth century were a time of turbulence and change for the church and for Europe. During this time the church moved toward greater emphasis on a spiritual and social role and away



Joseph and Infant Jesus, woodcut by Sr. Richard Mehren, CSJ.
Courtesy of the Congregation of St. Joseph.

from political power. Care for the poor and moral guidance became the church's primary concerns. Succeeding pontiffs echoed the call of Pius IX to "go to Joseph." Pope Leo XIII issued an encyclical in 1889 that introduced a theology of St. Joseph. With reference to the infancy narratives in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, Leo brought Joseph clearly into the history of salvation and human redemption. As the husband of Mary, and known in his lifetime as the father of Jesus, Joseph played a primary role in the incarnation. His dignity could not be more secure and profound.

Joseph as Portrayed by Matthew and Luke

The infancy narratives in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, if studied through the lens of Joseph, provide a clearer, more nuanced image of him. In Matthew, *Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary* (1:16) completed the forty-two generations included in the genealogy of Jesus. Its purpose was to present Matthew's Jewish community with the coming of Jesus as

the climax of Israel's history. In the next passage (1:18-25) Joseph confronts a difficult situation. The woman to whom he is betrothed is pregnant. The child is not his. Mosaic Law prescribed that the penalty for adultery was death by stoning (Deut 22:21-23). Joseph chose instead to divorce Mary quietly because he was *a righteous man* (Matt 1:19). *Righteous* is a word filled with meaning in scriptural texts. It indicates one who lives by covenant promises. God is righteous. A person faithful to God acts as God would act, that is, with mercy, kindness, and justice. These virtues describe Joseph's response to the news of Mary's pregnancy. But before implementing his decision he had a dream, a message from God: "the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matt 1:20). Joseph trusted the encounter. He acted on it immediately and proceeded with the marriage. The message was clear; not only was he directed to take Mary as his wife, he was also to assume the responsibility of being a father. Thus it was his duty as head of the household to name the child (Matt 1:24-25; Luke 1:62). Joseph's faithful habit of prayer allowed him to proceed with a relationship that, on its surface, contradicted the teachings of the Mosaic Law. Soon after, while in Bethlehem with his wife and newborn child, Joseph was confronted with a message that would strike terror in the heart of any parent. The authorities were determined to kill his child. With great courage Joseph gathered his family immediately and fled during the night, traveling to Egypt (Matt 2:13-14). Refugee status for several years in Egypt required that Joseph be relentlessly resourceful to provide for his household. In a few short verses Matthew has portrayed Joseph as a man of prayer, mercy, kindness, justice, fidelity, courage, and resourcefulness.

Joseph lived in the presence of God, even as a refugee.

The Gospel of Luke highlights other worthy attributes of Joseph. He responded to the Roman Emperor's decree that a census be taken. Joseph fulfilled his civic responsibility and at the same time showed concern for his religious identity. Luke writes that as a member of the House of David he was required to travel to Bethlehem, the City of David (Luke 2:4). After the birth and circumcision of Jesus his parents took him, their firstborn son, to the temple to be consecrated to the Lord as was the Jewish custom (Exod 13:2, 12; 1 Sam 1:24-28). The devout Simeon took the child in his arms but directed his words to Mary: "a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:35). Joseph also heard what Simeon said and pondered what the words meant. The family returned to Nazareth. Years went by: twelve, to be exact (Luke 2:42). In these formative years both parents were responsible for the education of their child (Prov 1:8), but traditionally the father

taught his sons while the mother taught her daughters domestic skills. Joseph instructed Jesus about the covenant, the Mosaic Law, and Scripture as well as elements of carpentry, which was his trade. The young Jesus learned his lessons well, as evidenced when he engaged with teachers in the temple who were amazed at his understanding and his answers (Luke 2:47). Often our reflection on this episode—Jesus separated from his parents in Jerusalem—focuses on the anguish of the parents over their missing child, but we should also admire Joseph as an excellent and knowledgeable teacher. United again, the family returned to Nazareth where Jesus' education continued under the tutelage of Joseph (Luke 2:52). Luke has portrayed Joseph as a responsible head of household, attentive to the education of Jesus, concerned for fulfillment of both civic and religious duties, and a thoughtful husband who shared his wife's concern for the wellbeing of their child.

Joseph in the Church's Liturgical Life

The status of Saint Joseph in the church's liturgical life grew significantly following Pope Leo's encyclical and with subsequent pontiffs' encouragement. The feast of Saint Joseph on March 19 was raised to a solemnity; later, in 1955, a second feast, Joseph the Worker, was introduced, to be celebrated on May 1. Joseph's name was included in Eucharistic Prayer I by Pope John XXIII in 1962; he also named Joseph as the patron of Vatican Council II. Most recently, in 2013, Pope Francis instructed that the name of Joseph be inserted into Eucharistic Prayers II, III, and IV.



Holy Family by Sr. Mary Southard, CSJ.
Courtesy of the Congregation of St. Joseph.



Joseph, Teacher

Joseph, Teacher by Sr. Richard Mehren, CSJ.
Courtesy of the Congregation of St. Joseph.

The readings for the feast of Saint Joseph place him clearly within the heritage of Abraham and David. The first reading, taken from 2 Samuel 7, contains the promise to David that his kingdom would last forever. That promise kept hope alive in the Jewish people for a thousand years and more. Though the visible trappings of a monarchy were long gone, the hope for a resurgence is kept alive in Israel's prayer. The psalm response reflects this hope: "His line will continue forever" (Ps 89:36). This promise is echoed throughout the psalm: for example in "I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations'" (v. 4).

The second reading, from Paul's letter to the Romans, confirms in another way how the promise made to Abraham and his descendants would



Joseph on the Journey by Sr. Mary Southard, CSJ.
Courtesy of the Congregation of St. Joseph.

be fulfilled—not through the Law alone, but through faith (Rom 4:13). The verse before the gospel reading is from Psalm 84:4: “Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.” House, in this context, is not the House of David. It means being in God’s presence, being open and receptive to the movement of God in your life. Joseph dwelt in God’s house.

The hope expressed in the first reading and the psalm response becomes reality in the gospel reading from Matthew. The genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:1-19) portrays the continuity of God’s promise of a nation lasting through generations, beginning with Abraham, through David, and now resting on the shoulders of Joseph. The reading opens with the last line of the genealogy: “and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary” (Matt 1:16). It continues with the movement of grace in Joseph that carried him into the mystery of the incarnation: “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way” (v. 18). The political kingdom Israel envisioned would not materialize, but the reign of God on earth would be initiated with the cooperation of Joseph.

The feast of Saint Joseph the Worker was established by Pope Pius XII in 1955 to Christianize the concept and the reality of labor. The texts of the Mass invite all to see their work in the light of faith. To work is to obey the command God gave to Adam (Gen 2:15; Sir 7:15). Providing for one’s

family gives meaning, dignity, and value to work. The collect for this feast expresses this belief: “O God, who laid down for the human race the law of work, graciously grant that we may complete the works you set us to do and attain the rewards you promise.” The author of the letter to the Colossians confirms the sanctity of work: “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col 3:17). The psalm response could not be clearer: “prosper for us the work of our hands” (Ps 90:17). In the gospel reading Jesus is referred to as the carpenter’s son (Matt 13:55). In addition to these Scripture texts, the Vatican II document on *The Church in the Modern World* affirms the sanctity of work with this beautiful statement: “Where men and women, in the course of gaining a livelihood for themselves and their families, offer appropriate service to society, they can be confident that their personal efforts promote the work of the Creator, confer benefits on their fellowmen, and help to realize God’s plan in history” (*Gaudium et Spes* 34).

Devotion to Joseph among the Faithful

As the church became more inclusive of Joseph in its liturgical celebrations his popularity increased among the faithful. Thomas Aquinas proposed that “Some saints are efficacious in certain needs but not in others; but our holy patron Joseph has the power to assist us in all cases, and every necessity, in every undertaking.” Today that hope for assistance has been recognized by countries, states, cities, dioceses, religious congregations, parishes, schools, hospitals, orphanages, and care centers that have placed their needs in the hands of Joseph. The patronage of Joseph has also been sought by attorneys and accountants, carpenters and civil engineers, educators, immigrants, expectant mothers, on behalf of unborn children, by people trying to sell or buy a house, social justice activists, people in doubt, and those who are dying. Saint Joseph has the power to assist us in all cases. Inspired by Joseph’s life—not just by the lilies—may we see our work as a benefit to others and a contribution to God’s plan for humanity and all creation.

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