



SAINT JOSEPH

St. Peter Catholic Church † Faith Fact † March 2017



By Fr. William Saunders

St. Joseph truly is the silent figure of the New Testament. For instance, the Gospel does not record one spoken verse for St. Joseph. Nevertheless, what this great saint did in his life for God speaks volumes. To appreciate him and his role in salvation, we need to glean the Gospels.

St. Joseph was “of the house and lineage of David” (Lk 2:4). Because of this ancestry, St. Joseph is the linkage between the old covenant made with Abraham and Moses, and the new, perfect and everlasting covenant which will be made through the blood of Jesus. He brings to a close the notion of the Patriarch’s promised land and King David’s established kingdom, and prepares the way for Jesus, the Messiah, who will establish the new kingdom of God and the new Promised Land—not a kingdom of land, castles and armies, but one that is within oneself of shared life with the Lord, lived now and fulfilled in heaven.

St. Matthew identifies Joseph as “an upright man.” The original text uses the word just or righteous, which better reflects that he lived by God’s standard, keeping the commandments and emulating God’s love.

St. Joseph first appears in the Gospel infancy narratives. While St. Luke’s Gospel focuses on the annunciation to Mary, St. Matthew’s Gospel focuses on St. Joseph. Here St. Joseph was engaged to Mary when he discovered that she was pregnant. Remember that in Jewish society, when a couple became formally engaged declaring their intent before two witnesses, they were considered married as husband and wife. After one year usually, the groom went to the home of the bride with great ceremony and brought her to his own home where they consummated the marriage and lived together as husband and wife. (This tradition is the basis for the parable of the five foolish bridesmaids (Mt 25)). Since St. Joseph did not yet know God’s plan but knew his wife was pregnant not by himself, the Gospel reads that he “decided to divorce her quietly” (Mt 1:19). According to the Torah laws, St. Joseph could have had Mary stoned to death for infidelity (cf. Dt 22). If St. Joseph knew Mary was pregnant, did the town gossip circle also notice? One can only wonder what shame and hurt he must have felt. How his heart must have been broken.

Nevertheless, the angel of the Lord appeared to St. Joseph in a dream, revealed to him that Mary had conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and commanded that he take Mary as his wife and Jesus as his own Son. Without question or hesitation, St. Joseph did as the angel commanded. Here again, we see the important role of Joseph: He is to take Jesus as his own Son and to name him, thereby giving Him legal recognition and legal personhood.

Please note that the foregoing understanding of the annunciation is the traditional one. Some individuals have speculated that St. Joseph knew that Mary had conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and thereby felt unworthy, even afraid, to marry her and accept this responsibility; therefore, he decided to divorce her quietly. However, why then would the angel later tell St. Joseph in the dream that Mary had conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit? The traditional understanding is still the best one.

St. Joseph fulfilled his obligations courageously. Throughout the Gospel he faithfully and unquestioningly obeyed the commands of God: taking his family to the safety of Egypt to flee the wrath of King Herod; returning to Nazareth; presenting his child in the Temple for circumcision and formal presentation; and traveling to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.

He accepted the responsibility of his vocation—being the faithful spouse and father. He provided the best he could for his family, whether that meant the stable in Bethlehem or the home in Nazareth. Although the Gospels recount hardly any information about the Holy Family’s life in Nazareth, they were people of modest means: When St. Joseph and Mary present Jesus at the Temple, they offer two turtle doves as a sacrifice, an exception made for poorer families who could not afford the usual offering of a lamb.

To provide for his family, St. Joseph worked as a carpenter. The original word in the Gospel is tekton which means “craftsman” or “artisan,” thereby suggesting that he could well have been a builder of homes as well as a carpenter. As a good Jewish father, St. Joseph passed this trade onto his Son, and indeed Jesus is known as “the carpenter’s son” (Mt 13:55) and “the carpenter” (Mk 6:3).

Although St. Joseph was not the physical father of Jesus, he was a father in every other sense of the word. Again, as a good Jewish father, he was responsible for the religious education of his Son, including teaching Him to read the sacred Scriptures. St. Joseph must have been a fine, masculine example for Jesus considering that God, the Father, had entrusted His Son to his care.

Finally, Jesus must have loved and respected St. Joseph and Mary very much, for the Gospel reads, after the finding in the Temple, Jesus returned to Nazareth and “was obedient to them” (Lk 2:51). In all, he selflessly set aside his own needs for the good of his family.

Tradition holds that St. Joseph died before Jesus began His public ministry. This belief is based two points: First, he never appeared during the public ministry while Mary did, like at the wedding feast at Cana; and second, from the cross, Jesus entrusted the care of His mother to St. John the apostle, indicating she was a widow with no other children to care for her. Tradition also holds that he died in the presence of Jesus and Mary. For this reason, St. Joseph is the patron saint of a holy death. Although not defined by the Magisterium, St. Francis de Sales (d. 1622) believed that St. Joseph was assumed body and soul into heaven: “What is there left for us to say now if not that, in no way must we doubt that this glorious saint enjoys much credit in Heaven in the company of the One who favored him so much as to raise him there, body and soul; something which is all the more likely since we have no relic of him here below on earth. It seems to me no one can doubt this truth; for how could He have refused this grace to St. Joseph, he who had been obedient at all times in his entire life?” (complete Works). [...]

Several great saints held great devotion to St. Joseph: St. Bernardine of Siena (d. 1444) preached, “He was chosen by the eternal Father as the trustworthy guardian and protector of His greatest treasures, namely, His divine Son and Mary, Joseph’s wife. He carried out this vocation with complete fidelity until at last God called him, saying, ‘Good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord.’”

St. Teresa of Avila (d. 1582) in her Life wrote, “I took St. Joseph as my advocate and protector, and recommended myself very earnestly to him. He came to my help in the most visible manner. This loving father of my soul, this beloved protector, hastened to pull me out of the state in which my body was languishing, just as he snatched me away from greater dangers of another nature which were jeopardizing my honor and my eternal salvation! For my happiness to be complete, he has always answered my prayers beyond what I had asked and hoped for. I do not remember even now that I have ever asked anything of him which he has failed to grant. I am astonished at the great favors which God has bestowed on me through this blessed saint, and at the perils from which He has freed me, both in body and in soul.”

In more recent times, Blessed Brother Andre Bessette (d. 1937) had a tremendous devotion to St. Joseph. While he was a young man, he had a dream, seeing a church in an unfamiliar setting. From this dream, he was inspired that a beautiful church be built in honor of St. Joseph on Mount Royale in Montreal, Canada. Today, St. Joseph’s Oratory is the largest church in the world dedicated to St. Joseph. Blessed Andre never spoke of this being “his” project; rather, he said, “Personally I am nothing. God chose the most ignorant one. If there was anyone more ignorant than I am, the good God would have chosen him.” Through the intercession of St. Joseph, Blessed Andre performed various cures, but stated, “It is St. Joseph who cures. I am only his little dog.” Blessed Andre’s life reflects true devotion to St. Joseph: the simple, quiet, humble man who served the Lord and His family, the Church.

Popes through the ages of the Church have also recognized the importance of St. Joseph: Pope Pius IX declared him the patron of the Catholic Church (1870). [...]

Pope John Paul II in “Redemptoris Custos” (1989) exhorted the faithful to look to St. Joseph in our troubled age: “This patronage must be invoked, and it is always necessary for the Church, not only to defend it against dangers ceaselessly cropping up, but also and above all to support it in those fearful efforts at evangelizing the world, and spreading the new evangelization among nations where the Christian religion and life were formerly the most flourishing, but are now put to a difficult test. ... May St. Joseph become for all a singular master in the service of the saving mission of Christ that is incumbent on each and every one of us in the Church: To spouses, to parents, to those who live by the work of their hands or by any other work, to persons called to the contemplative life as well as to those called to the apostolate.” [...]

May each of us honor and cherish the example of St. Joseph, trusting in his prayers to help us on the path of salvation.

Excerpts from: Saunders, Rev. William. “St. Joseph (Part 1)” and “St. Joseph (Part 2).” *Arlington Catholic Herald*; Catholic Education Resource Center: <http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/st-joseph-part-1.html> and <http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/st-joseph-part-ii.html>.