



St. Joseph: Our Father in Faith

Father Frederick L. Miller

BUILDING THE DOMESTIC CHURCH SERIES





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Saint Joseph: Our Father in Faith

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St. Joseph: Our Father in Faith

INTRODUCTION

Even though the Evangelists do not record one word spoken by Joseph of Nazareth, the Holy Spirit has inspired Christians throughout the ages to love the husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary and foster father of the Son of God. Because of Saint Joseph's relationship with Jesus and Mary, he enjoys a relationship with the Church that is *foundational*. Pope John Paul II has noted that Saint Joseph's example "*transcends all individual states of life* and serves as a model for the entire Christian community, whatever the condition and duties of each of its members may be."¹

For every believer, Saint Joseph is a model of wholehearted love of Jesus Christ and his virgin Mother, an example of perfect fidelity to the will of God. He is a teacher of holiness in marriage, chastity for the sake of the kingdom of God, the sanctity of human work and contemplative prayer. By his example, Saint Joseph teaches Christians how to love and serve Jesus Christ and live and die in his presence. He is a model for all the faithful: the laity, married and single, consecrated religious, and clergy.

Throughout the centuries, the Church has experienced the love, manly strength and protection of Saint Joseph. The saints tell us that with the Mother of God, Joseph enjoys a singular power of intercession. Saint Teresa of Avila, for instance, in the *Book of Her Life*, wrote:

I took for my advocate and lord the glorious Saint Joseph and earnestly recommended myself to him. I saw clearly that as in this particular need so in other greater ones concerning honor and loss of soul this father and lord of mine came to my rescue in better ways than I knew how to ask for. I do not recall up to this day ever having petitioned him for anything that he failed to grant. It is an amazing thing the great many favors God has granted me through the mediation of this blessed saint, the dangers I was freed from both of body and

soul. For with other saints it seems the Lord has given them grace to be of help in one need, whereas with this glorious saint I have experience that he helps in all our needs and the Lord wants us to understand that just as He was subject to Saint Joseph on earth — for since bearing the title of father, being the Lord's tutor, Joseph could give the Child command — so in heaven God does whatever he commands.²

For over a century, the successors of Saint Peter in the See of Rome have sought to spread and intensify the knowledge and love of Saint Joseph among Catholics. On Dec. 8, 1870, Blessed Pope Pius IX named Saint Joseph the *Patron of the Universal Church*. In his encyclical on Saint Joseph, *Quamquam Pluries*, dated Aug. 15, 1889, Pope Leo XIII called the people of God to a renewed devotion to Saint Joseph. In this text, the pope described the Church on earth as Joseph's numberless family scattered throughout all lands, over which he rules with a sort of paternal authority, because he is the husband of Mary and the father of Jesus Christ.³ Pope Saint Pius X approved the Litany of Saint Joseph for public use in the Church (see page XX). Pope Benedict XV added the invocation to Saint Joseph to the Divine Praises that Catholics pray at the end of Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. Pius XI named Saint Joseph the special protector of the Church against the assaults of communism. Pope Pius XII added the feast of Saint Joseph the Worker, May 1, to the Roman liturgical calendar in order to counteract further the influences of communism in Christian countries.

In convoking the Second Vatican Council, Blessed Pope John XXIII entrusted it to Saint Joseph and named him its special patron. In 1962, at the conclusion of the first session of the council, the pope added a commemoration of Saint Joseph in the Roman Canon (Eucharistic Prayer 1).

On Aug. 15, 1989, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the publication of Pope Leo XIII's *Quamquam Pluries*, Pope John Paul II published an apostolic letter on Saint Joseph entitled *Guardian of the Redeemer (Redemptoris Custos)*. In a sense, it is a companion of the Holy Father's encyclical on the Blessed Virgin, *Mother of the Redeemer (Redemptoris Mater)*. These papal letters explain the Church's veneration of the Blessed Virgin and Saint Joseph as the

persons closest to the incarnate Son of God. They also highlight the important place Mary and Joseph hold in the Church and in the spiritual life of every believer.

Several men and women who have recently been either beatified or canonized have called the Church to a deeper appreciation of Saint Joseph's mission and power of intercession: Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton placed her Sisters of Charity, as well as the first parochial schools, under his patronage. Saint John Neumann, the fourth bishop of Philadelphia, joined two other 19th-century saints, Thérèse of Lisieux and Bernadette Soubirous, in their frequent recourse to Saint Joseph in prayer. Blessed Jeanne Jugan, the foundress of the Little Sisters of the Poor, a congregation dedicated to caring for the aged poor, recognized Saint Joseph, the man who had taken the Blessed Virgin and her child into his home, as the model of the Christian hospitality that she and her sisters offer to their clients. Blessed André Bessette, at the Shrine of Saint Joseph in Montreal, led scores of sick people to find physical healing and peace in the saint's intercession. Blessed Louis Guanella called attention to Saint Joseph as the patron of a happy death, that is, a death in the company of Jesus and Mary. Saint Josémaria Escriva, founder of Opus Dei, promoted Saint Joseph as the model of the sanctification of ordinary, daily work. Significantly, on Oct. 13, 1917, the occasion of the "miracle of the sun" at Fatima, in Portugal, Saint Joseph appeared with Mary and the child Jesus to Lucia, Jacinta, and Francisco, the seers of Fatima. The Holy Family was and is the icon of the Gospel of life that modern men and women, ensnared in the culture of death so desperately need to hear.

Following the direction of Christ's vicars on earth, and the example of his saints, believers should seek a deeper understanding of Saint Joseph's role in the mystery of redemption, as well as cultivate an intimate, personal relationship with him in prayer. The goal is to move closer to Saint Joseph in faith and love. To attain this purpose, this reflection focuses on three themes: Joseph, the man of faith; Joseph, the just man, and Joseph, the spiritual father of all Christians.

JOSEPH: THE MAN OF FAITH

The Gospel of Matthew 1:18-25 describes Joseph's introduction to the mystery of the Incarnation. Following Pope John Paul II's teaching in *Guardian of the Redeemer*, one may entitle this text, "Joseph's annunciation." In the apostolic letter, Pope John Paul II suggests that Luke 1:26-38 and Matthew 1:18-25 should be read together: "There is a strict parallel between the 'annunciation' [to Joseph] in Matthew's text and the one in Luke [to Mary]. The divine messenger introduces Joseph to the mystery of Mary's motherhood."⁴

Jesuit Father Joseph Fitzmeyer has identified 12 points that connect the texts of the Annunciation to Mary in Luke's Gospel and the annunciation to Joseph in Matthew's. Luke and Matthew agree on the following points:

- 1) Jesus' birth occurred in the days of Herod the Great.
- 2) Mary, a virgin, is engaged to Joseph. They have not yet come to live together.
- 3) Joseph is of the House of David.
- 4) An angel of heaven announces the birth of Jesus.
- 5) Jesus is recognized as a son of David.
- 6) Jesus' conception is said to take place through the Holy Spirit.
- 7) Joseph is not involved in the conception of Jesus.
- 8) The name "Jesus" is imposed on Him by heaven before His birth.
- 9) The angel identifies Jesus as "Savior."
- 10) Jesus is born after Joseph and Mary come to live together.
- 11) Jesus is born in Bethlehem.
- 12) Jesus settles, with Mary and Joseph, in Nazareth in Galilee.⁵

Noting the points of contact between the two texts, Pope John Paul concentrates mainly on the content of the message revealed to both Mary and Joseph and their identical response of faith. Whereas Luke presents the mystery through the eyes of Mary, and reveals her response, Matthew presents the identical mystery through the eyes of Joseph, and indicates his:

This is how Jesus Christ came to be born. His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph; but before they came to live together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a man of honor and wanting to spare her publicity, decided to divorce her informally. He had made up his mind to do this when the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins.' Now this took place to fulfill the words spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Immanuel (Isaiah 4:14), a name that means 'God-is-with-us.' When Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord had told him to do: he took his wife to his home and, though he had not had intercourse with her, she gave birth of a son; and he named him Jesus (Matthew 1: 18-25).

The angel greets Mary as *full of grace* (Luke 1:28). This greeting reveals Mary as the living personification of the people of Israel, God's grace of election having come to perfection in her. She is *Daughter Zion* whose vocation is to welcome the Messiah in the name of her people. In Mary, the synagogue is personally transformed, by grace, into the Church. The Virgin of Nazareth is the bridge linking the Old to the New Covenant. In Mary, Israel welcomes her Savior and is transformed by God's grace.

The angel greets Joseph using his proper name, *Son of David*. Although far from the trappings of royalty and, in reality, a poor man, Joseph descended from the noble family of the Hebrew people of whose lineage the prophets foretold the Messiah would be born. The angel's greeting indicates that Joseph's vocation is directly related to the Messiah's mission.

The angel pledges that God will strengthen Mary and Joseph in their appointed mission. Gabriel told Mary "*Do not be afraid.*" Similarly, the angel said, "*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.*" This assurance suggests that both Mary and Joseph are being invited to accept a mission that is important and

significant: a task that will be humanly impossible to accomplish apart from God's grace.

According to the Jewish custom of the times, marriage took place in two distinct stages. First, there was the betrothal before the rabbi in the synagogue. The bride and groom would not, at that moment, begin to live together. After a period of several weeks or months, the bride's relatives would lead her ceremoniously to the bridegroom's home. Only at that point would they live under the same roof as husband and wife. Unlike the modern custom of engagement before marriage, this betrothal was the legal and religious marriage contract.

There is no warrant in either Scripture or Catholic tradition to affirm that Joseph was an old man when he was betrothed to Mary. Likely, Joseph was Mary's age or several years older than she. Surely they loved each other as husband and wife. The Church, while always recognizing the unique character of this marriage, has not hesitated to insist that it was a true Christian marriage, although never consummated out of reverence for the work of the Holy Spirit in Mary's virginal body and soul.

In the infancy narratives of both Luke and Matthew, the angel of the Lord came to Mary and Joseph after they had been legally married, but before they came together to live as husband and wife. Through the angel, God instructed Joseph not to fear to take Mary to his home as his bride. The next section of this essay shall discuss the motive of Joseph's decision to divorce Mary in an unobtrusive manner. This decision of his, in fact, occasioned the dream of Joseph which is presently being examined.

The angel explained to Mary that God had accepted the gift of her virginal purity. As the personification of Israel, Mary's vocation was to be God's bride and the mother of his Son: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And so the child will be holy and will be called Son of God" (Luke 1:35). The angel also reveals to Joseph, in his dream, that the child in Mary's womb is of God: "She has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:20).

Father Raymond E. Brown has made a significant observation. He writes:

The fact that the two [annunciation] accounts mention conception through the Holy Spirit rather than through male generation suggests that this is a most ancient phrasing, antedating both evangelists and coming from Christian tradition [that is, the oral transmission of the revealed Word of God].⁶

Through this revelation, both Mary and Joseph were asked to make an identical act of faith. Mary was asked to believe that she would become the virgin mother of the Messiah by the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph was invited to believe that his pregnant wife was bearing a child in her womb that was conceived *of the Holy Spirit*. In other words, each is asked to believe in the divine origin of the virgin's child.

The act of faith of both Mary and Joseph ends precisely in the transcendent origin of Mary's unborn baby. This child, *conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit*, is the only Son of God. They assent in a primordial and foundational way to the truth that will ever be the Christian profession of faith: The man Jesus Christ is the only Son of the Father conceived by the Holy Spirit. In this act of faith, Mary and Joseph are revealed as the first disciples to believe in Christ.

Believing the word of God spoken by Gabriel, Mary surrendered herself, without reservation, to the Lord's plan by stating: *I am the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me* (Luke 1:38). Joseph, without uttering a word, did exactly what Mary had done. In faith, he surrendered his entire life to the mystery of the Incarnation. In a matter-of-fact way, Saint Matthew writes: *When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord told him to do* (Matthew 1:24).

In explaining this text in *Guardian of the Redeemer*, John Paul II notes: "[Joseph] took [Mary] in all the mystery of her motherhood. He took her together with the Son who had come into the world by the power of the Holy Spirit. In this way he showed a readiness of will like Mary's with regard to what God asked of him through the angel."⁷

Summarizing Joseph's act of faith, John Paul writes: "...Joseph is the first to share in the faith of the Mother of God and that in doing so he supports his spouse in the faith of the divine annunciation. He is also the first to be placed by God on the path of Mary's 'pilgrimage of faith.'"⁸

Alluding to the prophecy of Nathan to King David, (see 2 Samuel 7:12-16), the angel tells Mary that her son will be the promised Messiah: "He will be great and will be called the son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David: He will rule over the House of Jacob forever and his reign will be without end" (Luke 1:32-33).

Joseph is similarly told not to fear to take Mary into his home as his wife because his specific mission is to confer his family name on Jesus, that is, *Son of David*. *You must name him Jesus* (Matthew 1:21).

Authors have at times presented Mary as a descendent of King David. We need not explore this question here. Suffice it to say that it was the father of the family who conferred the name on his child. If the son of Mary was to be the Messiah, it was imperative that he belong to the family of King David through male descendancy. Joseph's mission, then, revealed by the angel, was to incorporate Jesus, the son of Mary, into the genealogy of David, thereby conferring, humanly speaking, the title of *Messiah* on Jesus. According to Jewish law and custom, Joseph legally adopted Mary's child when he welcomed her to his home. When Mary, carrying Jesus in her womb, crossed the threshold of Joseph's house, Joseph conferred his name, *Son of David*, on the child that he thereby willingly adopted. Joseph bestowed the title *Messiah* on Jesus through his act of faith.

In his work, *The Image of Mary according to the Evangelists*, Jesuit Father Horacio Bojorge points out that, as Jesus was conceived through Mary's faith in the message of the angel, so was he adopted and legally integrated into the line of David by Joseph's act of faith in the heavenly origin of Mary's child. Father Bojorge states:

The Messiah is the Son of David neither by the will nor the action of man nor by genealogy; but he enters into the genealogy by virtue of an assent of faith which Joseph, Son of David, gives to what is revealed to him as worked by God in Mary.

The Messiah is the Son of God neither by the will nor the action of man, but by virtue of an assent of faith, which Mary gives to the working of the Spirit in her.

In order that the Messiah, Son of God and Son of David should come into the world and in order that he should enter into the Davidic descent, there were required two assents of faith: that of Mary and that of Joseph. Both assents establish the true Israel, the true descent of Abraham, which is born, is propagated and is perpetuated, not by human generation but by faith.⁹

Matthew catalogues the genealogy of Jesus Christ in his Gospel, presenting a long list of one father after another who begets a son:

Abraham was the father of Isaac and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez.... Eliud was the father of Eleazar and Eleazar the father of Matthan and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of her Jesus was born, who is called Christ [Messiah] (Matthew 1:2-16).

Physical begetting ends with Joseph. Joseph adopts Mary's son and gives him the name *Son of David* simply by welcoming Mary into his house as his spouse. Matthew's intention is to demonstrate that Mary's child is the Messiah precisely through the adoptive action of Joseph, in and through an act of divine faith. Jesus does not, however, through Joseph, inherit the disgrace that had attached itself through the ages to the kings or to David's line.

The accounts of the Annunciation to Mary in the Gospel of Luke, and to Joseph in Matthew's, reveal that God accomplished his greatest work through the cooperation of two human beings through the *obedience of faith*. Jesus, the Eternal Son of the Father, became the son of Mary through her faith in the Word proclaimed by Gabriel.

In his readiness to receive Mary into his home as his wife, and to adopt her unborn child, Joseph joined Mary in her act of faith in the heavenly origin of the child. Through Mary's faith, the Son of God became man. Through Joseph's faith, Mary's child became *Son of David*, the Messiah of Israel.

Like Mary, Saint Joseph's greatness is rooted in his faith, a faith that demanded incomprehensible confidence in God's power and a heroic degree of charity. He is, in the words of John Paul II: "...the first to share in the faith of the Mother of God.... He is also the first to be placed by God on the path of Mary's 'pilgrimage of faith.' ...Joseph's way of faith moved in the same direction [as Mary's]: it was totally determined by the same mystery, of which he, together with Mary, had been the first guardian."¹⁰

Extolling Joseph as a model of faith, John Paul says:

As the Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council has said, the basic attitude of the entire Church must be that of 'hearing the word of God with reverence,' an absolute readiness to serve faithfully God's salvific will revealed in Jesus. Already at the beginning of human redemption, after Mary, we find the model of obedience made incarnate in Saint Joseph, the man known for having faithfully carried out God's commands."¹¹

Through Joseph's response to God's word spoken to him by the angel, his total trust in God's power to save, and his tender love of Mary and her son, Saint Joseph is the paradigm of the *obedience of faith*, hope and love for every member of the Church. Through his heavenly intercession, Joseph obtains for the Church a share in his *obedience of faith*. With fatherly love, he pleads that each member of his family on earth may come to share in his knowledge and love of the Messiah who was uniquely his son.

JOSEPH: THE JUST MAN

Now we must answer a question that was deliberately left unanswered in the previous section of this booklet: Why did Saint Joseph decide to divorce Mary quietly when he discovered that she

was pregnant? Why did he need the assurance of heaven to take her into his home?

Saint Joseph is *the just man* of the Gospel. It is this title that will be a key to understanding why Joseph decided to divorce Mary quietly when he discovered her pregnancy. For the Jews at the time of Christ, this title was one of the highest compliments a person could receive. In describing Joseph as *just*, Saint Matthew demonstrates that Joseph was remarkably faithful to the covenant that God had established with his Chosen People. His observance of God's law was motivated by the same love that promulgated it. In fact, by calling him a *just man*, Saint Matthew is saying that Joseph participated in and manifested God's loving fidelity to the covenant in all of his relationships. Joseph's justice is a sharing in God's very justice and holiness. His justice is a manifestation of the grace of the Old Covenant and, in some way, a refraction of the justice and holiness that Christ would bring through his death and resurrection.

In his work, *The Beatitudes in Context*, Jesuit Father Dennis Hamm offers a definition of the Greek adjective, *dikaios* (just), and the abstract noun, *dikaiosyne* (justice), used by the New Testament authors. He says:

It is mainly God who is said to be *dikaios* [just] or to have *dikaiosyne* [justice] in that God is faithful to covenant relationships with the people of God. A human being is said to be *dikaios* or to have *dikaiosyne* if that person is 'right with God,' that is, if that person lives out the covenant relationship with God and neighbor. We receive the *dikaiosyne* of God as a gift; we pursue our own *dikaiosyne* as a task, enabled, to be sure, by the saving *dikaiosyne* of God.¹²

Matthew indicates that Joseph had decided to divorce Mary quietly precisely because of his justice. Throughout the centuries, various interpretations have been presented to explain Joseph's decision to divorce Mary. In an article entitled "The Justice of Joseph Revisited," Father Arthur Calkins points to three explanations for the ancient Church for Joseph's decision: Some held that Joseph suspected Mary of the sin of adultery. Others proposed that Joseph, aware of Mary's holiness and chastity, was profoundly befuddled by

her pregnancy and decided to step aside. Still others suggested that Joseph, fully aware of the divine origin of Mary's pregnancy, feeling himself unworthy to be so close to God's mighty work, withdrew in holy fear and reverence. The following section, including the quotations from the Patristic sources, is a summary of Father Calkin's excellent research.¹³

Did Joseph suspect Mary of adultery?

According to the first interpretation of the Fathers of the Church, Joseph suspected Mary of infidelity and consequently decided to end their relationship. His justice, it is said, is derived from his desire to fulfill the Mosaic law. An ancient articulation of this hypothesis is found in the apocryphal Gospel known as the *Protogospel of James*, composed before the year A.D. 200. This text has had an impact on many peoples' interpretation of Joseph's doubt, including Saint Augustine and Saint Ambrose in the Western Church and Saint John Chrysostom in the Eastern Church.

Now it was the sixth month with her, and behold Joseph came from his building, and he entered into his house and found Mary great with child. And he smote his face, and cast himself down on sackcloth and wept bitterly, saying: 'with what countenance shall I make concerning this maiden? For I received her from the Lord my God a virgin, and I have not kept her safe. Who is he who has ensnared me? Who has done this evil in my house and defiled the virgin?' And Joseph arose from off the sackcloth and called Mary and said to her: 'O you, who were cared for by God, why have you done this? You have forgotten the Lord your God.' And Joseph said: 'If I hide her sin, I shall be found fighting against the law of the Lord; and if I manifest her to the children of Israel, I fear lest that which is in her be the seed of an angel, and I shall be found delivering up innocent blood to the judgment of death.'¹⁴

According to this interpretation, Joseph, in discovering Mary's pregnancy and judging her an adulteress, decides to divorce her. According to the law, Joseph would have had the right to demand a trial to determine whether or not Mary willingly consented to commit

adultery, (Deuteronomy 22:20-24) or was forced against her will to perform the act (Deuteronomy 22:25-27). According to Mosaic law, the penalty for adultery was death by stoning.

This first interpretation begs the question: Why would Joseph be considered *just*, that is, an exemplary observer of the Mosaic law, if his strategy was to bypass the full force of the law for Mary's alleged violation of the Sixth Commandment? Saint Jerome discerned the contradiction at the heart of this interpretation and steered the issue in another direction. Consequently, he is at the foundation of the next interpretation to be considered.

Was Joseph confused?

Saint Jerome held that Joseph, without abandoning his trust in Mary, was profoundly unsettled because of her pregnancy and decided to step back from their relationship. Saint Jerome states: "How could Joseph be called just if he concealed the guilt of his spouse? What speaks in defense of Mary is precisely the fact that Joseph, knowing her chastity and marveling at what had happened, buried in silence a fact whose mystery he did not understand."¹⁵

Francisco Suarez, a 17th- century Jesuit theologian, offered this interpretation:

Joseph was unable to judge or suspect the Virgin harshly. Influenced in one direction by the factual evidence he perceived, but swayed in the other by the exalted sanctity of the Virgin, as he knew it from experience, he withheld all judgment because he was overwhelmed by a kind of stupefaction and great wonder. It was indeed a consummate act of justice neither to be carried out of himself in so grave a matter, nor to be blinded by extreme passion or feeling. He persuaded himself that the event could have occurred without sin. Consequently, he was unwilling to expose Mary; but since for him nothing in the matter was sufficiently clear, he believed that it pertained to justice to be separated from such a woman and to dismiss her in secret.¹⁶

In light of Joseph's justice, this interpretation of his decision to divorce Mary quietly because of confusion, like the previous

interpretation of suspicion of adultery, is equally disturbing and presents logical difficulties. May a man be called just, because of confusion, especially when a pregnant woman and an unborn child are involved? Would Saint Joseph be considered *just* in abandoning Mary if he were uncertain and confused over the origin of her child, even though he was convinced of her moral integrity?

Joseph was awestruck by a mighty act of God!

The third and final interpretation holds that Mary told Joseph about the intervention of the Holy Spirit, and Joseph believed her. Filled with holy awe over God's mighty act, Joseph decided that he was unworthy to be so closely involved in the work of salvation. His decision to *divorce Mary quietly* was based on the sense of his personal unworthiness and his reverential fear of God's presence and work. According to this interpretation, Saint Joseph is *just* precisely because of his reverence for Mary, her child and, above all, for the heavenly origin of Mary's pregnancy. For Saint Joseph, living with Mary and her child would be tantamount to setting up his carpenter shop in the Holy of Holies of the Temple in Jerusalem. This intimate closeness to God would have been inconceivable to a Jew who sought meticulously to fulfill the requirements of the covenant. This attitude of holy fear is what brought an angel from heaven to reassure Joseph, *the just man!*

Several of the Eastern Fathers of the Church espoused this interpretation. For instance, Romanos the Melodist puts these words in Saint Joseph's mouth:

O luminous One, I see a flame, a fire which surrounds you and I am terrified of it. Mary, protect me and do not consume me. Your guiltless womb is suddenly become a furnace filled with fire; let it not melt me, spare me, I beg you. You wish that I as Moses of old should also take off my shoes, that I should approach you and listen to you and, that, enlightened by you, I should say to you — Hail, unespoused spouse.¹⁷

The following text, attributed to a sixth-century bishop, had been read during Matins on Christmas Eve for centuries until the recent liturgical renewal:

Joseph was just, and the virgin was immaculate; but when he wished to put her away, this happened from the fact that he recognized in her the power of a miracle and a vast mystery that he held himself unworthy to approach. Humbling himself therefore before so great and ineffable a phenomenon, he sought to retire, just as Saint Peter humbled himself before the Lord and said, 'Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man,' and as the ruler confessed who sent word to the Lord, 'I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, for I have considered myself not even worthy to come to you,' or as Saint Elizabeth said to the most blessed Virgin, 'And how have I deserved that the mother of my Lord should come to me?' In like manner did the just man Joseph humble and look to himself and fear to enter into union with such exalted holiness.¹⁸

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux held this interpretation to be the *understanding of the Fathers of the Church*. In the supplement to his *Summa Theologiae*, Saint Thomas Aquinas embraced this position: "Joseph was minded to put away the Blessed Virgin not as suspected of fornication, but because in reverence for her sanctity, he feared to cohabit with her."¹⁹

Among contemporary Scripture scholars, Father René Laurentin and Jesuit Father Ignace de la Potterie hold that the text of Matthew 1:20 is best interpreted in this way. Father Laurentin, for instance, translates Matthew 1:20 in this way: "Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home for, although that which is begotten in her comes from the Holy Spirit, it is you who will call the son she bears by the name of Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."²⁰

Father de la Potterie translates the same text similarly: "Joseph, Son of David, do not fear to take Mary, your spouse, to your home; for certainly, that which has been begotten in her, comes from the Holy Spirit, but she will bear a son [for you] and you will give him the name Jesus."²¹

According to both Fathers Laurentin and de la Potterie, the text shows that the angel did not come to Joseph in his sleep either to dispel suspicion that Mary had committed adultery or to clarify

perplexity over the source of her pregnancy. Rather, the angel was sent by God to assure Joseph that, although his reverential awe in the face of God's mighty work was holy and pleasing to him, the Lord nonetheless willed that he wed Mary and adopt her child as his own.

According to this interpretation, the angel visited Joseph to confirm him in his conviction that Mary's child is, indeed, *of the Holy Spirit* and to assure him that his vocation is to wed Mary, and thereby adopt Jesus as his son. His mission was to give Jesus the surname *Son of David* and to be his father. Saint Joseph is just because of his profound reverence for the wonderful work of God, accomplished by the Holy Spirit in Mary, and his humility in the face of such glory. In a certain sense, Saint Joseph's humility is a reflection of God's humility in condescending to *become flesh and dwell among us*.

Interestingly, John Paul II gives voice to this interpretation in *Guardian of the Redeemer*: "Even though he decided to draw back so as not to interfere in the plan of God which was coming to pass in Mary, Joseph obeyed the explicit command of the angel and took Mary into his home, while respecting the fact that she belonged exclusively to God."²²

Having grounded the interpretation of holy awe in the text of Matthew's Gospel, Father de la Potterie draws some cogent conclusions:

The account of Matthew shows us what ought to be the authentic Christian manner of accepting in faith this mystery of the virginal conception of Mary. In this sense we could say — if we are permitted to use a modern expression — that Joseph, the spouse of Mary, furnishes us the example of the very first "acceptance" of this mystery, by his attitude of faith, humility and respect. Thus his comportment becomes a model for all believers, especially today. In a period when all too often the virginal conception and virginity of Mary are spoken of only in order to throw doubt on them by limiting discussion of them to the physical aspect, the example of Joseph invites us to recognize in Mary the mystery of the action of God.²³

The Holy Spirit in the life of Saint Joseph

Perhaps this is the ideal place to note the role of the grace of the Holy Spirit in Saint Joseph's life. The Holy Spirit not only called Joseph to be the husband of the virgin and father by adoption of the Heavenly Father's Son, but also gave him the grace to fulfill this awesome service.

It is the Holy Spirit himself who is the source of Joseph's spousal love of Mary and fatherly affection for Mary's son. The Church teaches that Mary and Joseph entered into a true marriage. They had deep marital affection for each other and shared all the goods of marriage: Mary and Joseph vowed lifelong fidelity to each other and were open to receiving new life from God. Through their marriage vows, God united them in a bond of love that became a lifelong source of grace within the New Covenant. Obviously, in the case of their marriage, the union was never consummated out of reverence for the child given to them by God. Joseph, in his spousal love for Mary, is guardian of her virginity. He is also guardian of the son that he and Mary received from God. He, the head of the Holy Family on earth, continues to exercise a spiritual fatherhood in the Church from his place in heaven.

In the encyclical *Guardian of the Redeemer*, John Paul II pointed out that Joseph possessed all the natural love for Jesus that every father has for his child. The Holy Spirit was the source of this paternal affection Joseph experienced for Jesus. This encourages contemplation of Joseph holding the baby in his arms, playing with the child, teaching him to walk, listening to his first words... One may contemplate Joseph playfully tossing the baby Jesus into the air and catching him to the child's delight, or the child climbing into the lap of his father, playing with his beard, snuggling close to his heart. Joseph, perhaps, sometimes forgot that this child was not his own. What wonder he must have felt whenever he remembered that Jesus was the natural son of the God of Israel!

There is another fact that we must not pass over in silence: Joseph did for Jesus what every father does for his son on the level of human development. Saint Thomas Aquinas perceptively

described the role of the male parent in the human formation of the child. He stated: "It is clear that the rearing of the human person requires not only the care of the mother, by whom he is nourished, but even more the care of the father, who must instruct, defend and perfect him in both interior and exterior goods."²⁴

Since Catholics believe that the Eternal Son of God took a true human nature as his own; a human nature like ours in all things but sin, we must affirm that Joseph *defended and perfected him in interior and exterior goods*. Jesus must have spoken like Saint Joseph. He must have walked like Saint Joseph. He must have emulated the gestures and expressions of Saint Joseph. As Saint Joseph's apprentice in his carpenter's shop, Jesus surely learned the skills of the trade from Joseph. Who is able to sound the depths of Joseph's formative role at the levels of Jesus' affectivity and psychological make-up? Although the Father's Son was uniquely disposed in his human nature to do the Father's will, the carpenter of Nazareth nonetheless had a paternal hand in the formation of that human nature.

In his choice of Joseph as foster father of his Son, God the Father chose the man who, by grace, would be most like himself. Joseph has rightly been described as the human image of God the Father. How wonderful to contemplate the child Jesus' first human word. Might it not have been *abba*, the Aramaic word for *daddy* or *papa*? May the child Jesus have first addressed this word to Joseph that, in turn, perhaps awakened in his human consciousness a more profound awareness of his origin from another Father? So intimate and tender was our Lord's relationship with his mother, Mary, and his *abba*, Joseph, that God has chosen to keep many of these details as secrets known only to Mary, Joseph and Jesus.

SAINT JOSEPH AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

Pope John Paul II has indicated that the Church needs Saint Joseph and his intercession, as she stands at the beginning of the new millennium, eager to bring the whole world into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. He wrote in *Guardian of the Redeemer*:

[Saint]...Joseph ha[s] renewed significance for the Church in our day in light of the third Christian millennium. The Second Vatican Council made all of us sensitive once again to the 'great things which God has done,' and to that 'economy of salvation' of which Saint Joseph was a special minister. Commending ourselves, then, to the protection of him to whose custody God 'entrusted his greatest and most precious treasures,' let us at the same time learn from him how to be servants of the 'economy of salvation.' May Saint Joseph become for all of us an exceptional teacher in the service of Christ's saving mission, a mission which is the responsibility of each and every member of the Church: husbands and wives, parents, those who live by the work of their hands or by any other kind of work, those called to the contemplative life and those called to the apostolate.²⁵

Let us look at some of the ways Saint Joseph, as spiritual father of Christians, helps them grow closer to God.

God works in the world through people who believe in Him

Saint Joseph helps Christians to understand that God works in the world through humble men and women who believe in him and cooperate with his grace. It was Mary's faith that brought the redeemer physically into our midst. It was Joseph's faith that conferred on him the legal title *Son of David* — the Messiah. Mary's faith gave the Son of God flesh and blood, thereby integrating him into our human history; Joseph's faith integrated Jesus into the saving history of the Chosen People. The omnipotent God accomplished His greatest work through the faith and good works of Mary and Joseph. He wants to continue working in the world through the example and good works of those Christian men and women who believe in him and want to do all they can to bring every human person into a relationship with Christ.

Saint Joseph and the Culture of life

At the center of Saint Joseph's consciousness was the awareness that the eternal God became man in Mary's womb. Loving and reverencing everything human, he teaches us how precious

human life is. Joseph stands at the origin of the new culture of life initiated by the Incarnation of the Word. Devotion to Saint Joseph teaches Christians to love and reverence human life, to understand how sacred are virginity, conception, motherhood, spousal love and parental love. Saint Joseph helps young people to be chaste. He helps men to be strong and faithful husbands, tender and loving fathers of their sons and daughters. He helps sons and daughters who have been wounded in their relationships with their fathers to forgive rather than turn to self-destructive homosexual behavior. He is a model of chaste and tender manhood for women who have been scarred in their relationships with men. Saint Joseph is the special guardian and guide of women who have consecrated their lives in spousal love of Christ; the model of manliness for priests who have the mission to guard and protect the Church, bride of Christ, and our Lord, present in his word and in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Many of God's friends who, faithfully following the Church's teaching on openness to life in marriage, find in Saint Joseph a helper in all their material needs. They frequently report that Saint Joseph is an expert real estate agent who helps them buy, sell or rent suitable lodging for their families. He likewise helps them balance the monthly budget and find resources for the authentic Christian education of their offspring.

Saint Joseph is also a helper of all those who seek to love and serve the poor. Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta likewise taught her Missionaries of Charity to seek the *daily bread* for the poor from the provident hands of Saint Joseph. Christians pray to Saint Joseph as the patron of a *holy death*, since he died in the company of Jesus and Mary.

Terror of demons

Joseph teaches those devoted to him how to discern the presence and activity of Satan. It was the Evil One who sought to kill the infant Jesus through the human agency of Herod. Just as Joseph rose up immediately and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him in his annunciation, so he rose up in haste and took the child and His mother into Egypt to save the life of the newborn infant. The

Church has called Joseph *terror of demons* for good reasons. Saint Joseph is expert at unmasking all of the attempts of the Evil One to destroy the inner life of Jesus in souls. He will also unmask the presence and work of the culture of death in our society. Christians need to invoke Saint Joseph more than ever in their struggles with the forces of evil in the world and in the Church.

Model of contemplation

Joseph, living with Jesus and Mary in Nazareth, Joseph, working in his carpenter's shop with Jesus, is the model of contemplative prayer; that is, prayer directly initiated and carried forward by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. During the years of Jesus' hidden life in Nazareth, Mary and Joseph experienced and, no doubt, entered into Jesus' relationship with His heavenly Father. With Mary, Joseph witnessed Jesus *advance in wisdom and age and favor before God and man* (Luke 2:52), and continuously pondered all of these things in his heart.

Saint Joseph also marveled at the presence of the spirit of God in the pure heart of his spouse. Because of his familiarity with God and the things of God, Joseph is able to teach those who have recourse to him not only how to enjoy the Divine Presence, but also how to work in such a way that contemplation is fostered in the midst of work. Saint Joseph contemplated, enjoyed and loved the Son of God as he exerted great energy in his carpenter's shop. Do you think that his work distracted him for a moment from our Lord, his Son? Saint Joseph helps all Christians to be men and women of deep prayer, of contemplative prayer, and to sanctify human work by doing it in the company of Christ. An awareness of the presence of Saint Joseph in prayer often surfaces when God calls a Christian to deeper contemplative union with Him.

Saint Joseph and the Paschal Mystery of Christ

In conclusion, it is well to invoke the help of an icon entitled *The Return of the Holy Family from Jerusalem to Nazareth*. It is an unusual modern icon that, like all true icons, tells a story and reveals a mystery. Kiko Arguello, the founder of the Neo-Catechumenal Way,

wrote the icon as he prayed and fasted. He then presented it as a gift to Pope John Paul II. In the icon, the artist, exercising a speculative and intuitive way of interpreting Scripture, makes a striking point about Joseph's special way of sharing in the Paschal Mystery of Christ.

The scriptural foundation of the icon is Luke 2: 41-52, the account of the finding of the child Jesus in the Temple:

Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom; and when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, but supposing him to be in the company they went a day's journey, and they sought him among their kinsfolk and acquaintances; and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking him. After three days, they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. And when they saw him, they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously.' And he said to them, 'How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' And they did not understand the saying, which he spoke to them. And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man.

In the icon, Joseph carries the 12-year-old Jesus back to their home in Nazareth. He carries the boy on his shoulders, holding him firmly by the ankles. The artist seems to indicate that Joseph's mission is, in large part, to prepare Jesus for his adult life. Mary looks on in profound reverence, contemplating the words, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and he has anointed me.*" The most striking detail of the icon is that Joseph's face is the face of Jesus on the Shroud of Turin.

Note the double use of father in this passage from the Infancy narrative. In her anxiety, Mary addresses the 12-year-old Jesus: "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold your father and I have been looking for you anxiously." He replies: "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Mary uses father to designate Joseph. Jesus immediately uses father to designate the Heavenly Father, the source of His divine life and mission.

In his icon, Arguello points out that Jesus' use of the word *father* is the very *sword of sorrow* that pierces Joseph's heart. Joseph knows that the God of Israel is Jesus' Father. He had fully accepted the mysterious fact twelve years before, when he took Mary and her unborn child into his home. Now the Lord points both Mary and Joseph to the reality of his being and mission. He has come forth from the Father in heaven. He is sent into the world to do the Father's work and to live in intimate personal communion with him. It was revealed to Joseph and Mary that the child would be a *sign of contradiction*.

Penetrating into this truth in the light of the Holy Spirit, Joseph may have suddenly discovered his particular way of sharing beforehand in the Lord's Paschal Mystery. Might he have been asked, that day in the Temple, to consciously offer Jesus, whom he loved as his own son, back to the Father and to his mission of redemption, a mission that would, in time, pierce the heart of his wife, Mary? May the Father in heaven have asked Saint Joseph to surrender Jesus, as Mary would do later, standing in the shadow of the cross? Did Joseph in some sense know that Jesus would offer this sacrifice for his people, for all people? Had not Joseph intuited this from the day he received his vocation? The angel had told him, "...you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). In this awareness, Saint Joseph entered into a paternal relationship with all who would ever believe in Christ and benefit from his sacrifice.

The iconographer seems to be saying that Joseph, in surrendering Jesus to his mission, died to himself for the sake of Christ. Joseph bears the visage of the Shroud of Turin precisely

because he shared that day, in a uniquely paternal way, in Jesus' passion and death for the sake of the Church. Joseph expresses at a new level of self-donation, what Saint Paul would articulate later, "...it is no longer *I who live, but Christ who lives in me...*" (Galatians 2:20).

Joseph offered sacrifice neither on Mount Moriah like Abraham, nor on Calvary with Jesus, but rather in the Temple of Jerusalem in the *sanctuary* of his paternal heart. Surrendering Jesus to his natural Father, and to the work of redemption, Joseph participated paternally in the offering that would later be consummated on Calvary. Did he somehow realize that, like Abraham, he would have many children as a result of the *obedience of faith* that began to be realized on the day of his marriage to Mary, and reached a new perfection that day in the Temple? Significantly, the Church has chosen a scriptural text from Romans on Abraham and his faith as a *type of Saint Joseph and his faith*.²⁶

Perhaps, by experiencing the pain of Joseph in offering him so graciously and sacrificially to the heavenly Father and to his mission, Jesus learned something about suffering and dying for God and for others. Fathers teach their children how to live and also how to die. While only speculating on what happened in Jesus' human psyche and affectivity that day in the Temple, it is reasonable to say that Joseph modeled for Jesus how to live and die for love of God and others by his daily gift of self to our Lord and his mother. This was perhaps Saint Joseph's greatest contribution to the work of redemption.

Saint Joseph surely helped the God-man *learn obedience* motivated by love: "Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, declared by God high priest according to the order of Melchizedek" (Hebrews 5:8-10).

As a resolution based on this reflection upon Saint Joseph, let us ask him to be our spiritual father, to strengthen our faith, to give us a share in his trust in God, and to teach us how to love Jesus and Mary as he loves them. Let us seek a share in his reverence for the Word made flesh. Let us form good habits of seeking other gifts from him:

the gift of contemplative prayer, the sanctification of our daily work, protection from the influences of the devil, and true humility of heart. Above all, in entering into *Joseph's school* through intimacy with him in prayer, let us ask him to teach us how to die to selfishness and sin — to narcissism in all its forms — so that Jesus may live with us and in us; so that we may live and die in Christ and, one day, join the Holy Family in heaven.

In his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI pointed out that the saints continue to do in heaven what they had done on earth: “The lives of the saints are not limited to their earthly biographies but also include their being and working in God after death. In the saints one thing becomes clear: those who draw near to God do not withdraw from men, but rather become truly close to them.”²⁷

Believing in the communion of saints, one has every right to expect Saint Joseph in heaven to do for Christians all those things he did for Jesus and Mary when he was on earth. The silent, strong, and just man of Nazareth is truly our father in Christ, our father in faith!

PRAYER TO SAINT JOSEPH

Saint Joseph, guardian and father of virgins,
to whose safekeeping were entrusted
Innocence Itself, Christ Jesus, with Mary
the Virgin of virgins; by these dear pledges,
Jesus and Mary, I pray and beseech you to keep
me free from all uncleanness, and make me
with spotless mind, pure heart and chaste body,
ever to serve Jesus and Mary most chastely
all the days of my life. Amen

O happy indeed are you, blessed Joseph,
to whom was given the privilege not only
of seeing and hearing the God whom many
kings desired to see and saw not,
to hear and heard not; but also of carrying,
nourishing, embracing, clothing and guarding him!

V. Pray for us, blessed Joseph.

R. That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

MEMORARE TO SAINT JOSEPH

Remember, O most chaste spouse of the Virgin Mary, that never was
it known that anyone who implored your help and sought your
intercession were left unassisted.

Full of confidence in your power I fly unto you and beg your
protection. Despise not O Guardian of the Redeemer my humble
supplication, but in your bounty, hear and answer me. Amen.

Lamb of God, who take away
the sins of the world,
Lamb of God, who take away
the sins of the world,
Lamb of God, who take away
the sins of the world.
He made him the lord of his
household.

spare us, O Lord.

graciously hear us, O Lord.

And prince over all his
possessions

Let us pray.

O God, in Your ineffable providence You were pleased to choose
Blessed Joseph to be the spouse of Your most holy Mother;
grant, we beg You, that we may be worthy to have him for
our intercessor in heaven whom on earth we venerate as our
Protector; You who live and reign forever and ever. Amen.

The Litany of Saint Joseph was approved for public use by Pope Saint Pius X in 1909.
Like other litanies, this litany contains 21 invocations to Saint Joseph which describe
his virtues and the part he played as the foster father of Jesus. The Litany has a partial
indulgence attached to it.

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20. Laurentin, René. *The Truth of Christmas Beyond the Myths*. Trans. Michael J. Wrenn. Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1986. 266.
21. De la Potterie, Ignace. *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*. Trans. Bertrand Buby, S.M. New York: Alba House, 1992. 59.
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23. De la Potterie 65.
24. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q. 154, A. 2.
25. Pope John Paul II 32.
26. Significantly Romans 4:13, 16-18, 23 is the second reading at Mass on the Solemnity of Saint Joseph. The text points out that Joseph stands in solidarity with Mary at the fountainhead of salvation precisely through his faith.

 "The promise to Abraham and his descendants, that they should inherit the world, did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ...That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants –not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham, for he is the father of us all, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations'--in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told, 'So shall your descendants be.' ...But the words, 'it was reckoned to him,' were written not for his sake alone...."
27. Pope Benedict XVI, *God is Love (Deus Caritas Est)*. 25 Dec. 2005. 42. Available at www.vatican.va.

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Father Frederick L. Miller, S.T.D. was ordained a priest of the Archdiocese of Newark in 1972. After having served in various parishes and apostolates (Legion of Mary, Natural Family Planning, and Dominican Laity) in the Archdiocese, Father Miller was assigned as Executive National Director of the World Apostolate of Fatima, and Rector of the Shrine of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Washington, New Jersey, from 1986 to 1992.

Father Miller taught Dogmatic Theology and Spirituality at Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary, Overbrook, Pennsylvania, from 1992 to 2002. He was also Academic Dean of the Religious Studies Division of Saint Charles Seminary. Father Miller has taught at Saint Joseph Seminary, Dunwoodie, New York, the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas in Rome, the Notre Dame Institute in Arlington, Virginia and the Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio. He served as spiritual director of the Pontifical North American College in Rome from 2002 to 2005. A widely-known retreat master and author, Father Miller is presently Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Mount Saint Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

“Faith seeks understanding”: it is intrinsic to faith that a believer desires to know better the One in whom he has put his faith, and to understand better what He has revealed; a more penetrating knowledge will in turn call forth a greater faith, increasingly set afire by love. The grace of faith opens “the eyes of your hearts” to a lively understanding of the contents of Revelation.

– Catechism of the Catholic Church, 158.

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Pope St. John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, 5
Apostolic Exhortation on Catechesis in our Time

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