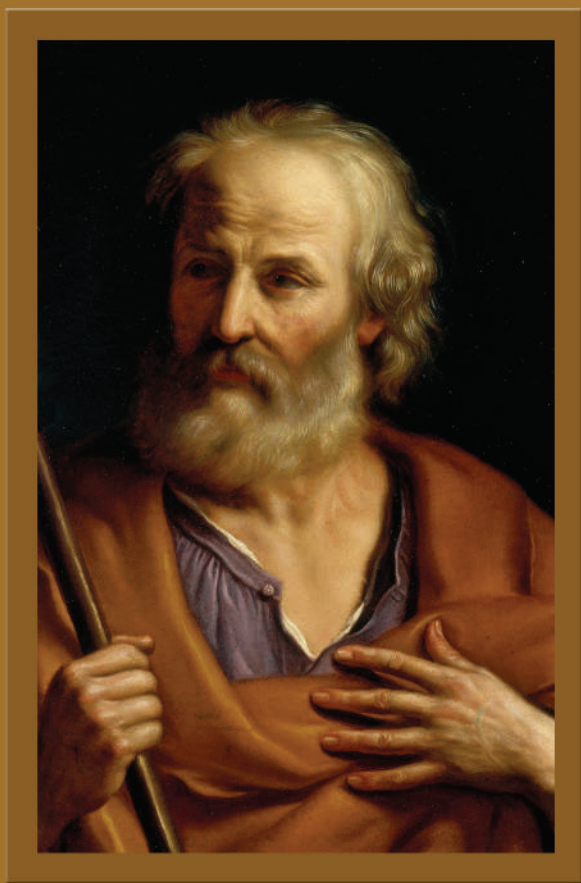


ST. JOSEPH

Help for Life's Emergencies



Stories & Prayers

ST. JOSEPH

Help for Life's Emergencies

Compiled and edited
by Sister Kathryn J. Hermes, FSP



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Introduction

Dear Reader,

The book in your hands is about Saint Joseph, husband of Mary and foster father of Jesus Christ. If you are leafing through the pages of this book, you probably have a very special intention you are holding in your heart. Perhaps you want to sell a house. Maybe you are accompanying someone who is approaching his or her final hours on earth. You could be looking for a job or starting a business. You may have financial difficulties or be looking for protection for your family. Or perhaps you never knew your father, or your father abandoned or hurt you, and now you are looking for a second father. If so, Saint Joseph is your patron saint. As head of the Holy Family, Saint Joseph experienced many of these things in his own life, as we shall see. He is a powerful intercessor before God for our needs.

Many people today know about Saint Joseph as a “real estate agent” — plant a statue in the front yard of a house you are trying to sell, and you’ll get results fast. Or so the stories go. The other day a woman told a friend of mine, also a Daughter of Saint Paul, that twenty years ago she had urgently needed to sell her house. She had been told by a friend to bury a statue of Saint Joseph in her yard. However, one of our sisters urged her instead to set the statue in a place of honor in the home and to say a novena to the saint asking his intercession. Well, her house did sell, and twenty years later she reports that she has had a strong devotion to Saint Joseph ever since. The statue of Saint Joseph purchased so long ago is still enthroned in her home.

In our archives there is a precious book in Italian about Saint Joseph — its binding taped and its pages torn. A woman had purchased the book from a Daughter of Saint Paul in 1933. Forty years later, in 1973, she returned the book to the sisters, stating that her devotion to Saint Joseph was strong and that the saint had provided for her many times when she was greatly in need. Although the book was worn and the pages ripped, she thought someone else might still be able to use it to grow in devotion to Saint Joseph!

This book you now hold isn't quite as old as the one she returned to us, but we hope you find it to be just as powerful a means of comfort and devotion.

Not simply a handbook on how to sell a house, this book is an essential guide to devotion to Saint Joseph. Others who have discovered the power of his intercession will lead you — through the stories of Joseph's powerful help in their moments of need — to place yourself under the guidance and protection of the head of the Holy Family. And, yes, they have sold their houses. They have found jobs. Bills have been paid when there was no money. Families have been reconciled, and loved ones have had a peaceful death. And the stories go on and on. We trust that you, too, will have your own story.

May Saint Joseph, foster father of Jesus Christ and true spouse of the Virgin Mary, lead you to a closer relationship with the Son of God whom he so lovingly provided for and protected on earth.

Sister Kathryn James Hermes, FSP

Who Is Saint Joseph?



*Saint Joseph is truly the faithful servant,
the guardian of the Lord, set by God as steward
over the whole human family.*

— DON G. PASQUALI, SSP

Life of Saint Joseph

Joseph

— silent, capable, and holy;

— called by God as a young man to play the most important part in the drama of salvation after Mary, Jesus' mother;

— foster father of Jesus and protector of the Holy Family.

In the Gospels, very few details are given to us about the man God chose to raise his Son on earth. Some of the information we know about Joseph comes from legends found in writings from the first six hundred years of Christianity. The saints and great teachers of the early Church reflected on the significance, virtue, and holiness of Joseph. Great men and women have had a strong devotion to this saint up to the present time. Popes have entrusted to Saint Joseph the needs of the Church.

And then there are the stories... Stories from every century and from diverse places recount the protection of Joseph. Passed down from generation

to generation and enshrined in families, religious communities, and countries, these stories reveal to us the virtues, attitudes, and qualities of Joseph.

There is, for instance, the story from the 1800s of the miraculous staircase of Our Lady of Light Chapel in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The Sisters of Loretto conducted a school in Santa Fe. Twenty years after its founding in 1853 they decided to add a chapel to the campus. It would be patterned after the Sainte Chapelle in Paris, with a vaulted ceiling, buttresses, and spires instead of the simple lines of the adobe churches of Santa Fe. Antoine Mouly and his son, architects from France who were already in Santa Fe building the Saint Francis Cathedral, were hired by the sisters to design the chapel. Five years later, when the chapel was completed, everyone realized that a dreadful mistake had been made. They had failed to build an access to the choir loft. Carpenters were consulted, but there seemed to be no solution other than installing a ladder to the choir loft or tearing down the structure, both of which were unacceptable.

Because the sisters needed the space for their growing student body, they began a novena to Saint Joseph, the patron saint of carpenters. On the last day of the novena, the story goes, a man appeared at the convent with a donkey and a toolbox. He was

looking for work, he told the sisters, and he asked if he could build a staircase for the chapel. The sisters were delighted. The gray-haired man had only a hammer, a saw, and a T-square.

Months later he finished, and disappeared without waiting for pay or thanks. The superior went to the local lumberyard to at least pay for the wood, only to discover that no wood had been obtained from the yard for the staircase in the school's chapel.

The circular staircase the mysterious carpenter built is considered today to be an architectural masterpiece. It makes two complete 360-degree turns, yet has no central supporting pole as other circular staircases have. The staircase hangs with no support! Architects who have studied the staircase have said it defies the Law of Gravity. There isn't a single nail in the structure, only wooden pegs. The splicing of the wood is precise, beyond what would have been possible using the tools of that period. And even more mysteriously, the wood used in the staircase did not come from New Mexico. The sisters were convinced that the carpenter was Saint Joseph himself. The humble, quiet ways of this mysterious benefactor are exactly what one would expect of the foster father of Jesus.

So, who is Joseph?

The Bible tells us that Joseph was a “righteous man” (Mt 1:19). Several legends say Joseph was selected to be Mary’s husband after his staff blossomed — a sign from God that he had chosen the young man for this responsibility. (Many statues of Saint Joseph depict him carrying a staff topped with lilies or other flowers in bloom.) In any case, the Scriptures tell us only that Mary was engaged to Joseph, and that it was in the months before the wedding was solemnized that Mary was visited by an angel. “Do not be afraid,” the angel Gabriel said. “You are loved by God, and you will be the mother of God’s Son” (cf. Lk 1:28–38).

This created a difficult beginning to Mary and Joseph’s spousal relationship. Within a few short months of their engagement, Joseph realized that Mary was pregnant and that it was not his child. He wrestled with the heartbreak, the anger, the shattered dreams, the law. He didn’t want Mary to be stoned, which was the punishment for adultery. He decided to dismiss her quietly. He did not lash out at her in anger. He wanted to treat her with compassion and goodness.

As he struggled with this difficult decision, Joseph himself was visited by an angel. In a dream he was told, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child con-

ceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:20–21). His turmoil and doubts about Mary and her child resolved, he continued the engagement despite the inevitable questions that would arise.

Next we find Joseph taking Mary with him to Bethlehem for a census. When they arrived in the ancient city of David, it was overcrowded and there was no room left for them in the places where travelers lodged. Joseph took Mary to a stable, where Jesus was born. What awe must have overtaken him in those first days and weeks of Jesus’ infancy! God had chosen him to be the one to raise this child. Like any father, he would teach the boy to walk and talk and work and love and pray. But in those first days, Joseph must simply have watched, loved, and protected the tiny bundle, his heart breaking whenever the child cried! Both Joseph and Mary were learning in a new, unheard-of way the joy of serving their God.

King Herod was worried when strangers from the East came with their inquiries about the birth of “a new king.” He quickly ordered the massacre of all infant boys in Bethlehem, hoping to snuff out this young rival. Again an angel woke Joseph from his sleep and told him to get up and flee,

because the life of Jesus was in danger. A man of lesser faith might have responded, "You told me before that Jesus would save people from their sins, and now you're telling me that his life is in danger and he needs to be saved himself? This doesn't make sense!" Instead, Joseph got up, woke Mary, and left for Egypt just in time. Joseph was a man keenly sensitive to God's direction and completely willing to follow God's plan in his life.

For several years, exiled in a foreign country, Joseph the carpenter supported his family. He had left his business, his tools, his friends, his clients, his workshop behind in Nazareth. He began all over again. With courage he risked a new start-up in order to support his family. When Herod had died, an angel told him to return to Israel. Once again the family left their home and his business to resettle in Nazareth.

The only other thing we know about Joseph from the Scriptures is that he was still alive when Jesus was twelve. Each year the Holy Family would go up to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. When Jesus was twelve, he remained behind in the Temple when Mary and Joseph left for home after celebrating the Passover in Jerusalem. The custom of pilgrims traveling in separate groups of men and women made it possible for Mary and Joseph to

journey an entire day before discovering the absence of their son. Frantically, they asked their friends whether they had seen Jesus. With no success, they looked for him among the groups of children playing together. When it was obvious they had left Jerusalem without him, they started back, fighting the fear that grips the heart of any parent when a child is lost.... They discovered him only after three days of retracing their steps through the city of Jerusalem. There he was, in the Temple, listening to the teachers and asking them questions, without even a trace of sorrow. In all their frustration and joy at finding him, they were met only with the words, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Lk 2:49).

How those words must have struck Joseph with both pride and sorrow. His son, or rather the Father's Son who had been entrusted to him to raise and teach and love, was growing up. He would need to let go and place this precious boy into God's hands. Joseph could not shield him, he could not protect Jesus forever. Jesus was ready for his mission — to save the people from the darkness of sin and death.

Joseph was probably not alive for the Wedding of Cana, which took place at the beginning of

Jesus' public life. Only Mary is mentioned in John's Gospel. And clearly Joseph was not alive at the time of the Crucifixion, because Jesus entrusted his mother to the apostle John as guardian. The presumption is that Joseph passed away before Jesus left home. That's why he is invoked as the patron of a good death, because he would have died in the arms of both Jesus and Mary.

And that is it. That's all we know about Joseph. But in these everyday occurrences of his ordinary life are hidden tremendous lessons for those of us who love his foster Son. In the ordinary and extraordinary events and the emergencies of life, he wants to provide for us as he did for Jesus and Mary.

Devotion to Saint Joseph

When you pray to Saint Joseph you are stepping into the stream of a 2,000-year-old tradition in the Church. In its growth from the first days of Christianity until today, devotion to Saint Joseph has become a most powerful means of intercession in the Church.

In the first century, from the scant literature available, it is evident that Joseph was commemorated in connection with Jesus and Mary. It wasn't until the third century, however, that we find the

first sculpture of Joseph. It is on a marble slab from a grave in the cemetery of Priscilla. It depicts the Magi adoring Jesus, who is sitting on Mary's lap. Directly behind them is Joseph, pointing to the Christmas star. Another image of Joseph is found on a triumphal arch of the Church of Saint Mary Major in Rome, built in 435 by Pope Sixtus III in memory of the Council of Ephesus, which proclaimed Mary as the Mother of God.

Joseph's memory was piously venerated in Nazareth, where a church was built in his honor by Saint Helena during the reign of the Roman emperor Constantine. In the seventh century in Egypt, a feast was instituted to honor Joseph's death. He was later included in the martyrology, a list of confessors — men and women who had professed Christ publicly in times of persecution and had persevered in their faith to the end of their lives — virgins who had forsaken marriage to love Christ alone, and martyrs who had laid down their lives because of their faith.

During the Dark Ages, the writings of the abbots of the great monasteries reveal a devotion to Mary the Mother of God and an esteem for Saint Joseph. It was in the monasteries that the beginnings of veneration for Saint Joseph as we know it today began to take shape. In this period we begin to see

Joseph called an intimate co-worker in our redemption, in the healing of the world. As early as the ninth century, local liturgical commemorations of Saint Joseph are noted for March 19, the day that would eventually become the Feast of Saint Joseph, Husband of Mary, and that we are familiar with today.

But it was only in the later Middle Ages that formal devotion to Saint Joseph began to appear. Saint Albert the Great, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Saint Bernard, Saint Bernardine of Siena, and others wrote of Saint Joseph. All later writings about Saint Joseph draw from the rich theological reflection of this period. In the sixteenth century, one of the first scholarly books devoted exclusively to the study of the life, death, and heavenly glory of Saint Joseph was written by the Dominican Isidoro Isolano, *Summary of the Gifts of Saint Joseph*. During this period, a great amount of popular spiritual writing focused on the life of Mary and veneration of her husband, Joseph.

The Council of Trent in the sixteenth century extended the feast of Joseph to the whole Catholic world. Religious orders were begun that placed themselves under Saint Joseph's patronage. Among them were the Jesuits in 1534 and the Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Joseph in 1650. A great

saint famous for her devotion to Joseph was Saint Teresa of Avila, a Carmelite reformer who lived from 1515 to 1582.

In 1870, three months after the Papal States had been invaded, Pope Pius IX placed the entire Church under the protection of Saint Joseph, giving the saint the title Patron of the Universal Church. Bishops, religious superiors, cardinals, and others had requested that Saint Joseph be given this honor. From that point the Church, whose temporal fortunes had been in a pitiful state, began to grow stronger. The following year, Pius IX legislated March 19 as the Feast of Saint Joseph.

Two years later a young man in poor health knocked on the door of the Congregation of the Fathers of the Holy Cross in Canada. This man, Blessed Brother André Bessett, a Holy Cross brother from 1872 till his death in 1937, was responsible for building Saint Joseph's Oratory in the 1920s in Montreal. Today the Oratory attracts more than two million visitors a year. Brother André himself was known for the thousands of cures that were brought about through his prayers and the intercession of Saint Joseph.

In 1955, in response to the May Day celebrations for workers sponsored by the Communists, Pope Pius XII instituted the Feast of Saint Joseph

the Worker. In this carpenter, who provided for the needs of Jesus and Mary by the work of his hands and the sweat of his brow, all working people have a shepherd, a defender, and a father. Joseph taught the Son of God how to work. In his carpenter shop, Jesus learned a trade — how to create, organize, plan, build, focus, and persevere at a project. From Joseph all those who work can learn virtue and obtain assistance and protection.

In 1989, John Paul II wrote the apostolic exhortation *Redemptori Custos*, urging the faithful not only to turn to Saint Joseph with greater fervor, but also to reflect on and imitate his humble, mature manner of service to others and of participating in the plan of salvation. He recalls how the hidden life of Jesus was entrusted to Saint Joseph's guardianship, and that in the love of Joseph and Mary and Jesus today's families can find both the model and the strength to live in a communion of love.

Popular Celebrations in Honor of Saint Joseph

Saint Joseph's Table

An ancient tradition called the Saint Joseph's Table goes back to the Middle Ages. A severe drought devastated Sicily, and the people were dying of famine. The peasants prayed for rain through the intercession of Saint Joseph. They promised that if God allowed it to rain they would prepare a feast in his honor to which everyone, especially the poor, would be invited. By a miracle, the rains came and the crops flourished. With the harvest the people prepared a *Tavola di San Giuseppe*, or Saint Joseph Table, to show their gratitude. Through the centuries people who have prayed to Saint Joseph for a favor use this festivity to offer their thanks, inviting the poor to their homes to take part in the feast. The "favor" requested must not be for personal gain or benefit but for the good of another.

According to the town or village of origin, the Saint Joseph Table takes many forms. It typically features rows of tables generously laden with beautifully arranged and often elaborately prepared

foods, usually meatless dishes, as well as breads, cookies, pastries, and cakes. Tables may be held in places such as private homes, churches, restaurants, or social clubs. Today people open these feasts to one and all who wish to share the magnificence of their Saint Joseph Day celebration.

A statue of Saint Joseph presides over the table, which is usually blessed by a priest. The “altar” is the focal point of the table. It can be as simple as a statue and candle or as elaborate as a shrine with flowers and fabric, vegetables, wheat, and even fountains. The table then becomes also a place of pilgrimage.

One tradition calls for the children to play the roles of the Holy Family — Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Angels and favorite saints are sometimes introduced. After the Holy Family has eaten, guests may partake of the meal. When the feast is over, the remaining food and whatever money has been donated are given to the poor.

Fava Beans

Fava beans are sometimes given to those who visit a Saint Joseph Table. The tradition of the fava bean also began in Sicily. During a famine all the crops failed except for the fava bean. It was grown

originally for fodder for cattle, but it became a lifesaver for the people. Even today some people carry a fava bean in their wallets in memory of the miraculous intervention of Saint Joseph. It is a reminder to pray to Saint Joseph, particularly for the needs of others.

Patron Saint

Saint Joseph is considered the patron of families, workers, unborn children, expectant parents, migrants and refugees, a peaceful death, and the universal Church. His intercession is invoked for accountants, carpenters, engineers, and craftsmen. He is invoked for persons beset by doubts or hesitations, those who have a profound interior life, and travelers.