

SAINT JOSEPH

PRAYER BOOK



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There are many saints to whom God has given the power to assist us in the necessities of life, but the power given to Saint Joseph is unlimited: it extends to all our needs, and all those who invoke him with confidence are sure to be heard.

SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS

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General Introduction

THE STORY OF Saint Joseph paints a picture of an ordinary man, living what appeared to be an ordinary life, but fulfilling an extraordinary mission entrusted to him by God. Although no words of Saint Joseph are recorded in the Gospels, his silent example of fidelity, integrity, protection, duty, and care for the Holy Family tells us quite a bit about him and makes him one of the most beloved saints of the Christian world. While details of his life may be lacking—disregarding the apocryphal sources of unreliable narratives from the early centuries—we can still gather credible facts about him from Scripture, history scholars, Church Fathers and Mothers, and Ecclesial writings. He was born of a royal and princely line, a descendant of King David (Mt 1:1–16); he was the lawful husband of Mary, the Virgin Mother of Jesus Christ, and therefore he was the legally recognized father or “foster father” of the

Redeemer of the world (Mt 1:24–25); he was a “just man” who deeply loved his wife and the child born of her (Mt 1:19); he suffered hardship to protect them from danger (Mt 2:13–16) and worked long hours at his carpentry trade (Mt 13:55) to provide for their needs (Lk 2:24). After the incident of the losing and finding of Jesus in the Temple when he was twelve, there is no further mention of Joseph. But as is often the case in Scripture, a few simple statements can provide material for worthy reflection.

“[Mary] was found to be with child . . .” (Mt 1:18). What Joseph understood about the situation and what his motives were in deciding to quietly divorce Mary are not entirely clear. Since the angel later tells Joseph that “the child who has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (Mt 1:20) it would seem that he had not known this and was acting under the assumption that she had been unfaithful.

But some early Church Fathers held that Mary must have told Joseph what happened and that he made his decision out of a sense of reverence, feeling unworthy to be part of God’s plan that was coming to pass in Mary. In either case, after a dream in which he is

given an explanation (Mt 1:20–25), “Joseph obeyed the explicit command of the angel and took Mary into his house, while respecting the fact that she belonged exclusively to God” (*Guardian of the Redeemer*, 20).

Historians tell us that Jewish men generally married between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four. In all probability, then, Saint Joseph married when he was in his late teens or early twenties. To fill the role of guardian, provider, and protector, it seems that God would choose a vibrant young man rather than a pious older man with white hair, which was a popular depiction in the Middle Ages based on fictional narratives attempting to safeguard the universal belief in Mary’s virginity.

Joseph “did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his house” (Mt 1:24). By accepting an event that transcended human understanding, Joseph welcomed into his house not only Mary and the child growing in her womb, but he also welcomed the work of the Holy Spirit that would affect the rest of his life. As the events of their life together unfolded—the journey to Bethlehem, the birth of the child, the visit of the Magi, the flight into Egypt, their return and

settling in Nazareth, the losing and finding of Jesus in the Temple, the journey back to their home and the hidden years—Joseph was cooperating in the mystery of salvation, entrusted with the task of *raising* Jesus. Feeding, clothing, educating Jesus in the Law, and teaching him a trade as the duties of a father required.

“Then [Jesus] went down with them and went to Nazareth, and he was subject to them” (Lk 2:51).

The *hidden years* of the Holy Family are even more latent in regard to Saint Joseph. The Gospels speak no more of him other than when the town’s folk referred to Jesus as “the carpenter’s son” (Mt 13:55). The events of those *hidden years* and the circumstances of the death of Saint Joseph are left to our reflection. What we can be sure of is that Joseph continued to be the faithful servant of the Lord, serving him in those he was given to care for, and he remained the faithful cooperator in God’s great design for the salvation of mankind. In his homily on the feast of Saint Joseph (March 2014), Pope Francis offers us some insights for reflection on those hidden years: “Joseph also quietly imparted to Jesus that wisdom which consists above all in reverence for the Lord, prayer and fidelity to his

word, and obedience to his will. Joseph's paternal example helped Jesus to grow, on a human level, in his understanding and appreciation of his unique relationship to his heavenly Father."

Devotion to Saint Joseph

From the earliest times in the life of the Church Saint Joseph was accepted as head of the Holy Family, and his life was woven into the mysteries of Christ's infancy and childhood; tribute granted to Joseph was always in connection with the veneration of Mary and the adoration of Jesus. In the third century we find the first authentic sculpture of Joseph on a marble plaque in the cemetery of Priscilla—a rough drawing of the Magi scene with the child Jesus sitting on Mary's lap and Saint Joseph directly behind her, pointing to the star. Other images of Joseph appear in the six mosaics on the triumphal arch of the Church of Saint Mary Major at Rome, built in 435 by Pope Sixtus III to commemorate the Council of Ephesus, which defined the dogma of Mary as the Mother of God.

During the reign of Roman Emperor Constantine (fourth century) Saint Helena had a church built in

Nazareth in honor of Saint Joseph. By the seventh century there is information that in the town of Nazareth two large churches had been built—one commemorating the location of the Annunciation and the other honoring the house where Mary and Joseph lived. Although there is no indication of a special devotion to Joseph, there is reason to believe that he was held in high esteem and venerated because of his relationship with Jesus and Mary. In seventh-century Egypt, a feast was instituted to commemorate the death of Saint Joseph.

During the early medieval period, sometimes referred to as the Dark Ages, the writings of prominent abbots indicate a growing devotion to Mary, Mother of God, and an increase in esteem for Saint Joseph. Veneration for Saint Joseph found its beginnings in monasteries and devotion to him grew through the centuries. In the later Middle Ages Saints Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Bernard of Clairvaux, Bernardine of Siena, and others wrote treatises and delivered sermons on the virtues and merits of Saint Joseph. Later writings on Saint Joseph all drew from the rich theological reflections of this period. One of the first scholarly works on the life, death, and

heavenly glory of Saint Joseph, entitled *Summary of the Gifts of Saint Joseph*, was written by the Dominican Isidoro Isolano.

The Council of Trent (1545–1563) extended the feast of Saint Joseph (March 19) to the whole Catholic world, and new foundations of religious orders placed themselves under the patronage of Saint Joseph.

In 1870, during a time of political upheaval for the Vatican, Pope Pius IX placed the entire Church under the protection of Saint Joseph, naming him as Patron of the Universal Church; the following year he declared March 19 as the official feast of Saint Joseph.

The encyclical letter of Leo XIII, *Quamquam Pluries* issued in 1889, was the first to outline a theology of Saint Joseph and urged all Catholics to pray to him as Patron of the Universal Church: “The special motives for which Saint Joseph has been proclaimed Patron of the Church, and from which the Church looks for singular benefit from his patronage and protection, are that Joseph was the spouse of Mary and that he was reputed the father of Jesus Christ. From these sources have sprung his dignity, his holiness, his glory” (*Quamquam Pluries*, 3).

As a response to the May Day celebration for workers supported by Communist-held countries, Pope Pius XII introduced the feast of Saint Joseph the Worker. By the work of his hands and the sweat of his brow, Joseph provided for the needs of Jesus and Mary. All working people should look to Joseph as their father and defender, obtaining protection and assistance in their time of need.

In 1989 Saint John Paul II issued the apostolic exhortation *Redemptoris Custos* (*Guardian of the Redeemer*) on the person and mission of Saint Joseph in the life of Christ and of the Church. The occasion was the one hundredth anniversary of *Quamquam Pluries*, and John Paul briefly reflects on the Gospel texts that refer to Saint Joseph. He remarks on how the time of the hidden years of Jesus was entrusted to Joseph's guardianship, and that in the love of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, families today can find a model of encouragement and strength to share their lives together in an environment of love. John Paul not only urges the faithful to turn to Saint Joseph with great confidence, but also to reflect on and imitate his

humble, mature manner of service to others, thus cooperating in God's plan of salvation.

In 2020, Pope Francis issued an apostolic letter, *Patris Corde (With a Father's Heart)*, on the 150th anniversary of the declaration of Saint Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church. He reflected on Saint Joseph as a tender and loving father, and encouraged the faithful to follow the example of Joseph's obedience, acceptance, and courage.

Whether you have a long-standing relationship with Saint Joseph or you are just setting out on your path of devotion to him, it is with confidence in Saint Joseph's desire to be provider, protector, and patron to everyone who calls on him that the prayers and reflections herein are offered. May the words of Saint Teresa of Ávila be of encouragement to you: "I do not remember even now that I have ever asked anything of Saint Joseph which he has failed to grant. . . . To other saints the Lord seems to have given power to help us in some special necessity, but to this glorious saint, I know by experience, he has given the power to help us in them all" (*Autobiography*, VI, 9).