

ST. JOSEPH: A THEOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION

Fr. Michael D. Griffin, O.C.D.

The splendid manifestation of devotion to Saint Joseph that have occurred in ever-increasing measure during the last one hundred years call for a word of explanation. How can we explain this phenomena? Christian piety calls for more than enthusiasm in its devotion to a saint; it needs to be nourished with a better understanding of the rich insights that have been unlocked by exegetes and theologians, as well as the reflections of the saints. In view of the enormous spiritual advantages they derived from this devotion, the insights of the latter command our attention and respect.

How often the heart anticipates conclusions later drawn by learned theologians! Herein lies the greatness of the heart. But, conversely, the heart is often unsure and filled with doubts. In the case of devotion to Saint Joseph, has this not often been the case? Many love him spontaneously and deeply, but wonder if their belief and faith are tempered with the appropriate measure of discretion.

The interests of a saint are best served by steering a safe course between the danger of exaggerating his importance on the one hand, and the possibility of minimizing his greatness on the other. His true position in salvation history will, it is hoped, emerge from the study of the following: his place in Sacred Scripture; the writings of theologians; devotion to Saint Joseph as proposed by the Church.

I. Saint Joseph in Scripture

Sacred Scripture is the most authentic source we have for the study of the importance and significance of Saint Joseph in the present economy of salvation. The Magisterium of the Church, the universal and proximate norm of all truth, bases its love for, and devotion to Saint Joseph on the data given in the pages of the inspired word of God.

What does Sacred Scripture tell us about Saint Joseph? Does it tell us very much? It would be misleading to gauge his importance by the number of words assigned to him in the sacred narrative. As is so often the case in the Bible, a few seemingly simple remarks say more than we can comprehend in a lifetime of study and reflection. True, the Bible does not give us an exhaustive picture of the saint, but then neither does it contain a definitive biography of Christ or his Mother. Sacred Scripture, however, does tell us all that we need to know about Saint Joseph, as well as the mission assigned him in the life of the people of God.

The following points are the main facts in the life of Saint Joseph that Sacred Scripture proposes as historically true.

1. Saint Joseph was married to Mary, the Mother of God

When the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary announcing that she was to become the Mother of God, she was, according to the account given by Saint Luke, "espoused to a man named Joseph"¹. The wording of the text is common to all modern versions of the Bible.

Commenting on this text, scripture scholars warn us that the word "espoused" is not to be equated with the word "engagement". The words espousal and engagement are allied terms that are related to marriage, but they are not perfectly synonymous. The word espousal refers to the making of vows of marriage rather than to the ceremonies that surround the wedding; it implies that the couple have, in the strict legal sense, entered upon the state of wedlock. Engagement, on the other hand, connotes only the "promise" of one day entering the state of matrimony, providing the present desires and wishes of the couple endure. Thus, to understand the phrase of Saint Luke "espoused to a man named Joseph" as meaning that Mary was engaged to him at the time, would not do justice to the text. Saint Luke is simply saying that Mary and Joseph were already married when Mary became the Mother of God.

Why, then, does Saint Luke use the word "espoused" instead of the word "married"? Would it not have been clearer and more simple for him to use the second?

It must be remembered that according to the Jewish custom of the time there were two steps that lead to marriage as we understand it today. First, the couple exchanged their <matrimonial consent> in a special ceremony. Today we would say they pronounced their marriage vows. In virtue of this they were joined together as man and wife in the eyes of God and in the eyes of the law. From that time they had all the rights and privileges accorded to husbands and wives. According to Jewish law if the man died, the woman was considered as his widow and was entitled to his inheritance. If the woman was unfaithful to him, she would be punished as an adulteress; neither could she remarry without first obtaining a bill of divorce.

The second step was the <solemnization> of the marriage or the celebration of the wedding festivities. According to the means of the couple, the wedding feast was celebrated as elaborately as possible. The man would come to the home of the bride and in public procession he would escort her to his home. Then they would begin their life together.

This second part of the ceremony took place many months after the exchange of the wedding vows. And it is for this reason that Saint Luke tells us that they were "espoused" at the time of the Annunciation. The meaning is clear. At the time of the apparition of the Angel they were not living together as man and wife for the wedding festivities had not as yet taken place, but they were married in the eyes of God since they had already exchanged matrimonial consent.

How old Saint Joseph was at the time he married Mary is a question of great interest to the modern mind because of the conflicting ideas expressed on this subject. For many centuries the idea prevailed that Joseph was an old man of eighty years when he married. Even today in some of our churches there are still statues and pictures that would appear to corroborate this view.

It is interesting to note that the earliest known paintings or pieces of sculpture in the catacombs show Joseph as a young man, probably no more than twenty-five years old. This trend continued until the fourth century. But from that time almost to modern times, Mary's husband is pictured as a man of advanced years. This raises the interesting question of why Joseph suddenly became an octogenarian in Christian art. There can be no doubt but that the change was deliberately introduced. In the fourth century the perpetual virginity of Mary was under attack, and by way of implication it was asserted that Joseph was the natural father of Christ. This claim was a serious distortion of divine revelation and was promptly refuted by the bishops of those times. History tells us that heresies die slowly and there follows a period of time in which there is a danger that the false doctrine will reappear. Hence the artists of the times were convinced that it was not advisable to depict Joseph as a young man for fear that the faithful would imagine him to be the natural father of Christ. Portraying him as a very old man, they thought, was the best way of upholding belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary and Joseph. This trend continued well into the twentieth century.

In recent decades there has been a change in thinking among religious artists. The modern artist, sensitive to the preferences of modern man, now prefers to represent Joseph as a strong and vigorous young man. This healthy trend accords with modern scriptural scholarship and has helped thinking Christians to reject as worthless fables many of the legends about Saint Joseph that are contained in the apocryphal literature, especially the <Gospel of Pseudo Matthieu> and the <Gospel of the Nativity of Mary.>

The belief that Mary was about fifteen years old when she became the Mother of Christ is very widely held by scripture scholars. Now who could seriously imagine God inspiring Mary to marry a man who was nearly eighty years old? How could he have been a real companion to her? Would he not have been more like a great-grandfather? Furthermore, the gospel assures us that the contemporaries of the holy family thought that Joseph was the natural father of Jesus. Is it likely that people would have come to such a conclusion had Joseph already been a very old man?

In addition, how could such an old man have worked as a carpenter to support his wife and child? Could he have taken the long journeys related in the gospel? How could he have protected his family on such trips? It is not necessary to portray Joseph as a decrepit old man in order to affirm his virginity, for virginity comes from virtue and the grace of God and not from debilitating old-age.

Is it possible to be more specific about his age at the time of his marriage? Yes, scholars of oriental history assure us that most Jewish men married when they were sixteen years old; they rarely deferred marriage beyond twenty-four. Thus in all likelihood Joseph was married when he was in his late teens.

2. Saint Joseph was considered to be the Father of Jesus

The Eternal Son of God was conceived in the womb of the Blessed Virgin, not by the power of man, but by the work of the Holy Spirit. In becoming man, Christ was born and received into a human family because he wanted to become like unto us in all things, sin alone excepted.

One of the main reasons why Christ was born into a family was due to the fact that it is in accordance with the divine natural law that children should be born to a married couple. Obviously God could have dispensed from this particular law him who was the "first begotten" of the new economy of salvation.

There was another reason why Christ should be born into a family. God reveals His mysteries of salvation to the world gradually, and as yet men were not prepared for the good news that the Second Person of the Trinity had become incarnate for our salvation, or for the news of the virginal conception of the Saviour. Thus it would have harmed the cause of human redemption had Christ become incarnate outside of a human family: this would have brought dishonor upon the Saviour, and upon His mother too, since many would have considered her guilty of seriously violating the moral law of God.

We can see, therefore, the great advantage of Christ being born of the marriage of Mary and Joseph, and how this acted as a veil over the inscrutable designs of Providence until the world could profit from this disclosure. As a matter of fact the gospels do not indicate that Christ ever revealed this mystery of his virginal conception until he had demonstrated his divinity and thus prepared the minds of men to accept this mystery.

Some of the texts of Sacred Scripture, especially in Saint Luke's second chapter, call Saint Joseph the father of Jesus, as Mary is called his Mother. In recording the presentation of the Child in the temple, Saint Luke writes: "and when His <parents> brought in the Child Jesus"². After the prophecy of Simeon the narrative continues: "His <father> and <mother> were marvelling at the things spoken concerning Him"³. When Christ went up to the temple at the age of twelve, we read: "And His <parents> were wont to go every year to Jerusalem at the feast of the Passover. And when He was twelve years old, <they> went up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast. And after <they> had fulfilled the days, when <they> were returning, the boy Jesus remained in Jerusalem, and His <parents> did not know it"⁴. Noticing that the boy was missing, Joseph and Mary searched for three days until they discovered him in the temple. On that occasion the gospel relates the words of Mary to the Child: "Behold, in sorrow Thy <father> and I have been seeking Thee"⁵.

3. Saint Joseph exercised paternal rights over the child Jesus

An Angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and said: "Joseph, son of David, fear not to take Mary your wife, because what is born of her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bring forth a Son, and you will call His name Jesus. For He shall save His people from their sins"⁶. Thus Joseph is assured that it is his right and duty to impose a name on the Child born of his wife.

Naming the child was considered, according to the Jewish mentality, as a special prerogative of the father: it was an exercise of paternal authority. And so eight days after His birth, on the occasion of the circumcision, we find Joseph presiding over the ceremony (though in all likelihood he did not perform the circumcision), and as he directed, the child was called Jesus. This rite made Christ a member of the chosen people, heir to all the promises that had been foretold by the prophets. At the same time, he also received his legal ancestry, becoming a member of the Davidic dynasty. True, both Mary and Joseph were descendants of the house of David, but it is through Joseph that Christ received the title, Son of David, according to which the Messiah was to be recognized.

In the gospels there are other indications of the leadership Saint Joseph gave to his family as he cared for his wife and the child. After the visit of the Magi, Herod was seeking the life of the Child, and an angel appeared to Joseph: "Behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph, saying: Arise, and take the Child and His Mother, and flee into Egypt, and remain there until I tell thee"⁷. Acting as a protective father to the Infant, he led Him safely to Egypt where He was safe from the devilish intent of Herod. When king Herod was dead an angel again appeared to Joseph as the head of the Holy Family and told him "to take the Child and His Mother into the land of Israel"⁸. Finally, an angel appeared to him and told him to return to Galilee and Joseph brought his family back to Nazareth⁹. Jesus was obedient to Joseph as to a father: "And He went down with them and was subject to them"¹⁰.

Saint Joseph exercised authority over Jesus only because this was the will of God. Obviously the right of authority can be exercised only over a person, and since Christ is a divine Person no one can have any authority over Him. The authority exercised by Joseph was given by God because Christ <chose> to be subject to His earthly father, who was the "shadow of His heavenly Father". If Jesus' humble subjection gives us an example of due submission to lawfully constituted authority, it also serves to emphasize the dignity of him whom He obeyed.

The matter of Joseph's exercising authority over Jesus enables us to enter a little more deeply into the inner sanctuary of the soul of the earthly father of Christ and the husband of Mary. Was it not natural for him to be hesitant in the exercise of that same authority? Was he not timid about giving lawful commands? Is it not easy to imagine that he was reluctant to govern those who were his superiors in holiness and in goodness? Actually this did not cause any uneasiness in the soul of Joseph; he fully realized that he

commanded in virtue of the authority granted by God and he only exercised that authority for the love of God and for the welfare of those placed under his charge.

From the exercise of authority over Jesus and Mary, it is an easy step to a further question: did Saint Joseph know that Christ was the second Person of the Most Blessed Trinity? A similar question is often raised by theologians concerning our Blessed Lady: did she know from the time of the Annunciation that her Child was the only begotten Son of God the Father? The gospels, it is true, are not as clear on these questions as we might like them to be. But they do give some indications that are extremely helpful.

First of all, there seems to be a growing consensus among exegetes that most likely Mary did not know, from the moment of the Incarnation, the true identity of her divine Son. Joseph, naturally, would have less knowledge than that accorded to Mary. When Saint Luke, who must have been assisted by the information he received from Mary in composing his account of the early life of Christ, describes the scene of Our Lord in the temple when He was twelve years old, he relates the words of Christ to "His parents": "Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" And in the next sentence he continues with the words: "And they (his parents) did not understand the word that He spoke unto them"¹¹. It seems that Saint Luke is telling us that Mary and Joseph did not understand the explanation given by Christ; and their lack of understanding would be difficult to account for had they already known that Christ was the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. Furthermore, it hardly seems likely to assume that Saint Luke is here talking of a sudden shock that these words caused Mary and Joseph, as though they had <momentarily> forgotten his identity. Luke seems to be speaking of the fact that they did not as yet fully know of His divinity and therefore they were puzzled by his words to them. And, finally, Luke relates how "His mother preserved all these words in her heart"¹², as though she meditated on these words a long time before she came to see, in the growing light of her Son, the real meaning they contained.

True, there are still modern exegetes who maintain that Mary knew from the time of the Annunciation that her Son was truly the Son of God, but their arguments do not seem entirely convincing. The texts must be forced to yield such a meaning.

Supposing that Mary and Joseph did not know the divine nature of their Son, it is much easier to understand the early life of the Holy Family. Jesus, who "grew in wisdom, age and grace with God and men"¹³, in due time must have revealed this mystery to them. At the time of the first miracle of Jesus at Cana of Galilee we notice the confident tone of Mary when she orders the chief steward: "Do whatever He tells you to do"¹⁴ By this time she fully understood. Though the gospel does not tell us, we can presume Christ fully revealed Himself to Joseph before the latter's death.

4. Saint Joseph was a just man

Saint Matthew tells us that Saint Joseph was "a just man"¹⁵. In biblical language this means one who is adorned with all the virtues. Matthew stresses the justice of Saint Joseph when he describes the doubt that tormented him when Mary is "found to be with child"¹⁶.

We have already seen that Mary and Joseph were married, though not living together, at the time that Christ was conceived. In all probability Mary did not feel she had a right to inform Joseph of the mysterious event. Yet she was anxious for him to be informed, and knew he would be profoundly disturbed if he learned of her pregnancy and did not know of its miraculous origin.

This is exactly what came to pass. Joseph learned that his wife was with child, and knowing that he himself was not the natural father of the child, his mind was in a state of agonizing confusion.

Now that Joseph knew of the pregnancy of his wife, how did he account for this fact? Did he, as a few of the Fathers of the Church held, think that Mary had been raped or that she had committed adultery? Or are we to surmise that Joseph came to the conclusion that Mary had miraculously conceived a child by the power of God? Some have suggested a third possibility, namely, that Saint Joseph admitted to himself that he did not know how this could have happened and that at first he simply did not know what to do.

The first opinion, that Joseph thought she had been unfaithful, is not acceptable to modern scholars. It is extremely unlikely that Joseph entertained such an opinion. He knew Mary to be the holiest person he had ever met and he was aware that his young wife was a woman of profound spiritual insight and totally committed to the faithful fulfillment of the will of God. Never for an instant could we imagine him questioning her innocence.

He would, under the circumstances, be much more likely to be sympathetic to the second opinion: that she had miraculously conceived a child by the power of God. Rather than harbor any suspicion against his wife, he would have been prepared to accept this possibility on blind faith. Nevertheless, it is not likely that he came to this conclusion. A miraculous virginal conception was unheard of. Such an event would never have entered the mind of man without the aid of a divine revelation.

Thus by a process of elimination we come to the third possibility: Saint Joseph was baffled; he just did not know what to think. He was dumfounded.

Since Joseph was convinced of Mary's innocence, he naturally did not believe that he had an obligation of accusing Mary to the authorities who, in turn, would be obliged to have her stoned as an adulteress. All his feelings told him that Mary was more truly and fully

good than any other person he had ever known. More than anything else he did not want to be separated from her. The heart has its reasons, said Pascal; it has reasons that cannot always be formulated in concepts, as we know from the teachings of the great mystics. And if ever that were true, it was true of the sentiments that Joseph experienced in wanting to take Mary to be his wife. The great mystical writers have described the condition of the soul that "feels" that it has been abandoned by God though it knows full well "by the obscure light of faith" that such is not the case. In the case of Saint Joseph it may well have been a mystical struggle that he was experiencing in which his deepest feelings and sentiments told him that he must never give Mary up, whereas reason (in the absence of any clear revelation from on high) made him suspect that he was obliged in conscience (a judgment of the practical intellect that is not <infallible> without a special revelation) to do the thing that he dreaded most, namely, to be forever divorced from Mary.

Surely he prayed for light. And waited. And God responded to his faith: "Behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream saying: Do not be afraid, Joseph, Son of David, to take to thee Mary thy wife, for that which is begotten in her is of the Holy Spirit"¹⁷.

We can easily imagine the joy that filled his heart. He determined to celebrate the solemnization of the marriage as soon as possible. As he reflected on the words of the angel there seemed to be more and more reason for happiness and joy, since the angel's words meant that Mary would be forever his, and it also meant that, in a way that was difficult to put into words, the Child was not completely a stranger to him but that it was <somehow> his Son.

In this account of Matthew we would say, in current English, that there had arisen a first-class misunderstanding between Joseph and Mary, between husband and wife. And it is admirable what manliness Joseph exhibits in striving to overcome the misunderstanding according to the light of reason and of faith. Torn between his sentiments of love for Mary and the law of God as he knew it through the light of conscience, he was prepared to follow the only light on God's will that he had. He, like Abraham before him, was prepared to sacrifice what was dearest to him in all the world; but at the appropriate time God intervened (as always) to help the weakness of His servant.

As Abraham was prepared to sacrifice Isaac who was most dear to him because of the <signified> (clearly indicated) will of God¹⁸, so Joseph was similarly concerned with responding to the will of God as he understood that will during the time of his doubt. This was not a theoretical question but a real existential spiritual trial that Joseph, the "just man", underwent.

Recalling that Joseph was probably only a teen-ager at the time sheds a great deal of light on the Scriptural mention of his justice. Not only was he trying to do what was just or fair, but this effort was prompted by his inner goodness, by his life-long generous fidelity

to the will of God. Only a man open to the holiness of God would have struggled with the problem as did Joseph. Only such a man could have been tempted to make the mistake he did, namely, of selling himself short because he was convinced that it was the very thing God was demanding of him. An ordinary teen-ager, or for that matter, an ordinary man, would have been tempted to sell God short rather than himself.

The love that Abraham nourished towards his God was proven by his willingness to sacrifice Isaac; and God rewarded him by making him the "father of many". Abraham's descendent, Joseph, was rewarded even more amply for the selflessness and purity of his love. Through the words of the Angel he was told that he was to take Mary to be his wife and that he would be at least somehow the father of the Redeemer and, thereby, the spiritual father, in a much more profound sense than Abraham, of the people of God here on earth.

5. Appendix: The death of Joseph

After the episode of the Child Jesus in the temple, the gospels do not tell us any more about Saint Joseph. His name is mentioned, in passing, when we learn that Christ began His public ministry when he was about thirty years of age, being as it was supposed the "son of the carpenter"¹⁹. But there is no indication given that he was still alive.

In all probability Joseph died before Our Lord begins His public career; certainly before the wedding feast at Cana.

We know that Saint Joseph was a carpenter and it is extremely likely, according to tradition, that he taught his Son the same trade. Though born of the royal house of David, he was a man of modest circumstances and earned a living for his family by the sweat of his brow. We would be doing Joseph an injustice were we to imagine him being anything less than a good craftsman. While the Holy Family did not live in luxury, thanks to the diligence of Joseph it was properly provided for.

By teaching his Son his own trade, he made it possible for Our Lord to provide for Himself and for Mary till He began His public ministry. The work of Saint Joseph was completed.

Tradition has always believed that it was necessary for Joseph to disappear from the scene or he would have been an obstacle to the preaching of Christ. Think how confusing it would have been for Christ to be preaching about His heavenly Father if Joseph were close at hand! There is every reason to suspect that the multitudes would have thought He was speaking about Joseph. In order to obviate such difficulties, the early death of Joseph was convenient. Joseph had to decrease that the kingdom of God on earth could increase.

And so, some time before Christ began to preach publicly the good news of salvation, Joseph died, assisted and comforted by the loving presence of Jesus and Mary, a death that was later to become the cherished ideal of all Christians.

II. Theological Reflections on Saint Joseph

It is one of the tasks of theology to bring into sharper focus the portrait of Saint Joseph. Theology does this by showing his place of importance in the life of Christ and in the life of Mary.

It is to be remembered that theology does not "philosophize" on the data of revelation and thus arrive at purely human reflections. Theology does more. For theology is the systematic and scientific reflection, aided and assisted by divine faith, on the truths revealed by God in public revelation to his Church.

Faith seeks understanding, according to Saint Augustine, and it is not content with a superficial knowledge of the word of God. But the understanding it seeks is a deeper insight into the significance of God's self-communication.

In the case of Saint Joseph it would be possible to stop short after reading the biblical narrative of his place in the life of the Redeemer. But would there not follow from this a lack of appreciation, realization, evaluation of the Saint's role in God's plan? Without serious reflection and consideration how can faith grow and develop beyond the conceptual grasp of a small child's appreciation? Study of the theology of Saint Joseph is necessary and legitimate because Sacred Scripture speaks of Joseph as a man specially called by God to perform a singular and meaningful task for our Redeemer and His Mother. It is important, therefore, that theology meditate in living faith on the place of this man in salvation history and the role he is called to fulfill in the life of the Church.

Leaving aside the technical questions that are dealt with by learned writers of Josephology, the following points are important in a true theology of Saint Joseph.

1. The divine call of Saint Joseph

When it was eternally decreed that the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity was to become man, not only the substantial factors of the Incarnation were determined by God, but likewise all those persons, places, and things that would bring about this mystery. After Mary, Saint Joseph was the most important personage among these.

God chose the one who was to be His Mother and He also chose the one who was to be her husband and consequently His father. It was not by chance that he received these honors, but by the express Will of God.

2. The Immaculate Conception or prenatal sanctification of St. Joseph?

The question has often been raised whether or not Saint Joseph, like Mary, was privileged by God to have been free from original sin from the first moment of his existence. Surely if there is reason to suspect that God bestowed this favor on any soul besides the Blessed Mother, the most logical one, and the only one, who comes to mind is Saint Joseph. This is prompted by the fact that he was truly married to the Mother of God and that he had a singular paternal relationship towards Christ. A strong logical case could be built up to show how fitting it would be for Saint Joseph to have been accorded such a privilege.

Nevertheless, reason no matter how compelling, is not sufficient to prove that God actually granted this or that favor to a particular saint. We can only have certitude when it is guaranteed by Scripture or the Magisterium of the Church. Scripture says nothing of such a privilege and more important still is the fact that the Magisterium of the Church seems clearly to rule out the possibility. In 1953 Pope Pius XII in his encyclical letter <Fulgens Corona> had this to say about the Immaculate Conception of Mary: "Mary obtained this <most singular privilege>, never granted to anyone else, because she was raised to the dignity of the Mother of God"²⁰.

There is agreement among theologians that the words of Pius XII are to be taken literally; in fact, they teach that it would be rash or temerarious to hold that any other person, no matter how exalted, has been favored with this privilege. The devotion to Saint Joseph would not be helped, but immeasurably damaged, if it departed from this clear statement of the Magisterium: devotion to Joseph, like all other devotions, must be based on truth and not empty sentimentality.

Saint John the Baptist was sanctified in his mother's womb. Is there not reason to believe that Saint Joseph must have been accorded a similar privilege? Some have not hesitated to reply in the affirmative, but the majority of theologians see no reason that justifies the claim. Once again, the only way in which we can be sure of the prenatal sanctification of Saint Joseph would be through an explicit affirmation of Sacred Scripture or the teaching of the Church. Since we would look in vain for such approval in either of those sources, the only prudent conclusion we come to is that Joseph was not sanctified until after his birth.

In simple terms it comes to this: Saint Joseph was born with original sin on his soul and was not cleansed from its stain until the time of his circumcision, as was the case with every other Jewish boy of his time.

3. The virginal marriage

Theologically speaking, there can be no doubt about the marriage of Mary and Joseph. It was not a fictitious marriage. The marriage was real; it was also a valid marriage. As we have already seen, the marriage existed from the time of the exchange of the marriage

rights and not from the time of the solemnization of the wedding ceremony. The only reason for again insisting on this point is to make clear that Christ was born (though miraculously) in wedlock. Had Christ been born out of wedlock, the people of the time would have considered Christ to have been an illegitimate child, and they would have suspected Mary of being guilty of fornication. Their reputations would have been darkened in the eyes of men and this would have seriously harmed the cause of the Redemption. Later in His life, the scribes and pharisees sought in every possible way to throw discredit upon the Messiah. They surely would have resorted to this argument, had it been available. When Christ said to them: "Which one of you will convict Me of sin?"²¹, we know that no one could accuse Him of any fault.

When did Mary and Joseph decide to remain virgins? Was it before they took their marriage vows that they made this extraordinary agreement of being joined in wedlock and yet never making use of their marital rights? Or was this mutual agreement reached only after the marriage had been contracted? We do not know anything of the specific circumstances that attended such an agreement, we know only of the constant tradition of the Church dating back to the earliest times that, enlightened by the grace of God, Mary and Joseph made this agreement and remained faithful to it always.

4. The fatherhood of Saint Joseph

Naturally the most cherished title possessed by the holy Patriarch is the privilege of being called the father of Jesus, which comes to him as Mary's husband. When this holy couple contracted marriage they had no idea it would be blessed with such fruitfulness, being ordained by the gracious providence of God to receive the Son of God, the Redeemer and Saviour of the world.

Mary and Joseph were both parents of the Child, but in different ways. Mary by the miraculous intervention of the Holy Spirit became His mother in the full sense of the word. Truly she was the Mother of God, the Redeemer, because she clothed Him with flesh from her own maternal substance. Because of her physical motherhood a metaphysical relationship was established between Mary and Christ in virtue of which she could say that He was her child and, in turn, He could say of Mary: truly this is My Mother. Of all the creatures of God no one is more intimately related to Christ than His Mother.

The fatherhood of Joseph and the motherhood of Mary are both due to the miraculous intervention of God. The Divine Motherhood is unique in all of history. What is unique and distinctive about Joseph's fatherhood will become clear only after we have considered the following points: (a) the general concept of fatherhood; (b) false kinds of fatherhood attributed to Joseph; (c) the description of his fatherhood that best accords with the teaching of Revelation.

a) The general concept of fatherhood

Fatherhood in the <proper> sense is brought about by physical generation whereby life is vitally transmitted by the father to his child. This type of fatherhood is fatherhood in the ordinary sense and can be described as <physical> and <natural> fatherhood. The relationship arising between the father who transmits life and the child who receives that life is a permanent and indissoluble one. Once established, this relationship endures in time and in eternity.

Paternity establishes two different bonds. The first, produced by the generative act, can be called <physical> since the father communicates something of his own physical substance to form the body of his son. But paternity establishes a relationship of a higher and more elevated nature, which is the most noble aspect of human fatherhood, namely, the <spiritual> bond of human affection. Sinibaldi writes:

Paternity would not be worthy of esteem, except for the excellence of the moral bond, of which it is the natural principle, just as it is of the physical bond. If the physical bond could exist of itself separate from the moral bond, human paternity would not be above that of the brute animal. On the other hand, if the moral bond could exist without the physical, it alone would suffice for true paternity, because it is more beautiful, more perfect, and more sublime. The heart can supply for the physical bond and establish another closer tie, like to that which proceeds from the natural order of fatherhood.²²

We call a man father in the <improper> sense when he adopts a child that is not the fruit of his own marriage and bestows upon that child all the love, affection and privileges that he would accord to the child if it were his natural son. In these cases a strong, personal bond of affection arises that can be spoken of as a <>true>, but <improper>, type of fatherhood. Cases are not unknown when the father, in the moral order, feels closer to an adopted child than to his own flesh and blood.

b) False kinds of fatherhood attributed to Saint Joseph

It would be contrary to the teachings of the deposit of faith to claim that Saint Joseph was the <physical> father of Jesus Christ in the <natural> and <proper> sense of the word. This is the clear belief of the Church expressed in the words of the Apostles Creed: "I believe... Jesus Christ, His only Son, Our Lord, who was conceived of the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary." Those who deny the supernatural order hold the opinion that Joseph was the natural father of Christ. Nevertheless there have not been wanting pious authors, moved not by any type of malice but rather by an excessive and exaggerated love of Saint Joseph, who have speculated on the possibility of the Holy Spirit miraculously and without prejudicing the virginity of Mary or Joseph, taking a bit of the virile semen of Joseph to bring about the conception of Christ. This would make Joseph the father of Christ in a <physical> but <virginal> manner. The Church has proscribed such speculation as being destitute of any real foundation; and, in addition, of being contrary

to the constant teaching of the faith. Therefore, to claim that the fatherhood of Joseph <can in any possible sense> be described as physical is a serious departure from sound theology and the teachings of the Church.

Since he did not cooperate in any physical sense, Joseph's fatherhood could only be in the <moral> order. This implies positively that he was moved by love and generosity to care for Christ and negatively it excludes the possibility of corporal generation. But this only imperfectly describes the situation, as we shall see.

c) The fatherhood of Joseph is Unique

In the whole course of human history there has never been a type of fatherhood that is identical to that of Saint Joseph. Why is this so? An event occurred in the life of Saint Joseph that has never occurred, and never will occur, to any other married men. This tremendous event implied: (1) that Almighty God miraculously enabled his wife virginally to conceive and bring forth a son; (2) the child in question was the Incarnated Word of God; (3) all this occurred in such a way, according to the special designs of Divine Providence, that the Child was not a stranger to Saint Joseph, but the fruit of his own marriage; (4) and finally Joseph by the same divine decree was, in a true sense, granted the rights and duties of fatherhood towards this Child.

It would be a mistake to conclude that what distinguishes Joseph's fatherhood from all forms of human adoptive fatherhood is the fact that the child in question was divine. This oversimplification would miss the whole point.

What is also unique in this case is the fact that the marriage of Mary and Joseph was ordained by God to receive the Son of God into the world. The Incarnate Word of God was the fruit of the marriage of this holy couple. Christ was not a stranger to their marriage. Quite different is an ordinary case of human adoptive parenthood, namely, the child adopted and given the rights accorded to natural children, is a <stranger> to the marriage of the couple in the sense that their marriage was not ordained to receive that child and care for him.

Were it ever to happen that God would miraculously and virginally make a man's wife fruitful precisely because of his marriage to her, that man would become the father of the child in the singular way that Joseph is the father of Christ. God could not in justice deny him a paternal right to the fruit of his wife's womb.

Hence, just as Mary became the Mother of God not "because of the will of man but because of the will of God"²³, so neither did Joseph receive his fatherhood towards Christ except by the will of God. Mary cooperated much more proximately and more intimately in the Incarnation than Joseph, so that she is not only morally the Mother of God, but <physically> as well. Her motherhood is perfect in every sense of the word. The

fatherhood of Joseph does not have the perfection of physical fatherhood but it immeasurably surpasses any form of human adoptive fatherhood.

How is it possible for Joseph to have become the father of Jesus in the sense described without his knowledge or consent? Furthermore, there is the constant belief of the Church that he and Mary agreed to remain virgins. Does that fact not imply the resolve to have no children?

These objections are easily answered. When Mary and Joseph married, even with the resolve to abstain from the use of the sexual privileges of marriage, they were entering marriage with the idea of consecrating themselves to one another for the love of God. They were completely "open" to the designs of God's will, even though at the time they did not know what that Will implied. It is basically unimportant whether they understood down to the most minute detail what God was demanding of them; it was sufficient that they surrendered themselves without reserve to His unfathomable designs. Their call to marriage was not a private vocation, a vocation that only concerned themselves; it was a call that was to affect the entire community of the human family. In all likelihood the only thing they were sure of in their hearts was that God was calling them to marriage and that they were to live a virginal life; they determined to live their married life according to the good pleasure of God. This attitude of mind and heart was the all-important thing at that moment. As yet they had no idea what great things God had in store for them.

Perhaps a simple example might shed some light on this matter. Consider the parents of St. Theresa of Lisieux, or the parents of Saint Thomas Aquinas at the time of their marriages. They certainly had no idea that a child would be born to them who would one day be a canonized saint and who would have such a profound spiritual influence on millions of souls. On their wedding day they simply resolved to follow their calling in the state of matrimony and to put their marriage at the service and good pleasure of their Creator.

Thus it was with Mary and Joseph. Only with the passing of time did they begin to understand how their marriage was to be the most privileged marriage of all times because, as Saint Augustine states, "the Holy Spirit gave a divine child to both of them"²⁴. In the miraculous fruit of their marriage, God's most decisive and important intervention into human history took place.

What is the best title to express the unique fatherhood of Saint Joseph? There are any number of terms employed by the faithful and spiritual writers such as a fatherhood that is legal, reputed, foster, vicar of the Eternal Father, or virginal. Most of these titles express a partial aspect of the reality. Father Francis Filas, S.J., the greatest living American Josephologist, along with a number of other writers, prefers the title: Joseph, the <Virginal Father> of Christ. He justifies his choice of title in these words:

'Virginal father' seems to approach the requirements for an adequate description because it is brief, exclusive, and clear, or perhaps we should say that it is as clear as any title ever will be in referring to a fatherly relationship that so utterly transcends all ordinary categories. Extrinsicly, 'virginal father' has been recommended in the words of Augustine. Intrinsicly, according to its meaning, it so limits the significance of the word 'father', by calling the fatherhood <virginal>, that it excludes all connotation of physical generation, with no ambiguity whatsoever. On the other hand, by its mention of a virginal <fatherhood>, it indicates that some sort of fatherhood is being referred to. Since physical paternity is excluded by the word 'virginal', the rights and duties of a fatherhood in the moral order seem to be the logical conclusion.

A little later in the same book, Fr. Filas continues:

Now to apply this principle to 'virginal father'. St. Joseph is father of Jesus <in so far as he, a virginal man, can be the father of Christ>, and in saying this we have exactly the thought of many centuries that Joseph was father in all respects, physical generation alone excepted! An adoptive father, whose son is extraneous to him and to his marriage, does not possess paternity in a fashion such as this. The description fits only St. Joseph's relationship, according to which Christ was Joseph's true son in the moral order, and not extraneous to him. The Saint could not have obtained such a fatherhood except through the fact that Jesus was born of Joseph's wife. There is no other source possible, the marriage was the channel of parenthood to St. Joseph.²⁵

5. Saint Joseph had true paternal sentiments toward Jesus

Since Joseph was granted the privilege of virginal fatherhood towards Jesus, it is necessary to say a few words about the special interior grace he possessed of experiencing true paternal sentiments towards the child. It is a general principle of theology that when God calls a man to perform a special service, He gives all the graces necessary for the perfect execution of that vocation. The fatherhood of Joseph was not granted by nature and therefore God who, in a supernatural manner had made Joseph a virginal father, also granted him profound sentiments of love and solicitude for Christ that no human father ever felt for his son. This can be called the principal grace of his state of life in God's plan for him in salvation history.

Bossuet explained this grace in a manner that has never been surpassed. He wrote:

That same divine hand that fashions each man's heart gave a father's heart to Joseph and a son's heart to Jesus, so that Jesus obeyed Joseph and Joseph did not fear to command Jesus. And how can he be so bold as to command his Creator? It was because Christ's true Father, the God who had begotten Him from all eternity, had chosen Joseph to act as father to His son in this world; and in so doing God had, as it were, charged Joseph's breast with some ray or spark of His own boundless love for His Son. It was this that changed Joseph's heart, it was this that aroused a father's love in him, so much so that,

feeling a father's heart burn within him at God's word, Joseph felt also that God was telling him to use a father's authority: therefore he did not fear to command Him whom he acknowledged as His Master.²⁶

His fatherly sentiments enabled him to exercise that holy care and solicitude in caring for the child. This is especially evident in the course of the endless troubles that occurred during the first few years of Christ's existence. But, again following the keen insights of Bossuet, the greatest proof of his fatherly solicitude was given in the agonizing experience of being separated from Christ for three days when the Holy Family went up to Jerusalem.

Consider this further ordeal, and a remarkable one. It was not enough that men should distress him, Jesus did so too: the Boy eluded his watchful eye, slipped away, and was lost for three days. What had faithful Joseph done? What had happened to the sacred trust that God had put into his hands? We can hardly imagine Joseph's alarm and lamentations. If you do not yet understand his fatherhood, look upon his tears now, see his misery, and be convinced that he is a father. His grief made it abundantly clear, and Mary was right when she said to Jesus, "Thy father and I have been seeking thee sorrowing". It was as if she said: "Son, I am not afraid to call him your father now, and by doing so I throw no shadow on the virginal marvel of your birth. I call him your father because of his solicitude and inquiet, his concern on your behalf is truly fatherly. I and your father: I join him with myself in our common sorrowing."²⁷

6. Holiness and dignity of Saint Joseph

From the sixteenth century there has been a growing consensus among theologians about the outstanding holiness of Saint Joseph. Today it can be affirmed that it is the common teaching of the Church that Joseph occupies a very special place in heaven, because of his exceptional holiness, that is second only to the place occupied by the Mother of God.

In his encyclical letter <Quamquam pluries>, Leo XIII wrote:

Joseph... indeed was the husband of Mary and the father, as was supposed, of Jesus Christ. From this arise all his dignity and grace, holiness and glory... There can be no doubt that more than any other person he approached that supereminent dignity by which the Mother of God is raised far above all created natures... Joseph alone stands out in august dignity because he was the Guardian of the Son of God by divine appointment.²⁸ Several things are worthy of note in this encyclical of Leo: first, he mentions the measure of the holiness of Saint Joseph. The norm that determined the amount of grace that Joseph received was the twofold office that he possessed, namely, that of being the husband of Mary, and the father of Jesus Christ. The grace God bestowed upon his soul coincided with the supereminent dignity of those two offices. Secondly, Leo's insistence that Joseph <more than any other person> approached the holiness of Mary. Mary was

raised far above <all created nature>, does this mean that the Pope was teaching that Mary is holier than the angels themselves? It does, and this has been the common teaching of the Church for many centuries. But, what is more pertinent to this study of ours, does this mean that Joseph is also higher in dignity and holiness than the angels? Leo does not explicitly say this, but he certainly supplies the premise from which such a conclusion can legitimately be drawn. Pius XI in his characteristically incisive and clear language dispelled any doubt that might still linger when he wrote: "... between Joseph and God we do not see, and we can not see, anyone except Mary with her divine motherhood"²⁹.

Because of the words of Christ that "of those born of women there has not risen a greater than John the Baptist"³⁰, some have questioned whether John the Baptist did not surpass Joseph in holiness. This objection is not as strong as may appear. Taking into account the parallel text of Luke (7:28), exegetes assure us that Christ did not state that John the Baptist was the holiest person who ever lived, otherwise we would have to maintain that he was holier than the Mother of God! Christ was only speaking of John the Baptist as the greatest of the <prophets> of the Old Testament. He was saying that the other prophets were given the mission of foretelling the coming of the future Messiah, but John was the last of the prophets and the greatest of them all because he was given the mission of pointing out to his contemporaries the expected one of the hopes of Israel: "Behold, the Lamb of God!"

The dignity of a Saint is measured by the degree of grace and virtue he possessed. In this sense, not all saints had an equal amount of grace, but each one was given the amount of grace "according to the will of God" that would enable him to perform the mission assigned him. In the case of Joseph, the fact that he was assigned the privilege of living in the intimate presence of Jesus and Mary indicates the rapid growth in grace and in virtue that must have occurred in his life.

7. Patron of the Universal Church

In 1870 Pope Pius IX declared Saint Joseph the Patron of the Universal Church. In the providence of God, nothing has, I believe, made the faithful so directly conscious of the special importance of Saint Joseph. From that time, devotion to Joseph has grown by leaps and bounds within the Church.

What prompted the Church to declare herself to be under the special protection of Joseph? Incidentally, there are many writers who do not hesitate to say that the Pope did not <make> Saint Joseph the Patron of the Church, but that he only <declared> this to be a fact. This observation is not without merit, for Papal documents only refer to a declaration on the part of the Church and they never speak of the Church herself constituting Joseph in this role. Hence, it is best to follow this terminology.

Leo XIII sums up the teaching of the Church on the matter:

The divine household which Joseph governed as with paternal authority contained the beginnings of the new Church. The Virgin most holy is the mother of all Christians, since she is the mother of Jesus and since she gave birth to them on the mount of Calvary amid the indescribable sufferings of the Redeemer. Jesus is, as it were, the firstborn of Christians, who are His brothers by adoption and redemption. From these considerations we conclude that the Blessed Patriarch must regard all the multitude of Christians who constitute the Church as confided to his care in a certain special manner. This is his 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. Thus, it is conformable to reason and in every way becoming to Blessed Joseph that as once it was his sacred trust to guard with watchful care the family of Nazareth, no matter what befell, so now by virtue of his heavenly patronage he is in turn to protect and to defend the Church of Christ.³¹

It was the mission of Joseph to be the head of the Holy Family on earth, and in caring for wife and son he began his office of protecting the Church, because, as Leo pointed out, the Church was then in the embryonic state of her existence. He was chosen to watch over the source of salvation and of sanctification for humanity, and in heaven he continues the sacred trust that he exercised so well here on earth.

But it should not be forgotten that this office of Joseph is a <paternal> office. He exercises it because he is the father of Jesus Christ. Joseph is the spiritual father of all the faithful, and this office is a natural consequence of his office as virginal father of Christ. In becoming the father and protector of Christ, he was given spiritual charge of all those who would receive the graces of the redemption, just as Mary became the spiritual Mother of all precisely because of her Divine Motherhood.

8. St. Joseph assumed into heaven?

Theologians have raised the question of Saint Joseph's assumption into heaven. Was Joseph granted the privilege of being taken to heaven in body as well as in soul? Many theologians have based their belief in the resurrection of Joseph into heaven on the words of Saint Matthew: "Many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep arose; and coming forth out of the tombs after His resurrection, they came into the holy city and appeared to many"³².

There is not unanimous agreement among the exegetes that this text can be used as a real proof of his assumption. Nevertheless, there are some noted scholars who have made the claim that those who rose at that time died no more and rose to heaven with Christ. Some of them think Joseph must certainly have been one of this group; and there are not lacking strong reasons for thinking this must be so.

We are a 501C Non-Profit Corporation. Thank you for your generous support of our ministry. All donations are tax deductible.

Please pray for our ministry

"Support for this prayer leaflet is made possible by your generous tax-deductible donations"