

St. Joseph

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Spouse of the [Blessed Virgin Mary](#) and foster-father of [Our Lord Jesus Christ](#).

LIFE

Sources. The chief sources of information on the life of St. Joseph are the first chapters of our [first](#) and [third](#) Gospels; they are practically also the only reliable sources, for, whilst, on the holy patriarch's life, as on many other points connected with the Saviour's history which are left untouched by the canonical writings, the [apocryphal literature](#) is full of details, the non-admittance of these works into the [Canon of the Sacred Books](#) casts a strong suspicion upon their contents; and, even granted that some of the facts recorded by them may be founded on trustworthy traditions, it is in most instances next to impossible to discern and sift these particles of true history from the fancies with which they are associated. Among these [apocryphal](#) productions dealing more or less extensively with some episodes of St. Joseph's life may be noted the so-called "Gospel of James", the "Pseudo-Matthew", the "Gospel of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary", the "Story of Joseph the Carpenter", and the "Life of the Virgin and Death of Joseph".

Genealogy. [St. Matthew](#) (1:16) calls St. Joseph the son of Jacob; according to [St. Luke](#) (3:23), Heli was his father. This is not the place to recite the many and most various endeavours to solve the vexing questions arising from the divergences between both genealogies; nor is it necessary to point out the explanation which meets best all the requirements of the problem (see [GENEALOGY OF CHRIST](#)); suffice it to remind the reader that, contrary to what was once advocated, most modern writers readily admit that in both documents we possess the genealogy of Joseph, and that it is quite possible to reconcile their data.

Residence. At any rate, [Bethlehem](#), the city of [David](#) and his descendants, appears to have been the birth-place of Joseph. When, however, the [Gospel](#) history opens, namely, a few months before the [Annunciation](#), Joseph was settled at [Nazareth](#). Why and when he forsook his home-place to betake himself to [Galilee](#) is not ascertained; some suppose -- and the supposition is by no means improbable -- that the then moderate circumstances of the family and the necessity of earning a living may have brought about the change. St. Joseph, indeed, was a *tekton*, as we learn from [Matthew 13:55](#), and [Mark 6:3](#). The word means both mechanic in general and carpenter in particular; [St. Justin](#) vouches for the latter sense (*Dial. cum Tryph.*, lxxxviii, in P.G., VI, 688), and tradition has accepted this interpretation, which is followed in the English Bible.

Marriage. It is probably at [Nazareth](#) that Joseph betrothed and married her who was to

become the **Mother of God**. When the marriage took place, whether before or after the **Incarnation**, is no easy matter to settle, and on this point the masters of **exegesis** have at all times been at variance. Most modern commentators, following the footsteps of **St. Thomas**, understand that, at the epoch of the **Annunciation**, the **Blessed Virgin** was only affianced to Joseph; as **St. Thomas** notices, this interpretation suits better all the evangelical data.

It will not be without interest to recall here, unreliable though they are, the lengthy stories concerning St. Joseph's marriage contained in the **apocryphal writings**. When forty years of age, Joseph married a woman called Melcha or Escha by some, Salome by others; they lived forty-nine years together and had six children, two daughters and four sons, the youngest of whom was **James** (the Less, "**the Lord's brother**"). A year after his wife's death, as the priests announced through **Judea** that they wished to find in the **tribe of Juda** a respectable man to espouse Mary, then twelve to fourteen years of age, Joseph, who was at the time ninety years old, went up to Jerusalem among the candidates; a **miracle** manifested the choice **God** had made of Joseph, and two years later the **Annunciation** took place. These dreams, as **St. Jerome** styles them, from which many a **Christian** artist has drawn his inspiration (see, for instance, Raphael's "Espousals of the Virgin"), are void of authority; they nevertheless acquired in the course of ages some popularity; in them some ecclesiastical writers sought the answer to the well-known difficulty arising from the mention in the Gospel of "**the Lord's brothers**"; from them also popular credulity has, contrary to all probability, as well as to the tradition witnessed by old works of art, retained the belief that St. Joseph was an old man at the time of marriage with the **Mother of God**.

The Incarnation. This marriage, true and complete, was, in the intention of the spouses, to be virgin marriage (cf. St. Aug., "De cons. Evang.", II, i in P.L. XXXIV, 1071-72; "Cont. Julian.", V, xii, 45 in P.L. XLIV, 810; St. Thomas, III:28; III:29:2). But soon was, the faith of Joseph in his spouse to be sorely tried: she was with child. However painful the discovery must have been for him, unaware as he was of the **mystery of the Incarnation**, his delicate feelings forbade him to defame his affianced, and he resolved "to put her away privately; but while he thought on these things, behold the **angel of the Lord** appeared to him in his sleep, saying: Joseph, son of David, fear not to take unto thee **Mary** thy wife, for that which is conceived in her, is of the **Holy Ghost**. . . And Joseph, rising from his sleep, did as the **angel of the Lord** had commanded him, and took unto him his wife" (**Matthew 1:19, 20, 24**).

The Nativity and the Flight to Egypt. A few months later, the time came for Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem, to be enrolled, according to the decree issued by **Caesar Augustus**: a new source of anxiety for Joseph, for "her days were accomplished, that she should be delivered", and "there was no room for them in the inn (**Luke 2:1-7**). What must have been the thoughts of the holy man at the birth of the Saviour, the coming of the shepherds and of the **wise men**, and at the events which occurred at the time of the Presentation of **Jesus** in the Temple, we can merely guess; St. Luke tells only that he was "wondering at those things which were spoken concerning him" (2:33). New trials were soon to follow. The news that a **king of the Jews** was born could not but kindle in the wicked heart of the old and bloody tyrant, **Herod**, the fire of jealousy. Again "an **angel of the Lord** appeared in sleep to Joseph, saying: Arise, and take the child and his mother, and fly into Egypt: and be there until I shall tell thee" (**Matthew 2:13**).

Return to Nazareth. The summons to go back to Palestine came only after a few years, and the Holy Family settled again at [Nazareth](#). St. Joseph's was henceforth the simple and uneventful life of an humble Jew, supporting himself and his family by his work, and faithful to the religious practices commanded by the Law or observed by pious [Israelites](#). The only noteworthy incident recorded by the Gospel is the loss of, and anxious quest for, [Jesus](#), then twelve years of old, when He had strayed during the yearly pilgrimage to the Holy City ([Luke 2:42-51](#)).

Death. This is the last we hear of St. Joseph in the sacred writings, and we may well suppose that [Jesus's](#) foster-father died before the beginning of Savior's public life. In several circumstances, indeed, the Gospels speak of the latter's mother and brothers ([Matthew 12:46](#); [Mark 3:31](#); [Luke 8:19](#); [John 7:3](#)), but never do they speak of His father in connection with the rest of the family; they tell us only that [Our Lord](#), during His public life was referred to as the son of Joseph ([John 1:45](#); [6:42](#); [Luke 4:22](#)) the carpenter ([Matthew 13:55](#)). Would [Jesus](#), moreover, when about die on the Cross, have entrusted His mother to John's care, had St. Joseph been still alive? According to the [apocryphal](#) "Story of Joseph the Carpenter", the holy man reached his hundred and eleventh year when he died, on 20 July (A. D. 18 or 19). St. Epiphanius gives him ninety years of age at the time of his demise; and if we are to believe the [Venerable Bede](#), he was buried in the [Valley of Josaphat](#). In truth we do not know when St. Joseph died; it is most unlikely that he attained the ripe old age spoken of by the "Story of Joseph" and St. Epiphanius. The probability is that he died and was buried at [Nazareth](#).

DEVOTION TO SAINT JOSEPH

Joseph was "a just man". This praise bestowed by the [Holy Ghost](#), and the privilege of having been chosen by [God](#) to be the foster-father of [Jesus](#) and the Spouse of the Virgin Mother, are the foundations of the honour paid to St. Joseph by the [Church](#). So well-grounded are these foundations that it is not a little surprising that the cult of St. Joseph was so slow in winning recognition. Foremost among the causes of this is the fact that "during the first centuries of the [Church's](#) existence, it was only the martyrs who enjoyed veneration" (Kellner). Far from being ignored or passed over in silence during the early [Christian](#) ages, St. Joseph's prerogatives were occasionally descanted upon by the [Fathers](#); even such eulogies as cannot be attributed to the writers among whose works they found admittance bear witness that the ideas and devotion therein expressed were familiar, not only to the theologians and preachers, and must have been readily welcomed by the people. The earliest traces of public recognition of the sanctity of St. Joseph are to be found in the [East](#). His [feast](#), if we may trust the assertions of Papebroch, was kept by the Copts as early as the beginning of the fourth century. Nicephorus Callistus tells likewise -- on what authority we do not know -- that in the great [basilica](#) erected at Bethlehem by [St. Helena](#), there was a gorgeous [oratory](#) dedicated to the honour of our saint. Certain it is, at all events, that the [feast](#) of "Joseph the Carpenter" is entered, on 20 July, in one of the old Coptic Calendars in our possession, as also in a Synazarium of the eighth and ninth century published by [Cardinal Mai](#) (Script. Vet. Nova Coll., IV, 15 sqq.). Greek [menologies](#) of a later date at least mention St. Joseph on 25 or 26 December, and a twofold commemoration of him along with other saints was made on the two Sundays next before and after [Christmas](#).

In the [West](#) the name of the foster-father of [Our Lord](#) (*Nutritor Domini*) appears in local [martyrologies](#) of the ninth and tenth centuries, and we find in 1129, for the first time, a

church dedicated to his honour at [Bologna](#). The devotion, then merely private, as it seems, gained a great impetus owing to the influence and zeal of such saintly persons as [St. Bernard](#), [St. Thomas Aquinas](#), [St. Gertrude](#) (d. 1310), and [St. Bridget of Sweden](#) (d. 1373). According to [Benedict XIV](#) (*De Serv. Dei beatif.*, I, iv, n. 11; xx, n. 17), "the general opinion of the learned is that the Fathers of Carmel were the first to import from the East into the West the laudable practice of giving the fullest cultus to St. Joseph". His [feast](#), introduced towards the end shortly afterwards, into the Dominican Calendar, gradually gained a foothold in various dioceses of Western Europe. Among the most zealous promoters of the devotion at epoch, [St. Vincent Ferrer](#) (d. 1419), [Peter d'Ailly](#) (d. 1420), [St. Bernadine of Siena](#) (d. 1444), and [Jehan Charlier Gerson](#) (d. 1429) deserve an especial mention. [Gerson](#), who had, in 1400, composed an Office of the Espousals of Joseph particularly at the [Council of Constance](#) (1414), in promoting the public recognition of the cult of St. Joseph. Only under the pontificate of [Sixtus IV](#) (1471-84), were the efforts of these holy men rewarded by Roman Calendar (19 March). From that time the devotion acquired greater and greater popularity, the dignity of the [feast](#) keeping pace with this steady growth. At first only a *festum simplex*, it was soon elevated to a double rite by [Innocent VIII](#) (1484-92), declared by [Gregory XV](#), in 1621, a festival of obligation, at the instance of the Emperors Ferdinand III and Leopold I and of King Charles II of Spain, and raised to the rank of a double of the second class by [Clement XI](#) (1700-21). Further, [Benedict XIII](#), in 1726, inserted the name into the [Litany of the Saints](#).

One [festival](#) in the year, however, was not deemed enough to satisfy the piety of the people. The [feast of the Espousals of the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph](#), so strenuously advocated by [Gerson](#), and permitted first by [Paul III](#) to the Franciscans, then to other religious orders and individual dioceses, was, in 1725, granted to all countries that solicited it, a proper Office, compiled by the Dominican Pierto Aurato, being assigned, and the day appointed being 23 January. Nor was this all, for the reformed [Order of Carmelites](#), into which [St. Teresa](#) had infused her great devotion to the foster-father of [Jesus](#), chose him, in 1621, for their patron, and in 1689, were allowed to celebrate the [feast](#) of his Patronage on the third Sunday after [Easter](#). This [feast](#), soon, adopted throughout the [Spanish Kingdom](#), was later on extended to all states and dioceses which asked for the privilege. No devotion, perhaps, has grown so universal, none seems to have appealed so forcibly to the heart of the [Christian](#) people, and particularly of the labouring classes, during the nineteenth century, as that of St. Joseph.

This wonderful and unprecedented increase of popularity called for a new lustre to be added to the cult of the saint. Accordingly, one of the first acts of the pontificate of [Pius IX](#), himself singularly devoted to St. Joseph, was to extend to the whole [Church](#) the [feast](#) of the Patronage (1847), and in December, 1870, according to the wishes of the [bishops](#) and of all the [faithful](#), he solemnly declared the Holy Patriarch Joseph, patron of the [Catholic Church](#), and enjoined that his [feast](#) (19 March) should henceforth be celebrated as a double of the first class (but without [octave](#), on account of [Lent](#)). Following the footsteps of their predecessor, [Leo XIII](#) and [Pius X](#) have shown an equal desire to add their own jewel to the crown of St. Joseph: the former, by permitting on certain days the reading of the [votive Office](#) of the saint; and the latter by approving, on 18 March, 1909, a [litany](#) in honour of him whose [name](#) he had received in [baptism](#).