

The Dream of St. Joseph
by Francisco Rizi 1665
Indianapolis Museum of Art



Introduction: Begin by spending time just looking at the image. Who is depicted, what might the story be and are there interesting details.

Content of the image: This painting depicts the scene from the Gospel of Matthew; “Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child though the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. Such was his intention when, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘Behold, a virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means ‘God is with us.’ When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home.” (Mt 1:1-24)

Symbolism of the Blooming Staff: We see Joseph asleep holding a staff of blooming flowers. A legend from the Middle Ages says that when he went to visit his future wife, his staff started to bloom flowers and this is how the Virgin Mary knew he was specially chosen to be her husband. The blooming staff is often represented in images of Joseph; it gives the viewer a clue as to who they are looking at.

Light: In this painting, while Joseph is asleep, a beautiful angel flies down from heaven to give the good news to him. The angel has a halo and the face is illuminated in full light. This right away tells us this person is from heaven, but the wings tells us for sure this is an angel. The angel holds a lamp, the message of light. The light also seems to be a symbol of illumination for the viewer as we can see the plan of salvation bathed in light behind Joseph in the figure of Mary. Mary is surrounded by light; this is Divine light. We see in her womb the Child Jesus who is also surrounded by light, but that light comes directly out from him as it is uncreated light. Mary has a halo of sorts, but if you look closer they are supposed to be bright stars and there are 12 of them. This comes from the book of Revelation, where a woman is described to appear in the sky with a crown of twelve stars.

The Holy Trinity: The picture also tells us how the plan came about with the dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit and the triangle symbolizing the presence of God the Father. The Holy Trinity is a direct line from God the Father, to the Holy Spirit to Jesus the Son.

Pope Francis Devotion to the sleeping St. Joseph. For decades he has had a statue of sleeping St. Joseph on his desk, bringing it to Rome from Argentina when he was made pope. He said that when he has a special problem he writes it down on a piece of paper and slips it under the statue. He says,

“Even when he is asleep, he is taking care of the church! Yes! We know that he can do that. So when I have a problem, a difficulty, I write a little note and I put it underneath St. Joseph, so that he can dream about it! In other words, I tell him: Pray for this problem!” Pope Francis said. “Do not forget St. Joseph who sleeps! Jesus slept with the protection of Joseph... We also must rest in prayer and dream.”

It is only through dreams that messages from heaven are communicated to Joseph in the Gospels. That is why this image of the sleeping Joseph is a powerful reminder of the many ways in which God speaks to us.

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