

St. Joseph

FIRST CENTURY
HUSBAND OF MARY AND
FOSTER-FATHER OF JESUS
FEAST DAYS: MARCH 19 AND MAY 1
(ST. JOSEPH THE WORKER)

IN TODAY'S CULTURE, efforts to redesign and re-define the family are well under way. However, a family, as God designed it, needs a father as well as a mother. St. Joseph is the best model of the kind of father every Christian family needs.

Everything known about Joseph is told in the Gospels. Like his wife Mary, he was a remote descendant of King David. He was the son of Jacob (Gospel of Matthew) or Heli (Gospel of Luke) (the likely reconciliation is that the men were brothers and that Joseph was the legal son of one and the descendant of the other through marriage to his brother's widow, a custom commanded in the Old Testament when a man died childless). His birthplace is not known, although Bethlehem is possible since he returned there to be enrolled for a census, a circumstance that resulted in Jesus' birth there. The Gospels name four brothers of Jesus and an unknown number of sisters. Possibly they were Joseph's children by an earlier marriage, but more likely they were

Jesus' cousins, since Aramaic, the language he spoke, did not have a separate word for "cousin." The Gospels never suggest that Joseph and Mary had the responsibility for children apart from Jesus. The long journeys he made, one a headlong flight all the way to Egypt to save the infant Jesus, suggest a man who was in the prime of his life, not a widower with six or more grown children.

Joseph was a carpenter, and he taught his foster-son Jesus the same trade. He was called a "just man" (Mt 1:19), and his virtues are seen in his actions. He first appeared in the Gospels on the horns of a dilemma: his espoused wife Mary was pregnant, he cannot believe that she had sinned, but he cannot bring her to his home when he knew the child was not his. "Unwilling to put her to shame, [he] resolved to divorce her quietly" (Mt 1:19). God sent an angel to Joseph in a dream to reveal the truth of the virginal conception of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, and upon awakening he took her into his home, completing the two-part process of marriage customary at the time.

Joseph cared for the heavily-pregnant Mary when they traveled to Bethlehem to be enrolled and during the difficult time when they could find no lodging in the crowded city and were forced to shelter in a cave used as a stable. Fol-



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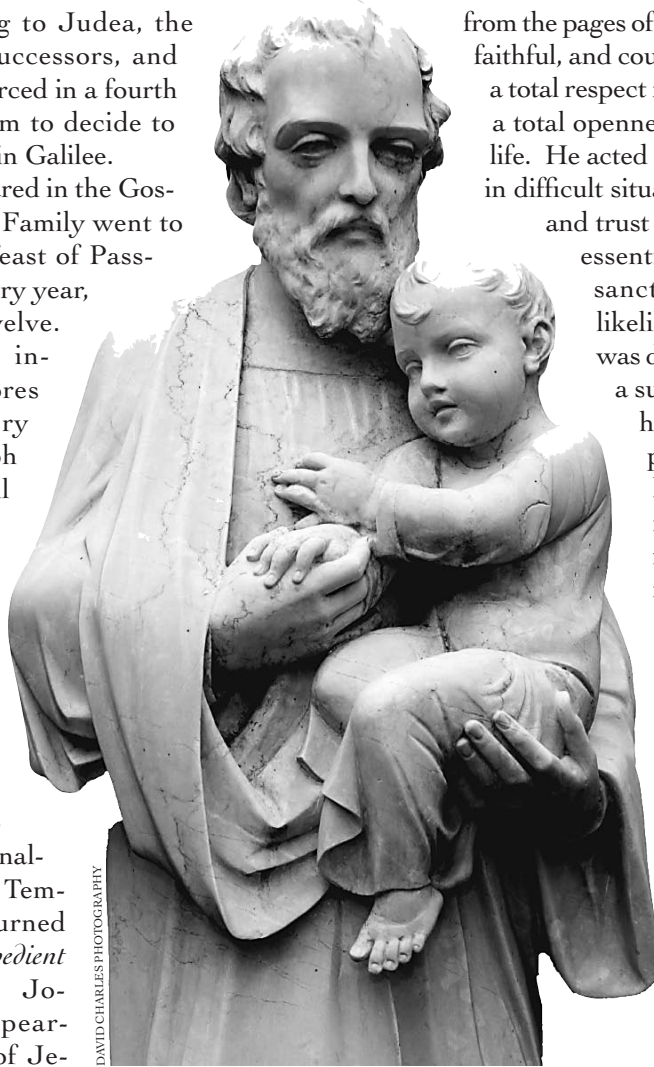
Following the departure of the magi who had come from afar to worship Jesus, he was told by an angel in a dream that King Herod intended to kill the Child who might threaten his usurped throne, and to take his family to Egypt. Joseph rose immediately and they fled. They settled there for, perhaps, several years until Herod’s death, when Joseph, for the third time, was visited by an angel in a dream and instructed to take his family home. He realized the danger of returning to Judea, the realm of Herod’s successors, and his fears were reinforced in a fourth dream which led him to decide to settle further north, in Galilee.

Joseph last appeared in the Gospels when the Holy Family went to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, as they did every year, when Jesus was twelve. These pilgrimages involved perhaps scores of people from every village, since Joseph and Mary took a full day to realize, on their return, that Jesus was not among their “kinfolk and acquaintances” (Lk 2:44). Joseph and Mary returned to Jerusalem, spent three days anxiously looking for Jesus, and finally found him in the Temple. After they returned home, Jesus “was obedient to them” (Lk 2:51). Joseph’s quiet disappearance from the life of Je-

sus and Mary after this event suggests a most holy death in their presence before Jesus began his public life.

God’s plan of salvation necessitated the presence of Joseph, to whom the Father entrusted two missions, husband and protector of the virginity of Mary and foster-father and guardian of the Redeemer. He accepted both responsibilities with unquestioning faith in God’s commands.

God knew his heart, and Joseph emerges from the pages of the Gospel as a strong, faithful, and courageous man. He had a total respect for the will of God and a total openness to God’s will in his life. He acted quickly and decisively in difficult situations. Immense faith and trust in God’s will were the essential foundations of his sanctity. There is every likelihood that his consent was divinely rewarded with a supernatural purity and holiness. The constant presence of God — as his foster son — would not have been possible if he were a sinful human person. He was also called to a life of total continence. Yet between him and Mary there surely was a deep and tender love. True love is not self-seeking but selflessly generous. Joseph gave himself, completely, to the welfare and protection of his wife and foster son.



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