



## St. Joseph: Young or Old?

How do you envision Saint Joseph? Is he the grey-haired grandfatherly figure of Renaissance paintings or the young, buff man shown in some modern portrayals? While it is a bit of an overstatement, it's likely your mental image of Joseph derives at least in part from Nativity scenes you saw as a child—and most of those portray Joseph as elderly. (One woman recently admitted that she never liked Joseph as an old man, so she used to swap out one of the virile shepherds in her family's Nativity scene!)

The reality is that we haven't a reliable clue about Joseph's age. The Gospels tell us precisely nothing. The notion that he was an elderly man comes from speculation in the Orthodox tradition that tries to resolve two difficulties: the issue of Joseph's sexuality and the biblical references to the brothers and sisters of Jesus. The idea is that if Joseph were old enough, his libido would be low, therefore, Mary's perpetual virginity would not be in danger. If he were elderly, the "siblings" of Jesus could be his children from a first marriage.

While this interpretation of Joseph's age ties up some loose ends, it remains pure conjecture. It's one of those things about which we are allowed to hold a personal opinion, and many saints have had their own ideas. We need to remember, however, that our opinion is just that—opinion, the writings of even some great saints notwithstanding.

The best thing to do is to imagine Joseph as the age that best enables you to use him as an example for your life.

### Quotation

"Joseph was probably a young man, strong, virile, athletic, handsome, chaste, and disciplined, the kind of man one sees . . . working at a carpenter's bench. Instead of being a man incapable of loving, he must have been on fire with love. . . . Young girls in those days, like Mary, took vows to love God uniquely, and so did young men, of whom Joseph was one so preeminent as to be called the 'just.' Instead then of being dried fruit to be served on the table of the King, he was rather a blossom filled with promise and power. He was not in the evening of life, but in its morning, bubbling over with energy, strength, and controlled passion."

*—Blessed Fulton Sheen in *The World's First Love**

### Prayer

Saint Joseph, let me never put emphasis on a person's age, but rather on their actions. And help me to always be aware that I am never too old or too young to do God's will in my life. Amen.

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