

March 19

St Joseph: Foster Father of Jesus

First Century

When God the Father planned to send his only Son to become a man, he needed someone to be a good foster father to Jesus and a good husband to Mary. He needed a man who was strong and gentle, dependable and loving, religious and practical, courageous and faithful. God made a wise choice. He chose Joseph of Nazareth to be the head of the Holy Family.



An Unexpected Birth

Joseph was a carpenter who at that time also did the work of a construction worker. He lived in the small town of Nazareth although he came from the royal line of King David. Since most Jewish men married before they were twenty, Joseph was probably in his late teens when he became betrothed to Mary, who also lived in Nazareth. This was a much more serious commitment than engagement is today. Suddenly Joseph's happy, uneventful life turned upside down. Before he and Mary came to live together, she was pregnant and Joseph knew he was not the father.

Poor Joseph. Apparently Mary, his bride-to-be, loved someone else. For some reason God kept Joseph in the dark during this time and let him experience shock, bewilderment, and pain. Being a good man, Joseph decided he could not wed Mary. Although according to the law she could be put to death, Joseph intended to break their engagement quietly.

After making this sad decision, Joseph fell asleep. An angel spoke to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. 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." The name Jesus means "God saves." With this news, Joseph took Mary into his home, but the young couple didn't live happily ever after there.

The emperor called for a census. Everyone was to go to the town of their ancestors to be registered. Joseph, a good citizen, had to journey south to Bethlehem, the city of David. Although it was almost time for Mary to have her baby, she went with him. When the two travellers arrived in Bethlehem, the inns were filled. Mary was about to have her baby at any time. Joseph must have dreaded the thought of her spending the night outside or with a crowd of strangers. Luckily, someone finally offered them a private place where animals were kept. There, Jesus, God's Son, known on earth as the son of Joseph the carpenter, was born. Mary laid him in a manger, a feedbox for animals, Joseph probably felt terrible that the son of God, under his protection, was born in such poor surroundings.



Artwork Dorothy Woodward rsj

How Joseph must have wondered at this birth and how puzzled he must have been! His wonder increased when shepherds came to honour the child. They told a fantastic story of an angel who announced the news of the saviour and sent them to find the child in the manger. They said they saw a host of angels singing "Glory to God in the highest!" Joseph was amazed at the shepherds' words. He was amazed again when wise men from the East visited and brought precious gifts for Jesus.

According to Jewish law, parents had to present their firstborn son to God at the Temple and offer a sacrifice. Obedient to religious laws, Joseph took Mary and Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem to offer two young pigeons, the sacrifice of the poor. That day an old man named Simeon was sent to the Temple by the Spirit. God had promised him that he wouldn't die until he had seen the Messiah. On seeing Jesus, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God. He called the baby a light for the gentiles and the glory of the people Israel. Joseph and Mary were astounded at this stranger's words. Then Simeon blessed Mary and Joseph and foretold that the child would face opposition. He also foretold that because of this Mary would suffer as though a sword were piercing her heart. At hearing these predictions for the two people he loved most, Joseph must have been filled with sorrow.

Facing Hardships

The opposition began immediately. An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and warned him that King Herod wanted to kill Jesus. He told Joseph to flee to Egypt and stay there until further notice. At once Joseph got up and took Mary and Jesus to Egypt. Fear for his son's life gave him courage to face the unknown. But now Joseph had to start a new life in a strange land. As the guardian of the family, he had to find a place to stay among strangers who spoke a different language. He had to find a job where he had no reputation.

The family stayed in Egypt until King Herod died and an angel revealed to Joseph in a dream that it was safe to return. Joseph intended to go to Judea where Bethlehem was. When he learned that Herod's son ruled there, however, he wisely took his family back to Nazareth in Galilee instead. There Joseph and Mary raised Jesus.

The Bible records one last crisis that Joseph had to face as the earthly father of Jesus. When Jesus was twelve he went with Joseph and Mary to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. On the way home Joseph and Mary looked for Jesus among the others in the caravan at the end of the first day. Realizing that Jesus was missing, Mary and Joseph returned to Jerusalem. There they looked for him for three long days. Finally, they found Jesus in the Temple speaking to the teachers there. He was amazing them with his knowledge. Mary asked him, "son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety." Jesus replied, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" He was referring to his heavenly Father. This answer puzzled Mary and Joseph. Jesus went back with them to Nazareth and was obedient to them.



Artwork by Dorothy Woodward RSJ

The story is the last time Joseph appears in the gospels. When Jesus died, he left Mary in the care of St John, so Joseph must have died by then. If so, Joseph probably had a peaceful death with Mary and Jesus at his side. For this reason, St Joseph is patron of happy deaths.

A Quiet Hero

Joseph lived a quiet life in Nazareth. None of his words are quoted in the Bible. Joseph, however, was certainly favoured by God. What joy he must have had living with Mary and Jesus! It was Joseph who provided Jesus and Mary with food, clothing, and shelter. He taught Jesus the Jewish laws and customs and how to pray. He handed on to him the trade of a carpenter. Under Joseph's care and protection, Mary and Jesus lived safely and happily. Best of all, Joseph surrounded them with his love.

Because Joseph is the foster father of Jesus, he was made the patron of the universal church. He now watches over all of us who are the body of Christ. St Joseph is also the patron of workers, and can teach us the value of work. He was an honest workman who served customers well and charged fair prices. He gave dignity to earning a living by the sweat of your brow and having callused hands. St Joseph has a special feast day on May 1 called the Feast of St Joseph the Worker.

St Joseph is also known as the patron of fathers, treasurers, artisans, manual labourers, the poor, those in authority, priests and religious, travellers, prayer, and devotion to Mary. Mexico, Canada, Bohemia, Peru, and Belgium claim him as their patron saint. St Joseph is also the patron of house hunters. People pray to him when they want to sell or buy a house. Some even bury a statue of him in the front lawn, or turn it to face the wall until their prayers are answered.

In art St Joseph is often shown with a lily, which stands for purity. Sometimes he holds a flowering staff. This comes from a legend that the High Priest ordered all men who wished to wed Mary to put their staffs on the altar. The man whose staff blossomed would be her husband. It was Joseph's staff that bloomed. The flowers also stand for the fact that Joseph is the flower, or descendant, of the root of Jesse prophesied in Scripture. Jesse was King David's father.



The month of March is dedicated to St Joseph, and so is Wednesday. The Bible calls Joseph righteous. His holiness makes him the greatest and most powerful saint after Mary.

What Do You Think?

- How did Joseph practice great faith? Why didn't God make things easier for him?
- What are some things Jesus might have learned from Joseph?
- What must Jesus' attitude have been toward his foster father?
- What characteristics of a good father did Joseph have?
- What do you think a day in the holy family's home at Nazareth was like?
- What people in particular could have a devotion to St Joseph?
- When would it be good to pray to St Joseph?
- Why is work good? How can you make your work valuable?
- Why is St Joseph a powerful saint?

Things to do

1. For St Joseph's feast some people carry on an Italian custom of creating St Joseph's table. They fill a table with food and distribute it to the needy. Do something for the poor on this day.
2. Write three things about your life that you don't understand. Pray for the grace to trust God in these matters.
3. Reflect on a time when you were asked to do something or endure something you didn't understand. Did any good come out of it?
4. Do something special for your father or someone who takes the place of your father.
5. Write a poem in honour of St Joseph or a prayer to him for the church.
6. Make something religious out of wood, such as a cross or a plaque.
7. Act out an event from St Joseph's life with family members or friends.
8. Find news items about people who act honestly and justly.
9. Repair something around the house.
10. Make a habit of praying "Jesus, Mary, Joseph."
11. Resolve to imitate St Joseph's obedience.

Craft

On a piece of sandpaper draw a picture, symbols, or words related to St Joseph or Jesus lightly with pencil. Colour it heavily with crayons.

A Play: The Honest Craftsman (Characters: Joseph, Aaron, Seth)

Aaron and Seth are walking towards a shop where Joseph is working.

Aaron: I tell you, you won't be disappointed with Joseph's work. He takes pride in his work and uses the best materials. Never cheats. You saw the yoke he made for my oxen.

Seth: Yes, what fine workmanship, but I bet his prices match.

Aaron: Don't worry. Joseph doesn't overcharge. And if you can't pay right away, he always works something out. Do you know Jacob?

Seth: The poor fellow with ten mouths to feed?

Aaron: Yes. When Jacob's house needed repair, Joseph worked on it for free. We're lucky to have such a man in town.

Seth: I heard Joseph has a son.

Aaron: Right. His name is Jesus, and he's following in his father's footsteps in more ways than one. A fine lad can't be found. One day he'll probably be taking over Joseph's business. Ah, Joseph! Shalom!

Joseph: Well, Aaron! Shalom! How's the yoke working out?

Aaron: Just fine. I brought you more business. This is Seth. He just moved here from Judea, though I don't know why anyone would move to Nazareth.

Joseph: Glad to meet you. I wish my wife Mary and my son Jesus were here. I gave the boy the day off to go with his mother to visit some sick friends. What can I do for you?

Seth: I'll be making a whole list. Right now, I just wanted to get acquainted. I saw you and Jesus at the synagogue last Sabbath, but I didn't know you were the best carpenters in Nazareth then!

Joseph: You must return tomorrow when Mary is here. Can you and your family join us for dinner? Mary loves to cook for guests, and her meals are delicious.

Seth: I would like that very much. I'm sure my wife Rachel and two sons would appreciate meeting our neighbours.

Joseph: Aaron, you're welcome to come too.

Aaron: Thank you. I always enjoy talking to Jesus. Such a mature young man – a chip off the old block, if you don't mind me saying so. (*laughs*)

Joseph: Aaron has a rare sense of humour. You'll get used to it, Seth.

Aaron: Well, we'll see you tomorrow.

Seth: Good bye.

Joseph: God be with you!

Remember Joseph!

From American Catholic Notes for teachers

Let us take time to focus on Mary's husband, Joseph. Poor Joseph! On many Christmas cards these days you'll notice that he is usually stuck in the back—old, balding, sometimes even entirely absent from the scene. Not only did he help raise the Son of God, but his story has a lot to teach us.

Sadly, little is known about St. Joseph. He was of the line of King David and was to be engaged to a young woman from Nazareth. Mary was found, quite unexpectedly, to be pregnant. But Joseph, "since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame," as the Gospel of Matthew (1:19) says, planned to dissolve his betrothal quietly.

Even before Jesus is born, Joseph's tender compassion and forgiving heart were on full display. His actions must have earned him the contempt of many in Nazareth, just as the work of compassion and justice is often rejected today.

Then God uses a dream to reveal his saving plans for the carpenter from Nazareth. In the dream, an angel lets Joseph in on Mary's secret (see Mt 1:20-25). That same angel, after the birth of Mary's son, advises Joseph to take the child and his mother to Egypt, to flee the murderous Herod. Joseph listens (Mt 2:13-15). Dreams, to this day, can still bring forth God's word into our lives. Some of us, it seems, need to be asleep before we can shut out the world's noise enough to listen!

There are only a few more stories about the boy Jesus—he is lost on a journey and found teaching in the Temple. So most of Jesus' first decades are his "hidden life." This is Joseph's time. He spends it caring for his foster son—and teaching him the trade of carpentry or woodworking. In Joseph's workshop in Nazareth, Jesus would have learned about the raw materials for his craft as well as the values required to become a good carpenter.

Alongside his teacher, a young Jesus labored and built, contributing all the while to the common good of Nazareth and the surrounding towns. As I mentioned, it's not hard to imagine that the skills Jesus learned from his teacher would serve him well in his later ministry.

The things that seem so insignificant, so hidden, so small—teaching an adolescent about carpentry—turn out to be quite important, indeed, like much of what we do.

As a father, Joseph would as well have been one of his son's primary teachers in his religious faith. It is probable that Joseph was the first one Jesus went to with his questions. So Jesus' understanding of God the Father, his heavenly Father, may have been shaped not only by Joseph's own life, but also by Joseph's answers to his questions. Joseph's faith was one of the foundations of Jesus' faith.

But as soon as Jesus starts his ministry, Joseph disappears, at least in the Gospel narratives. What happened to the guardian of Jesus? Tradition holds that by the time Jesus began his preaching, Joseph had already died.

How Jesus and Mary must have wished Joseph could have seen and heard about his son's work among the people of Israel! How they must have wished for the counsel of their father and husband during Jesus' public ministry! How Mary must have longed for Joseph's shoulder to support her during the Crucifixion!

Joseph is not mentioned beyond those few early passages in Scripture. Appearing only briefly in the Gospels, given no words to speak at all, Joseph leads a life of quiet service to God, a life that remains almost totally unknown to us. His was, necessarily, a life of humility. Today many Christians lead lives of hidden charity—a kind deed here, a few hours of service there. All of these quiet acts mark the Christian lifestyle. Even if no one else sees those deeds, God does.

Public or hidden, the earthly lives of Jesus, Mary and Joseph may sometimes seem far removed

from our own today. But if we look at them carefully, we can see how their individual lives offer an invitation to grow in our own humanity and holiness. It's in our hands to accept this invitation, to listen for God's call and to faithfully respond.

James Martin is a Jesuit priest, culture editor of *America* and author of the best-selling books *My Life with the Saints* and *Becoming Who You Are*

