

# Uncovering the great gift of St. Joseph's fatherhood

Who is St Joseph? What do we know about him?

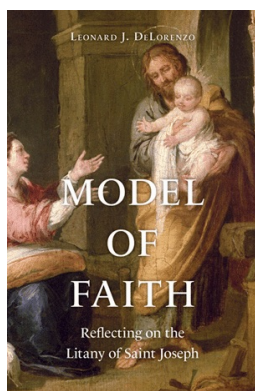
The Scriptures seem to conceal him from full view. He is hidden within the great mystery of the Incarnation. He is hidden within the mystery of his marriage to Mary, whose role in the Incarnation of the Son of God is a central part in the mystery of the Incarnation. Joseph, on the other hand, seems almost an afterthought, drawn into the mystery only by his marriage to Mary. His person is flooded with mystery because of his union with her, but he also seems thereby set in the background. He is "head of the Holy Family," in the words of the Litany of St. Joseph, yet he is the least of the three. Scripture invites us to contemplate the mystery of his person on these terms.

## A divine intimacy

Joseph is not an afterthought in the divine plan. The angel Gabriel was sent not to a virgin who was living a single life, but "to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph" (Lk 1:27). The Word chose to become Incarnate in a woman betrothed in marriage. The marriage of Mary and Joseph was part of God's plan for the Incarnation. Consider what it would look like if Mary, known to be a virgin, had conceived a child on her own, living with her family of origin (who could confirm her virginity). It would be very dazzling! A kind of prodigy, drawing attention to itself. But that's not God's style. The virginal conception of Jesus was not an ostentatious violation of the laws of nature, in effect to show off God's power. That is more in line with the devil's way of working, who wants to fascinate us with his prodigies so that we stare at his power and become captives.

Instead, the Incarnation, dazzlingly miraculous as it was and surely a deed of God's power, was at the same time a deed of God's love. It was concealed within the intimate bond of love between a husband and a wife. The gift was given as the extension of this family, conferred within the intimacy that is always irreducibly secret and reserved to the couple. "How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given!" The miracle did not violate the intimacy of betrothal but extended it. Jesus was conceived, by God's will, within that intimacy, rather than in violation of it.

### 'MODEL OF FAITH: REFLECTING ON THE LITANY OF SAINT JOSEPH'



A new book by frequent Our Sunday Visitor contributor Leonard DeLorenzo walks readers through the Litany of St. Joseph, reflecting on how the saint's fidelity and courage can help inspire each of us to respond to our vocation as a disciple of Jesus and friend of God. In his wisdom, the Lord empowers Joseph to open his fatherly care to all Christians, to show us how to hear the word of God and act on it, and to shine in every age as a model of faith. For more information on "[Model of Faith: Reflecting on the Litany of Saint Joseph](#)," or to order, visit [osvcatholicbookstore.com](http://osvcatholicbookstore.com).

And yet, is that true? Did it not violate it? The angel of the Lord came to the virgin and not to Joseph, though they were betrothed. Joseph was not consulted. It seems to displace Joseph almost out of the family picture. He seems somehow replaced in Mary's heart by the "real dad" of Jesus, and Joseph is bumped down to the status of the "foster father of

the Son of God," again to quote the Litany, a kind of place holder.

But is that actually what Scripture says? When Mary and Joseph find Jesus amidst the teachers of the Law in the Temple, Mary asks him, "Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety" (Lk 2:48). Mary says this! Not, "your foster-father," but "your father." Is Mary lying? Or is there an implied wink wink, nod nod, included in the communication? But they were looking "with great anxiety" precisely as "mother" and "father." Did the Evangelist slip up and forget about the Annunciation scene he had dramatized so beautifully?

Let's turn to Matthew, to the scene sometimes called the "annunciation to Joseph." Joseph, discovering that his wife is pregnant but knowing they had not had sex, resolves, because he was a "just man," not to complete the betrothal and to take Mary into his house as his wife. Yet when the unnamed angel speaks to him in a dream, revealing the miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit and telling him, "do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home" (Mt 1:20), he immediately obeys ("Joseph most obedient!"). In a sense, it is this act of obedience and trust that "consummates" their marriage. It is an act even more intimate than the sexual act it replaces, notwithstanding the great intimacy proper to that act. In a way, it is the form or inner essence of married chastity, of husbandly tenderness, which the normal act of consummation participates in and embodies but never fully attains ("Joseph most chaste!"). Jesus is conceived within this intimacy, and so he really has an earthly "father," as Mary, freely receiving this act of intimate love and trust, calls him.



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## Poverty of spirit

What about the “justice” of Joseph? “Joseph her [Mary’s] husband, being a just man,” Matthew writes, resolved to end the betrothal (Mt 1:19). This is no mean compliment Scripture gives him! It is only one word, “just,” but it is the highest compliment Scripture gives to any man before the New Testament. To be “just” in Jewish terms means to have fulfilled the obligations of the Law. In the Gospel of Matthew, we recall, Jesus came “not to abolish [the Law] ... but to fulfill” (Mt 5:17). And he sums up the character of the “just man,” the one who fulfills the obligations of the Law, with the first beatitude: “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Mt 5:3). That is Joseph.

In utter poverty of spirit, making no claims for his own marital rights at least to consultation about how his wife gets pregnant, Joseph consents to receiving his paternity, his true paternity, his being the “father” of Jesus, completely as a gift. He thereby reveals the essence of paternity as always

and everywhere a gift. No matter how active a role the husband has in conception, it is still a sheer and utter gift beyond his control, since only God can send a human soul into the world. In Joseph's utter docility to the will of God, and conformed in advance to the poverty of spirit of his son, his heart meets Mary's. And the Word became flesh within this secret marital intimacy.

And thus Joseph becomes the "terror of demons," because by concealing the Incarnation in the secrecy of marital love, and at the same time allowing himself to be concealed in the larger mystery, he in turn conceals the Incarnate Word from the devil in the simple intimacy of a home where the justice of poverty of spirit reigns. The devil fears this "justice" and cannot "see" beyond it. Jesus is concealed by Joseph's paternal love until the time when "his hour had come" to confront the Evil One directly and to defeat him once and for all by the justice of God, the justice of the cross.

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