

GETTING TO KNOW JOSEPH

The Church's appreciation for the head of the Holy Family has developed over millennia

By Mike Aquilina
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College Knights gather for eucharistic adoration at St. Joseph's Church in New Haven, Conn., during the College Councils Conference in September 2019. During the holy hour, the students recited together a prayer of consecration to St. Joseph. *Photo by Mike Ross*

Many Catholics might be surprised to learn that widespread devotion to St. Joseph is relatively new in the life of the Church. The feast of St. Joseph wasn't widely celebrated until the 16th century, and his title as Patron of the Universal Church – not to mention the feast of the Holy Family – did not come until the late 1800s.

Yet, perhaps we shouldn't be too surprised that it took so long for devotion to St. Joseph to develop, for he was never one to draw attention to himself. The New Testament records not a single word

spoken by him. He appears briefly in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and only in their opening chapters. In John, he gets two drive-by mentions and in Mark none at all.

The stories told by Matthew are riveting – compressed, seeming to invite deeper contemplation. But the earliest Christians missed the invitation, as they had more pressing priorities. Among the doctrines most often attacked by pagans and Jews were Mary's perpetual virginity and her virginal conception of Jesus. Christians wanted to leave no room for doubt, so their devotional works often portray Joseph as a very old man, infirm and decrepit. In the Coptic *History of Joseph the Carpenter*, an apocryphal work dating to the sixth or seventh century, he is portrayed as 91 years old at his wedding to Mary – with grandchildren who are older than his bride!

In other ancient fictions, he appears as something of a buffoon. Again, the authors seem to think that Mary would be exalted if her husband were humiliated.

But for the most part, Christians of the first millennium chose to ignore Joseph. He required too much explanation, and they were occupied with other questions. Great bishops of the fifth century, St. Augustine and St. John Chrysostom, spoke well of Joseph, emphasizing his role in God's plan and expanding on the Gospel's characterization of him as a "just man" (Mt 1:19). But these few sermons still fell short of what the Church calls veneration.

That kind of notice came only with the ninth century, when Joseph began to appear in prayer books. In the later Middle Ages, he was still usually depicted in art as an old man, but preachers like St. Bernardine of Siena began to propose Joseph as a model for men to imitate, especially husbands and fathers.

He came to the fore in the spirituality of the Catholic Reformation. St. Francis de Sales took St. Joseph as patron of the religious order he founded, and St. Teresa of Ávila placed her reformed order under his patronage. In her autobiography she urged all those who took up the life of prayer to devote themselves to St. Joseph in a special way.





St. Joseph and the Christ Child (c. 1655–60) by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, Photo © Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images

It was in the New World, however, that devotion to St. Joseph came to flourish most fully. This is the conclusion of Father Joseph Chorpensing, OSFS, a great historian of devotion to St. Joseph.

“A sizable segment of the population of the New World did not know what it meant to have a father,” Father Chorpensing explained in an essay on the evangelization of Mexico. The European conquest, and the diseases that came with it, devastated native populations and orphaned countless children. At the same time, many conquistadores had children with Indigenous women, but took little care for their offspring. Franciscan missionaries introduced devotion to St. Joseph in order to give these children a fatherly presence in their lives.

“Most *mestizos* knew only their Indian mothers, but not their Spanish fathers,” Father Chorpensing wrote. “The Virgin Mary became their loving and compassionate mother, while Joseph became the father ... who would protect and shelter them.”

By the late 16th century, images of St. Joseph abounded in the art of South and Central America.

The 17th-century poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a religious sister, proposed St. Joseph as an antidote to the machismo she found in Mexican culture. Chaste and silent, Joseph had renounced biological fatherhood in order to raise God’s son. There was no bluster in him.

A second great movement of devotion would emerge in French Canada, culminating in the construction of St. Joseph's Oratory in Montréal. The project, begun by St. André Bessette in 1904, would expand and eventually become the world's largest shrine dedicated to the Holy Family's patriarch, who is also the patron saint of Canada.

Veneration of St. Joseph, though virtually absent in the first millennium, found fulfillment at the second, especially as papal teaching and liturgical developments gave increasing prominence to him (see sidebar).

St. Joseph has not changed, of course. What he was in the New Testament, he has remained through all Christian history: the earthly father of our Savior, the chaste and loving husband of the Virgin Mary, an iconic witness to the dignity of work, and an effective guardian of the Church throughout the world. As devotion develops over time, we can see all of this more clearly.

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A Growing Devotion



A statue of St. Joseph greets pilgrims to St. Joseph's Oratory of Mount Royal in Montréal. The oratory was founded by St. André Bessette in honor of his patron in 1904, and the current basilica was



completed in 1967. *iStock / Getty Images*
Plus

“AFTER MARY, the Mother of God, no saint is mentioned more frequently in the papal magisterium than Joseph, her spouse,” writes Pope Francis in his recent apostolic letter, *Patris Corde*. But this was not always the case. Devotion to St. Joseph was slow to develop throughout Church history, and most of the magisterial pronouncements have taken place in the past 150 years. Here are some of the most notable:

1870 – On Dec. 8, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, Pope Pius IX proclaims St. Joseph “Patron of the Universal Church.”

1889 – Pope Leo XIII publishes *Quamquam Pluries*, the first papal encyclical devoted to St. Joseph, on Aug. 15, the feast of the Assumption.

1892 – In the apostolic letter *Neminem Fugit*, Pope Leo XIII affirms and promotes devotion to the Holy Family. A year later, he institutes the feast of the Holy Family, which dioceses may celebrate on the Sunday after Epiphany.

1921 – Pope Benedict XV makes the feast of the Holy Family an obligatory celebration of the universal Church. He also adds to the Divine Praises the phrase “Blessed be St. Joseph, her most chaste spouse.”

1955 – Pope Pius XII establishes the feast day of St. Joseph the Worker, to be celebrated May 1. The feast promotes the true dignity of human labor in response to communist May Day celebrations.

1961 – Pope John XXIII declares St. Joseph the patron of the Second Vatican Council. The next year, he inserts St. Joseph’s name into the Roman Canon (Eucharistic Prayer I).

1989 – On the 100th anniversary of *Quamquam Pluries*, Pope John Paul II publishes an apostolic exhortation about St. Joseph titled *Redemptoris Custos* (Guardian of the Redeemer).

2013 – Pope Francis, fulfilling the intentions of Pope Benedict XVI, inserts St. Joseph’s name into the other three Eucharistic Prayers of the Latin Rite. He also consecrates Vatican City to St. Joseph.

2020 – With the apostolic letter *Patris Corde* (With a Father’s Heart), Pope Francis proclaims a “Year of St. Joseph” and marks the 150th anniversary of Pius IX’s declaration of St. Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church.



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