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Betrothal to Joseph: Magisterium, Saints, Poets

A selection of texts from the
Magisterium, saints and
Christian poets on Mary and
Joseph's virginal marriage.

02/04/2010

VOICE OF THE MAGISTERIUM

1. In presenting Mary as a "virgin," the Gospel of Luke adds that she was "betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David" (1:27). These two pieces of

information at first sight seem contradictory.

It should be noted that the Greek word used in this passage does not indicate the situation of a woman who has contracted marriage and therefore lives in the marital state, but that of betrothal. Unlike what occurs in modern cultures, however, the ancient Jewish custom of betrothal provided for a contract and normally had definitive value: it actually introduced the betrothed to the marital state, even if the marriage was brought to full completion only when the young man took the girl to his home.

At the time of the Annunciation, Mary thus had the status of one betrothed. We can wonder why she would accept betrothal, since she had the intention of remaining a virgin forever. Luke is aware of this difficulty, but merely notes the

situation without offering any explanation. The fact that the Evangelist, while stressing Mary's intention of virginity, also presents her as Joseph's spouse, is a sign of the historical reliability of the two pieces of information. 2. It may be presumed that at the time of their betrothal there was an understanding between Joseph and Mary about the plan to live as a virgin. Moreover, the Holy Spirit, who had inspired Mary to choose virginity in view of the mystery of the Incarnation and who wanted the latter to come about in a family setting suited to the Child's growth, was quite able to instil in Joseph the ideal of virginity as well.

The angel of the Lord appeared in a dream and said to him: "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 1:20). Thus he received

confirmation that he was called to live his marriage in a completely special way. Through virginal communion with the woman chosen to give birth to Jesus, God calls him to co-operate in carrying out his plan of salvation.

The type of marriage to which the Holy Spirit led Mary and Joseph can only be understood in the context of the saving plan and of a lofty spirituality. The concrete realization of the mystery of the Incarnation called for a virgin birth which would highlight the divine sonship and, at the same time, for a family that could provide for the normal development of the Child's personality.

Precisely in view of their contribution to the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word, Joseph and Mary received the grace of living both the charism of virginity and the gift of marriage. Mary and Joseph's

communion of virginal love, although a special case linked with the concrete realization of the mystery of the Incarnation, was nevertheless a true marriage (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptoris custos*, no. 7).

The difficulty of accepting the sublime mystery of their spousal communion has led some, since the second century, to think of Joseph as advanced in age and to consider him Mary's guardian more than her husband. It is instead a case of supposing that he was not an elderly man at the time, but that his interior perfection, the fruit of grace, led him to live his spousal relationship with Mary with virginal affection. 3. Joseph's co-operation in the mystery of the Incarnation also includes exercising the role of Jesus' father. The angel acknowledged this function of his when he appeared in a dream and invited him to name the

Child: "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21).

While excluding physical generation, Joseph's fatherhood was something real, not apparent. Distinguishing between father and the one who begets, an ancient monograph on Mary's virginity—the *De Margarita* (fourth century)—states that "the commitments assumed by the Virgin and by Joseph as husband and wife made it possible for him to be called by this name (father); a father, however, who did not beget". Joseph thus carried out the role of Jesus' father, exercising an authority to which the Redeemer was freely "obedient" (Lk 2:51), contributing to his upbringing and teaching him the carpenter's trade.

Christians have always acknowledged Joseph as the one who

lived in intimate communion with Mary and Jesus, concluding that also in death he enjoyed their affectionate, consoling presence. From this constant Christian tradition, in many places a special devotion has grown to the Holy Family and, in it, to St Joseph, Guardian of the Redeemer. As everyone knows, Pope Leo XIII entrusted the entire Church to his protection.

**John Paul II, General Audience,
August 21, 1996**

VOICE OF THE SAINTS

Both St Matthew and St Luke tell us that Joseph came from a noble line — the house of David and Solomon, kings of Israel. The details of his ancestry are not quite clear. We don't know which of the Gospel's two genealogies refers to Joseph, Jesus' father according to Jewish law, and which to Mary, his Mother according

to the flesh. Nor do we know if Joseph came from Bethlehem, where he went for the census, or Nazareth, where he lived and worked.

On the other hand, we do know that he was not well-to-do: he was just a worker, like so many millions of people throughout the world. He worked at the same demanding and humble job which God chose for himself when he took our flesh and came to live just like the rest of us for thirty years.

Scripture tells us St Joseph was a craftsman. Some Fathers of the Church add that he was a carpenter. When talking of the life of Jesus, St Justin says that he made ploughs and yokes. Perhaps that's why St Isidore of Seville concludes that St Joseph was a blacksmith. In any event, he was a workman who supplied the needs of his fellow citizens with a

manual skill acquired through years of toil and sweat.

The Gospels give us a picture of Joseph as a remarkably sound man who was in no way frightened or shy of life. On the contrary, he faced up to problems, dealt with difficult situations and showed responsibility and initiative in whatever he was asked to do.

I don't agree with the traditional picture of St Joseph as an old man, even though it may have been prompted by a desire to emphasise the perpetual virginity of Mary. I see him as a strong young man, perhaps a few years older than our Lady, but in the prime of his life and work.

Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 40

I took for my advocate and lord the glorious Saint Joseph and commended myself earnestly to him;

and I found that this my father and lord delivered me both from this trouble and also from other and greater troubles....

I am astonished at the great favors which God has bestowed on me through this blessed saint, and at the perils from which He has freed me, both in body and in soul. To other saints the Lord seems to have given grace to succor us in some of our necessities but of this glorious saint my experience is that he succors us in them all and that the Lord wishes to teach us that as He was Himself subject to him on earth (for, being His guardian and being called His father, he could command Him) just so in Heaven He still does all that he asks.

I wish I could persuade everyone to be devoted to this glorious saint, for I have great experience of the blessings which he can obtain from

God. I have never known anyone to be truly devoted to him and render him particular services who did not notably advance in virtue, for he gives very real help to souls who commend themselves to him. For some years now, I think, I have made some request of him every year on his festival and I have always had it granted. If my petition is in any way ill directed, he directs it aright for my greater good.

I only beg, for the love of God, that anyone who does not believe me will put what I say to the test, and he will see by experience what great advantages come from his commending himself to this glorious patriarch and having devotion to him. Those who practice prayer should have a special affection for him always. I do not know how anyone can think of the Queen of the Angels, during the time that she suffered so much with the Child

Jesus, without giving thanks to Saint Joseph for the way he helped them. If anyone cannot find a master to teach him how to pray, let him take this glorious saint as his master and he will not go astray.

**from *Life of Saint Teresa of Avila*,
ch. 6**

VOICE OF THE POETS

I Sing of a Maiden

I sing of a maiden

That is makeles;

King of alle kinges

To her son she ches.

He cam also stille

Ther His moder was,

As dew in Aprille

That falleth on the gras.

He cam also stille
To His moderis bowr,
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the flowr.

He cam also stille
Ther His moder lay,
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the spray.

Moder and maiden
Was never none but she;
Wel may swich a lady
Godes moder be.

from ***The Oxford Book of Medieval English Verse***

I Sing of a Maiden (modern English version)

I sing of a maiden

That is matchless,

King of all kings

For her son she chose.

He came as still

Where his mother was

As dew in April

That falls on the flower.

He came as still

Where his mother lay

As dew in April

That falls on the spray.

Mother and maiden

There was never one but she;

Well may such a lady

God's mother be.

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(08/04/2025)