

A SHORT HISTORY OF DEVOTION TO ST. JOSEPH

St. Patrick Parish
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Pope Francis' Prayer to St. Joseph

(from Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde*, 8 December 2020)

Hail, Guardian of the Redeemer,
Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary.
To you God entrusted his only Son;
in you Mary placed her trust;
with you Christ became man.

Blessed Joseph, to us too,
show yourself a father
and guide us in the path of life.
Obtain for us grace, mercy and courage,
and defend us from every evil. Amen.

One way to think about what we'll talk about:

The Christian Tradition, the ensemble of practices, beliefs, and devotions
= a “history of effects,” a “reception history”

The image we'd like to have in mind as we start: a **STREAM**

- every tradition starts “upstream” with a major originating event
e.g. for the Western tradition, its “Classics”; for a family tradition, its ancestors
for Christians: the life of Jesus of Nazareth, his historical lifestyle, actions,
message, death, and resurrection
- every event has downstream “effects”
 - Jesus —> Apostles/Disciples —> early Christian communities
 - + how they lived, worshipped, preached,
continued to think about and interpret
Jesus (who is he? why is he significant?)
 - >and they spark off further effects, and so on . . .

Three stops/stations along the developing stream of devotion to St. Joseph

I. The Early Church (esp. the Apocryphal Gospels, early Christian speculation)

II. The Mid and Late Medieval Period

III. From the Counter-Reformation (16th century, around the Council of Trent)
until today

The problem we confront:

Anyone who speaks about St. Joseph in the early Church should begin with a warning to his hearers: don't expect too much. For the first millennium of Christianity, St. Joseph was all but ignored in preaching, liturgical celebrations, martyrologies, and theological writing. . . .

The first known feast of St. Joseph was instituted in Egypt in the seventh century. In all the rest of the Christian Church, there is no feast of St. Joseph before A.D. 1000 at the earliest.

The first treatises on St. Joseph date from the beginning of the fifteenth century, written by Pierre d'Ailly (1350–1420) and Jean Gerson (1363–1429), both theologians at Paris. Isidoro de Isolani, O.P., published a *Summa on the Gifts of St. Joseph* at Pavia in 1522. Thereafter, writings on St. Joseph become frequent.

—Joseph T. Lienhard, SJ, “St. Joseph in Early Christianity: Devotion and Theology” (1999)

I. The Early Church: Apocryphal Gospels

(Greek *apokrypha* = "hidden things")

1. The Gospel of the Nazareans	154
2. The Gospel of the Ebionites	166
3. The Gospel of the Hebrews	172
V. The Gospel of Philip (<i>Hans-Martin Schenke</i>)	179
VI. The Gospel of the Egyptians (<i>Wilhelm Schneemelcher</i>)	209
VII. The Gospel of Peter (<i>Christian Maurer and Wilhelm Schneemelcher</i>)	216
VIII. Dialogues of the Redeemer	228
Introduction (<i>Wilhelm Schneemelcher</i>)	228
1. The Book of Thomas (<i>Hans-Martin Schenke</i> ; <i>translated by Einar Thomassen</i>)	232
2. The Freer Logion (<i>Joachim Jeremias</i> †)	248
3. Epistula Apostolorum (<i>C. Detlef G. Müller</i>)	249
4. The Apocryphon of James (<i>Dankwart Kirchner</i> ; <i>translated by Einar Thomassen</i>)	285
5. The Dialogue of the Saviour (<i>Beate Blatz</i> ; <i>translated by Einar Thomassen</i>)	300
6. The First Apocalypse of James (<i>Wolf-Peter Funk</i>)	313
7. The Second Apocalypse of James (<i>Wolf-Peter Funk</i>)	327
8. The Letter of Peter to Philip (<i>Hans-Gebhard Bethge</i>)	342
IX. Other Gnostic Gospels and Related Literature	
(<i>Henri-Charles Puech</i> † revised by <i>Beate Blatz</i>)	354
Preliminary Note (<i>Wilhelm Schneemelcher</i>)	354
A. Gospels under general titles	356
1. The Gospel of the Four Heavenly Regions	356
2. The Gospel of Perfection	357
3. The Gospel of Truth	358
B. Gospels under the name of an Old Testament figure	360
C. Gospels current, directly or indirectly, under the name of Jesus, and similar works	361
1. The Sophia Jesu Christi	361
2. The Dialogue of the Redeemer (see p.300)	
3. The Pistis Sophia	361
4. The two Books of Jeu	370
D. Gospels attributed to the Apostles as a group	374
1. The Gospel of the Twelve (or: of the Twelve Apostles)	374
2. The (Kukean) Gospel of the Twelve	375
3. The Memoria Apostolorum	376
4. The (Manichean) Gospel of the Twelve Apostles	378
5. The Gospel of the Seventy	380
6. Other 'Gospels of the Twelve Apostles'	381
E. Gospels under the name of an Apostle	382
1. The Gospel of Philip (see p.179)	
2. The Coptic Gospel of Thomas (see p.110)	
3. The Book of Thomas (see p. 232)	
4. The Gospel according to Matthias. The Traditions of Matthias	382

5. The Gospel of Judas	386
6. The Apocryphon of John	387
7. Fragments of a Dialogue between John and Jesus	388
8. The Apocryphon of James (Apocryphon Jacobi) (see p. 285)	
9. The Gospel of Bartholomew (see p. 537)	
F. Gospels under the names of holy women	390
1. The Questions of Mary	390
2. The Gospel of Mary	391
3. The 'Genna Marias'	395
G. Gospels attributed to an arch-heretic	397
1. The Gospel of Cerinthus	397
2. The Gospel of Basilides	397
3. The Gospel of Marcion	399
4. The Gospel of Apelles	399
5. The Gospel of Bardesanes	400
6. The Gospel of Mani	401
Appendix	411
H. Gospels under the Names of their Users	413
X. Infancy Gospels (<i>Oscar Cullmann</i>)	414
General Introduction	414
1. The Protevangelium of James	421
2. The Infancy Story of Thomas	439
3. Gnostic Legends	453
4. Later Infancy Gospels	456
A) Extracts from the Arabic Infancy Gospel	460
a) Legends of the child Jesus in Egypt	460
b) The children who were changed into goats	461
B) Extracts from the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew	462
a) Ox and ass at the manger	462
b) Legends of the child Jesus in Egypt	462
C) Extract from the Latin Infancy Gospel in the Arundel Manuscript	466
D) Extract from the Life of John according to Serapion	467
XI. The Relatives of Jesus (<i>Wolfgang A. Bienert</i>)	470
XII. The Work and Sufferings of Jesus	489
1. The Witness of Josephus (<i>Testimonium Flavianum</i>) (<i>Wolfgang A. Bienert</i>)	489
2. The Abgar Legend (<i>Han J.W. Drijvers</i>)	492
3. The Gospel of Nicodemus. Acts of Pilate and Christ's Descent into Hell (<i>Felix Scheidweiler</i> †)	501
4. The Gospel of Bartholomew (<i>Felix Scheidweiler</i> † / <i>Wilhelm Schneemelcher</i>)	537
Introduction (<i>Wilhelm Schneemelcher</i>)	537
a) The Questions of Bartholomew (<i>Felix Scheidweiler</i> † / <i>Wilhelm Schneemelcher</i>)	539
b) Coptic Bartholomew Texts (<i>Wilhelm Schneemelcher</i>)	553
5. The Gospel of Gamaliel (<i>M.-A. van den Oudenrijn</i> †)	558

For the tradition of Joseph, these apocryphal works are important and influential (even into the 20th Century):

1. the *Protoevangelium of James* (last half of 2nd century AD)*
2. the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (c. mid-3rd century AD)*
3. the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* (fifth century AD; conflates and expands 1 and 2)
4. the *Gospel of the Birth of Mary* (c. 5th-6th century AD; expansion of 3)
5. the *Arabic Gospel of the the Infancy* (c. 5th-6th century AD; also uses 1 and 2)
6. the *Coptic Gospel of Joseph the Carpenter* (c. fifth century AD)

1. the *Protoevangelium of James* (last half of 2nd century AD)

Chapters 8-9: Mary is given to Joseph by divine choice

And she laid her down to rest in the bedroom of her sanctuary, and went out and served them. When the feast was ended they went down rejoicing and glorifying the God of Israel.¹⁸

7. 1. The months passed, and the child grew. When she was two years old Joachim said, 'Let us take her up to the temple of the Lord, so that we may fulfil the promise which we made, lest the Lord send some evil to us and our gift be unacceptable.' And Anna replied, 'Let us wait until the third year, that the child may then no more long for her father and mother.' And Joachim said, 'Let us wait.' 2. And when the child was three years old Joachim said, 'Call the undefiled daughters of the Hebrews, and let each one take a torch, and let these be burning, in order that the child may not turn back and her heart be tempted away from the temple of the Lord.' And they did so until they had gone up to the temple of the Lord. And the priest took her and kissed her and blessed her, saying, 'The Lord has magnified your name among all generations; because of you the Lord at the end of the days will reveal his redemption to the sons of Israel.' 3. And he placed her on the third step of the altar, and the Lord God put grace upon her and she danced with her feet, and the whole house of Israel loved her.

8. 1. And her parents returned marvelling, praising the Lord God because the child did not turn back. And Mary was in the temple of the Lord nurtured like a dove and received food from the hand of an angel. 2. When she was twelve¹⁹ years old, there took place a council of the priests saying, 'Behold, Mary has become twelve¹⁹ years old in the temple of the Lord. What then shall we do with her lest she defile the temple of the Lord?' And they said to the high priest, 'You stand at the altar of the Lord; enter the sanctuary and pray concerning her, and that which the Lord shall reveal to you we will indeed do.' 3. And the high priest took the vestment with the twelve bells and went into the Holy of Holies and prayed concerning her. And behold, an angel of the Lord appeared and said to him, 'Zacharias, Zacharias, go out and assemble the widowers of the people, and to whomsoever the Lord shall give a sign she shall be a wife.' And the heralds went forth through all the country round about Judaea; the trumpet of the Lord sounded, and all came running.

9. 1. And Joseph threw down his adze and went out to their meeting. And when they were gathered together, they took the rods and went to the high priest. He took the rods from them all, entered the temple, and prayed. When he had finished the prayer he took the rods, and went out and gave them to them; but there was no sign on them. Joseph received the last rod, and behold, a dove came out of the rod and flew on to Joseph's head. And the priest said to Joseph, 'You have been chosen by lot to receive the virgin of the

¹⁸ Some MSS add 'And they gave her the name Mary because her name shall never fade'.

¹⁹ Variants: 'fourteen' or 'ten'.

Lord as your ward.' 2. But Joseph answered him, 'I have sons and am old; she is but a girl. I object lest I should become a laughing-stock to the sons of Israel.' And the priest said to Joseph, 'Fear the Lord your God, and remember what God did to Dathan, Abiram, and Korah, how the earth was split in two and they were all swallowed up because of their rebellion. And now beware, Joseph, lest these things happen in your house too.' And Joseph was afraid and received her as his ward. And Joseph said to Mary, 'I have received you from the temple of the Lord, and now I leave you in my house and go away to build my buildings. I will return to you; the Lord will guard you.'

10. 1. Now there was a council of the priests saying, 'Let us make a veil for the temple of the Lord.' And the priest said, 'Call to me pure virgins of the tribe of David.' And the officers departed and searched and they found seven virgins. And the priest remembered the child Mary, that she was of the tribe of David and was pure before God. And the officers went and fetched her. 2. Then they brought them into the temple of the Lord and the priest said, 'Cast lots to see who shall weave the gold, the amianthus, the linen, the silk, the hyacinth-blue, the scarlet, and the pure purple'. The pure purple and scarlet fell by lot to Mary. And she took them and went home. At that time Zacharias became dumb,²⁰ and Samuel took his place until Zacharias was able to speak again. Mary took the scarlet and spun it.

11. 1. And she took the pitcher and went out to draw water, and behold, a voice said, 'Hail, highly favoured one,'²¹ the Lord is with you, you are blessed among women.' And she looked around to the right and to the left to see where this voice came from. And, trembling, she went to her house and put down the pitcher and took the purple and sat down on her seat and drew out the thread. 2. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before her and said, 'Do not fear, Mary; for you have found grace before the Lord of all things and shall conceive by his Word.' When she heard this she considered it and said, 'Shall I conceive by the Lord, the living God, and bear as every woman bears?' 3. And the angel of the Lord said, 'Not so, Mary; for the power of the Lord shall overshadow you; wherefore that holy one who is born of you shall be called the Son of the Most High. And you shall call his name Jesus; for he shall save his people from their sins.' And Mary said, 'Behold, (I am) the handmaid of the Lord before him: be it to me according to your word.'²²

12. 1. And she made ready the purple and the scarlet and brought them to the priest. And the priest blessed her and said, 'Mary, the Lord God has magnified your name, and you shall be blessed among all generations of the earth.'²³ 2. And Mary rejoiced and went to Elizabeth her kinswoman and

²⁰ Cf. Luke 1: 20-2, 64.

²¹ Luke 1: 28.

²² Luke 1: 31.

²³ Luke 1: 42, 48.

1. the *Protoevangelium of James* (last half of 2nd century AD)

Chapters 13-16: Mary is pregnant; Joseph worries; the “water of conviction”

knocked on the door. When Elizabeth heard it, she put down the scarlet and ran to the door and opened it, and when she saw Mary she blessed her and said, 'How is it that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, that which is in me leaped and blessed you.'²⁴ But Mary forgot the mysteries which the archangel Gabriel had told her, and raised a sigh towards heaven and said, 'Who am I, Lord, that all generations of the earth count me blessed?' 3. And she remained three months with Elizabeth. Day by day her womb grew, and Mary was afraid and went into her house and hid herself from the children of Israel. And Mary was sixteen²⁵ years old when all these mysterious things happened.

13. 1. Now when she was in her sixth month, behold, Joseph came from his buildings and entered his house and found her with child. And he struck his face, threw himself down on the ground on sackcloth and wept bitterly saying, 'With what countenance shall I look towards the Lord my God? What prayer shall I offer for this maiden? For I received her as a virgin out of the temple of the Lord my God and have not protected her. Who has deceived me? Who has done this evil in my house and defiled the virgin? Has the story of Adam been repeated in me? For as Adam was absent in the hour of his prayer and the serpent came and found Eve alone and deceived her, so also has it happened to me.' 2. And Joseph arose from the sackcloth and called Mary and said to her, 'You who are cared for by God, why have you done this and forgotten the Lord your God? Why have you humiliated your soul, you who were brought up in the Holy of Holies and received food from the hand of an angel?' 3. But she wept bitterly, saying, 'I am pure, and know not a man.' And Joseph said to her, 'As the Lord my God lives, I do not know whence it has come to me.'

14. 1. And Joseph feared greatly and parted from her, pondering what he should do with her. And Joseph said, 'If I conceal her sin, I shall be found to be in opposition to the law of the Lord. If I expose her to the children of Israel, I fear lest that which is in her may be from the angels and I should be found delivering innocent blood to the judgement of death. What then shall I do with her? I will put her away secretly.' And the night came upon him. 2. And behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Do not fear this child. For that which is in her is of the Holy Spirit. She shall bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus; for he shall save his people from their sins.'²⁶ And Joseph arose from sleep and glorified the God of Israel who had bestowed his grace upon him, and he guarded her.

15. 1. And Annas the scribe came to him and said to him, 'Joseph, why have you not appeared in our assembly?' And Joseph said to him, 'Because I was weary from the journey and I rested the first day.' And Annas turned and

²⁴ Luke 1: 41-4.

²⁵ Variants: 'fourteen' or 'fifteen'.

²⁶ Cf. Matt. 1: 20f.

saw that Mary was pregnant. 2. And he went running to the priest and said to him, 'Joseph, for whom you are a witness, has grievously transgressed.' And the high priest said, 'In what way?' And he said, 'The virgin, whom he received from the temple of the Lord, he has defiled, and has secretly consummated his marriage with her, and has not disclosed it to the children of Israel.' And the priest said to him, 'Has Joseph done this?' And Annas said to him, 'Send officers, and you will find the virgin pregnant.' And the officers went and found as he had said, and brought her and Joseph to the court. And the priest said, 'Mary, why have you done this? Why have you humiliated your soul and forgotten the Lord your God, you who were brought up in the Holy of Holies and received food from the hand of an angel, and heard hymns, and danced before him? Why have you done this?' But she wept bitterly saying, 'As the Lord my God lives, I am pure before him and I know not a man.' And the priest said to Joseph, 'Why have you done this?' And Joseph said, 'As the Lord my God lives, I am pure concerning her.' And the priest said, 'Do not give false witness, but speak the truth. You have consummated your marriage in secret, and have not disclosed it to the children of Israel, and have not bowed your head under the mighty hand in order that your seed might be blessed.' And Joseph was silent.

16. 1. And the priest said, 'Give back the virgin whom you have received from the temple of the Lord.' And Joseph began to weep. And the priest said, 'I will give you both to drink the water of the conviction of the Lord, and it will make your sins manifest in your eyes.' 2. And the priest took it and gave it to Joseph to drink and sent him into the hill-country, and he returned whole. And he made Mary drink also, and sent her into the hill-country, and she returned whole. And all the people marvelled, because sin did not appear in them. And the priest said, 'If the Lord God has not revealed your sins, neither do I judge you.' And he released them. And Joseph took Mary and departed to his house, rejoicing and glorifying the God of Israel.

17. 1. Now there went out a decree from the king Augustus that all those in Bethlehem in Judaea should be enrolled.²⁷ And Joseph said, 'I shall enrol my sons, but what shall I do with this child? How shall I enrol her? As my wife? I am ashamed to do that. Or as my daughter? But all the children of Israel know that she is not my daughter. On this day of the Lord the Lord will do as he wills.' 2. And he saddled his she-ass and sat her on it; his son led, and Joseph followed. And they drew near to the third milestone. And Joseph turned round and saw her sad and said within himself, 'Perhaps the child within her is paining her.' Another time Joseph turned round and saw her laughing and said to her, 'Mary, why is it that I see your face at one moment laughing and at another sad?' And Mary said to Joseph, 'I see with my eyes two peoples, one weeping and lamenting and one rejoicing and exulting.'

²⁷ Luke 2: 1; Matt. 2: 1.

2. the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (c. mid-third century AD)

Chapter 4:1-2

After this [Jesus] again went through the village, and a child ran and knocked against his shoulder. Jesus was angered and said to him, “You shall not go further on your way,” and immediately he fell down and died. But some, who saw what took place, said, “From where was this child born, since his every word is an accomplished deed?” And the parents of the dead child came to Joseph and blamed him and said, “Since you have such a child, you cannot dwell with us in the village; teach him to bless and not to curse. For he is killing our children.”

Chapter 13:1-2

His father was a carpenter and made at that time ploughs and yokes. And he received an order from a rich man to make a bed for him. But when one beam was shorter than its corresponding one and they did not know what to do, the child Jesus said to his father Joseph, “Lay down the two pieces of wood and make them even from the middle to one end.” And Joseph did as the child told him. And Jesus stood at the other end and took hold of the shorter piece of wood, and stretching it made it equal to the other. And his father Joseph saw it and was amazed, and he embraced the child and kissed him, saying, “Happy am I that God has given me this child.”

6. the *Coptic Gospel of Joseph the Carpenter* (c. fifth century AD)

Chapters 17-23: the death of Joseph (the speaker throughout is Jesus)

[17] I now went in beside him and found his soul exceedingly troubled, for he was in great anguish. And I said to him, “Hail! My father Joseph, you righteous man; how are you?” And he answered me, “All hail! My well-beloved son. Indeed, the agony and fear of death have already surrounded me; but as soon as I heard your voice my soul was at rest. O Jesus of Nazareth! Jesus, my Saviour! Jesus, the deliverer of my soul! Jesus, my protector! Jesus! O sweetest name in my mouth, and in the mouth of all those that love it! . . . I am your servant; this day I most humbly venerate you, and before your face I pour out my tears.”

[18] [*I wept. My mother asked if Joseph must die, and I told her that it must be so.*]

[19-22] [*Death appears at the door. I prayed for the protection of Joseph's soul.*]

[23] Therefore Michael and Gabriel came to the soul of my father Joseph, and took it, and wrapped it in a shining cloth. Thus he committed his spirit into the hands of my good Father, and he bestowed upon him peace. But as yet none of his children knew that he had fallen asleep. And the angels preserved his soul from the demons of darkness which were in the way, and praised God until they conducted it into the dwelling place of the pious.

Questions that the Gospels, the Apocrypha, and various early legends raised for early Christian writers:

1. How can Joseph's double genealogy be explained? Was he the son of Jacob, as Matthew records (Mt 1:16) or the son of Heli, as Luke records (Lk 3:23)?
2. How can the references in the gospels to the brothers and sisters of Jesus be explained? And, in light of the answer, was Joseph a widower or a virgin?
3. Did Joseph contract a true marriage with Mary?
4. May Joseph be called the "father" of Jesus?

II. The Mid and Late Medieval Period: A New Perspective on St. Joseph

A. The theologians

1. St. Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux (1090–1153)

— a transformation of the traditional view and a new perception of St. Joseph as a man and as a father

“To him it was given not only to see and to hear what many kings and prophets had longed to see and did not see, to hear and did not hear, but even to carry Him, to take Him by the hand, to hug and kiss Him, to feed Him and to keep Him safe.”

— Bernard of Clairvaux, *In laudibus Virginis Mariae*, II.16

2. Jean Gerson, Chancellor of the University of Paris (1363–1429)

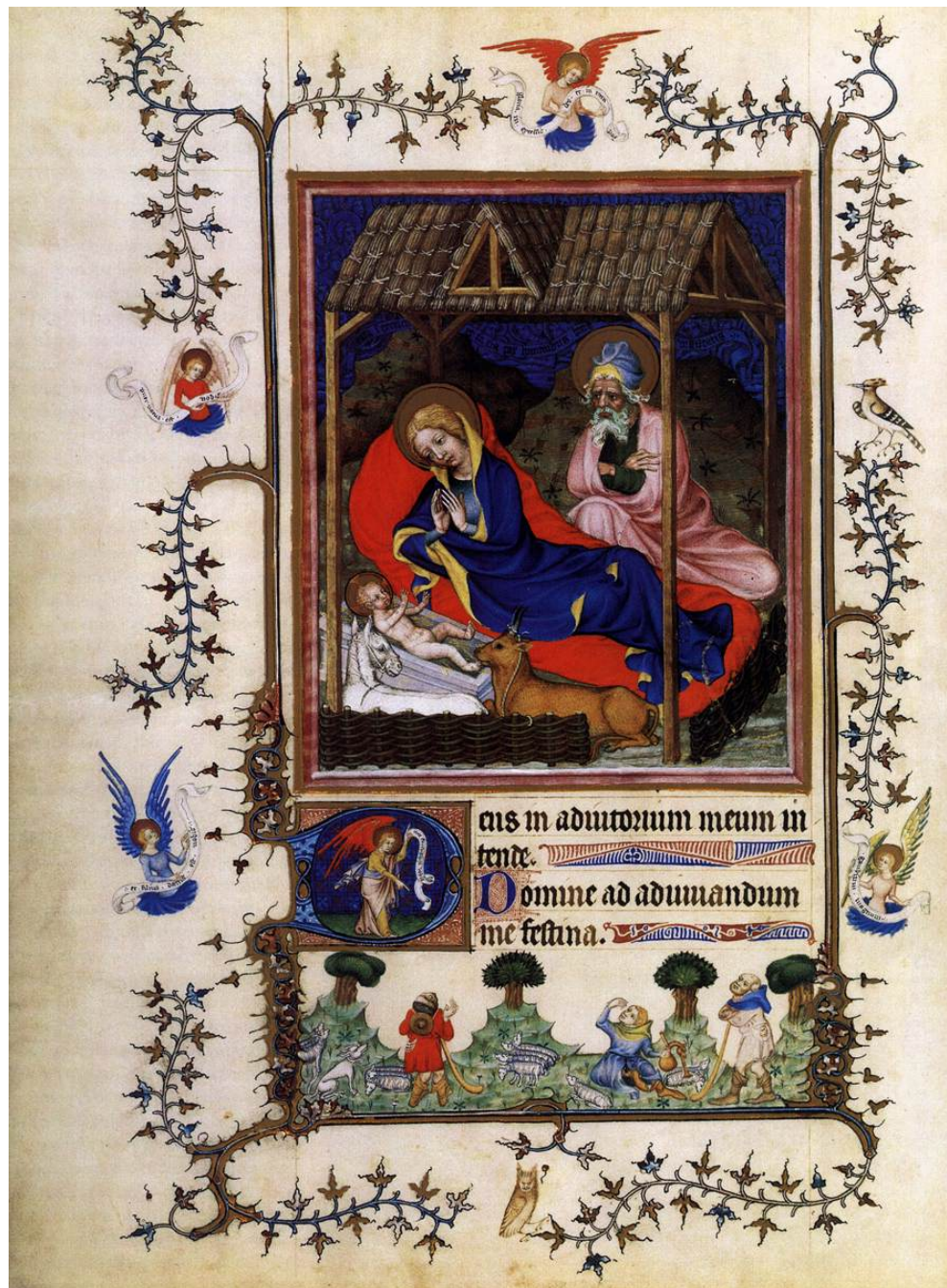
“[In his encyclical letter to Paris clergy, Gerson] reviewed not only the relevant Gospel texts but also the statements of Church Fathers such as Origen, Augustine, and Jerome. He insisted that Joseph had been a young man, under the age of fifty, when he accepted Mary as his wife, ‘with whom he was most intimate, as a man is with his wife, except for the act of sexual intercourse’. . . . Gerson wanted to convey the idea that Joseph enjoyed being together with Mary, that they shared an everyday life together, and that they were man and wife in every sense except having sex.”

— Brian Patrick McGuire, “Becoming a Father and a Husband” (2008)

B. Popular spirituality (sacred art as an indicator of popular devotion)



Nativity, *Anjou Bible* (Naples, 1340)



Très belles heures du Duc de Berry
(14th cent.)



Giotto, *Marriage of Mary and Joseph* (Arena Chapel, Padua, 1303–06)



Conrad von Soest, *Nativity* (Niederwildungen Altarpiece, 1403)



Gerard David, *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (c. 1510)

III. The Counter-Reformation (16th cent., around the Council of Trent) until today

1. A continuation of the late medieval/Renaissance interest in the everyday lives of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph as the Holy Family, but also interest in Joseph as a loving husband and father, and as the “human artisan” present in Jesus’ life as a “shadow” of the Divine Artisan.



*The Artisan of the heavens and earth is the one Father of Jesus
Behold, the father of Christ, another artisan is now present*

(Christophorus Blancus, illustration in Jerónimo Gracián, *Somario de las excelencias del glorioso S. Joseph* (Rome, 1597)

III. The Counter-Reformation (16th cent., around the Council of Trent) until today

2. Also, a continuation of the stream of tradition/theological effects shaped by the insights of Augustine and Jean Gerson: an emphasis on St. Joseph's personal traits as husband and father as well as his personal holiness, as derived from the Gospels.

a. Our key example: St. Teresa of Avila (1515–1582)

— her pivotal role in the popularization of the cult of St. Joseph throughout Spain, and eventually Latin America and Western Europe

“For with other saints it seems the Lord has given them grace to be of help in one need, whereas with this glorious saint I have experience that he helps in all our needs and that the Lord wants us to understand that just as He was subject to St. Joseph on earth—for since bearing the title of father, being the Lord's tutor, Joseph could give the Child commands—so in heaven God does whatever he commands.”

— Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life*

b. Teresa was followed in this by Jerónimo Gracián

- although 30 years younger, he was her religious superior, spiritual director, her closest friend and collaborator in the reform of the Carmelite Order
- his *Somario de las excelencias del glorioso S. Joseph* (Summary of the Excellences of the Glorious St. Joseph) (Rome, 1597) became the best work on St. Joseph and immensely influential in the development of the saint's cult of devotion (it even became a European best-seller).
- portrays Joseph as husband of Mary, member of the earthly Trinity, earthly artisan and surrogate of God the Father, the just man, “Atlas, leader, guardian [who] carries rules, and protects Heaven on his shoulders, His mother by his voice, and both by his faith,” patron of the interior life, and patron of a happy death (because of his closeness to Jesus and Mary)



Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *The Holy Family with a Little Bird* (c. 1650)



Francisco Goya, *The Death of St. Joseph* (1787)

2. One can draw a straight line from Teresa's/Gracián's depiction of St. Joseph to Pope Francis's view in *Patris corde* (Apostolic Letter, 8 December 2020)

—biblically based, yet expressed in deeply personalist language:

Joseph as a beloved father, a tender and loving father
an obedient father, an accepting father
a creatively courageous father, a working father
a father in the shadows

In his relationship to Jesus, Joseph was the earthly shadow of the heavenly Father: he watched over him and protected him, never leaving him to go his own way. . . .

Fathers are not born, but made. A man does not become a father simply by bringing a child into the world, but by taking up the responsibility to care for that child. Whenever a man accepts responsibility for the life of another, in some way he becomes a father to that person.

Children today often seem orphans, lacking fathers. The Church too needs fathers. . . . Being a father entails introducing children to life and reality. Not holding them back, being overprotective or possessive, but rather making them capable of deciding for themselves, enjoying freedom and exploring new possibilities. Perhaps for this reason, Joseph is traditionally called a “most chaste” father. That title is not simply a sign of affection, but the summation of an attitude that is the opposite of possessiveness. Chastity is freedom from possessiveness in every sphere of one's life. Only when love is chaste, is it truly love. A possessive love ultimately becomes dangerous: it imprisons, constricts and makes for misery. God himself loved humanity with a chaste love; he left us free even to go astray and set ourselves against him. The logic of love is always the logic of freedom, and Joseph knew how to love with extraordinary freedom. He never made himself the centre of things. He did not think of himself, but focused instead on the lives of Mary and Jesus.

