

THE LIFE OF
SAINT JOSEPH
AS SEEN BY THE MYSTICS



COMPILED BY PAUL THIGPEN

THE LIFE OF SAINT JOSEPH AS SEEN BY THE MYSTICS

From the Visions of
SAINT BRIDGET OF SWEDEN,
SERVANT OF GOD MARINA DE ESCOBAR,
VENERABLE MARY OF ÁGREDA,
VENERABLE MARIA CECILIA BAIJ
and BLESSED ANNE CATHERINE EMMERICH

Compiled by
Paul Thigpen



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For Michael Borja

*Devoted husband of my daughter, loving father of
my grandchildren, and imitator of Saint Joseph*

“I give you these visions, not for yourself; they are given to you so that they may be recorded. I give you these visions—and I have ever done so—to prove that I shall be with My Church till the end of days. But visions alone sanctify no one; you must practice charity, patience, and all the other virtues.”

—Jesus to Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich

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DECLARATION OF OBEDIENCE



IN conformity with the decrees of Pope Urban VIII concerning the publication of private revelations, I herewith declare that:

1. While the sources from which this book has been compiled have frequently been published with the approval of learned theologians and with the permission of the ordinaries of many dioceses in several countries, I willingly submit all that is contained in this work to the judgment of the Holy See;

2. In applying the terms “saint” and “venerable” to persons who are neither canonized nor beatified, I wish in no way to anticipate the final decision of the Church; and

3. For all the private revelations and seemingly supernatural events herein narrated, insofar as they have not received the attestation of the Church, I claim no more than the assent of a merely human credence, according to the dictates of prudence and the principles of mystical theology.

THE COMPILER

INTRODUCTION



SINCE ancient times, Christians have wondered about so many things that the Gospel writers passed over in silence. We hear from the Evangelists, for example, very little about the life of the Holy Family; that is particularly the case with Saint Joseph.

Mark does not speak of him at all. John mentions him only in quoting those who referred to Jesus as his son (Jn 1:45; 6:42). Matthew and Luke tell us a bit more about the husband of Mary. But this mysterious saint disappears from Matthew's narrative after he brings Mary and the Child Jesus back from Egypt (Mt 2:23), and he is absent from Luke's account after Jesus is found in the Temple at the age of twelve (Lk 2:51).

Even in Matthew and Luke, no words of Saint Joseph are recorded. Nothing is told of his early life; nothing of his later years. No mention is made of his death, which occurred, apparently, sometime before Jesus began His public ministry.

Not surprisingly, speculations attempting to fill in the gaps of the saint's story date back to the early years of the Church. The so-called *Gospel of James*, composed around the year 150 (about fifty years after the composition of John's Gospel), provides us

with some of the earliest conjectures of this sort. It may in fact draw in part on certain historical traditions as well.¹

After the early centuries, such apocryphal texts with elaboration on the life of Saint Joseph gave way to claims of private revelations from God that seemed to supply some of what was lacking in the Gospel accounts. Several women religious, beginning in the medieval period, have left us with records of such visions. *The Life of Saint Joseph as Seen by the Mystics* crafts a narrative of the saint's life by drawing from the private revelations reported by five of these visionaries: Saint Bridget of Sweden (c. 1303–73), Venerable Marina de Escobar (1554–1653), Venerable Mary of Ágreda (1602–65), Venerable Maria Cecilia Baij (1694–1766), and Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774–1824). This work can be viewed as a companion volume to *The Life of Mary as Seen by the Mystics*, compiled by Raphael Brown (TAN Books, 1991).

The Value of the Visions

In meditating on the visions of these mystical writers, we must use great discretion, recognizing that their value is primarily spiritual. Though the authors were by no means doctors of history, science, or theology, they were in many ways doctors of the soul. They display at times a fine understanding of the inner workings of the human mind and heart, and the influences of grace.

In their visions, then, we see not only Joseph, Jesus, Mary, and their contemporaries but in a certain sense ourselves as well. Held up as a mirror, this story invites us all to view ourselves more clearly and to imitate their holy example as we seek to navigate the course of our lives. It allows us as well to recognize our eternal debt to Saint Joseph as the guardian of our Savior and spouse of His mother. And it reveals to us the ways in which his heroic life and grace-filled death have

¹ Also known as the *Book of James* or the *Protoevangelium*. See “Book of James,” in F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 723.

made him a great patron for each of us in each hour of our lives—and especially at the hour of our death.

At the same time, we should keep in mind that the Catholic Church speaks of divine revelation with regard to two kinds. *Public* (or *universal*) revelation is that revelation contained in the Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition transmitted by the Church. Together, Scripture and Tradition form the one sacred deposit of the word of God.

This deposit was complete with the close of the apostolic age. “No new public revelation,” says the *Catechism*, “is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ.”² All Catholics are obliged to believe public revelation as it is authentically interpreted by the Sacred Magisterium.

Certain *private* (or *particular*) revelations, on the other hand, have come to individuals from God down through the ages of the Church. “They do not belong,” notes the *Catechism*, “to the deposit of faith. It is not their role to improve or complete Christ’s definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history.”³

Nevertheless, some private revelations have been recognized by the authority of the Church. When the Church approves such revelations, she declares that nothing in them is contrary to faith or good morals and that they may be read without danger, read even with profit. Even then, however, Church approval imposes no obligation on Catholics to believe these revelations. With regard to such messages, Pope Benedict XIV has observed: “It is not obligatory nor even possible to give them the assent of Catholic faith, but only of human faith, in conformity with the dictates of prudence, which presents them to us as probable and worthy of pious belief.”⁴

Regrettably, some readers have treated the visions of these mystical writers as if they were somehow infallible, a kind of fifth Gospel. We must avoid that mistake. In fact, the texts

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 66; *Dei verbum*, 4; cf. 1 Timothy 6:14; Titus 2:13. Hereafter referred to as “CCC.”

³ CCC 67.

⁴ Pope Benedict XIV, *De canon.*, III, liii, xxii, II.

themselves, taken together, will not allow such an interpretation: Some aspects of the various visions cannot be reconciled.

Mary of Ágreda reported, for example, that both of Mary's parents had died by the time she and Joseph were betrothed. Anne Catherine Emmerich, on the other hand, spoke of Saint Anne's remarriage after Joachim's death and described her extensive involvement in the life of the Holy Family. How, we might ask, could these alleged private revelations truly be from God if they obviously display such inconsistencies among themselves—not to mention certain historical inaccuracies?

The Jesuit scholar Fr. Auguste Poulain, in his classic treatise on mystical theology, explains:

When visions represent historic scenes . . . they often have an approximate and probable likeness only. . . . It is a mistake to attribute an absolute accuracy to them. . . . Many saints have, in fact, believed that the event took place exactly as they saw it. But God does not deceive us when He modifies certain details. If He tied Himself down to absolute accuracy in these matters, we should soon be seeking to satisfy in visions an idle desire for erudition in history or archaeology. He has a nobler aim, that of the soul's sanctification. . . . He is like a painter who, in order to excite our piety, is content to paint scenes in his own manner, but without departing too far from the truth.

The scholar-priest adds an important note: "This argument cannot be applied to the historical books of the Bible."⁵

Father Poulain goes on to observe that "God has another reason for modifying certain details. Sometimes He adds them to a historical scene in order to bring out the secret meaning of the mystery. The actual [historical] spectators saw nothing similar. . . . We see, therefore, that it is imprudent to seek to remake history by the help of the saints' revelations."⁶

⁵ Auguste Poulain, *The Graces of Interior Prayer, a Treatise on Mystical Theology* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1912), Part IV, "Revelations and Visions," 327–29.

⁶ Poulain, 327–29.

To summarize, then: God might use a kind of artistic license in the visions or locutions He prompts. At the same time, certain inconsistencies or even errors may be introduced by the visionaries themselves or by others. Father Poulain suggests several possibilities.

First, the human mind of the visionary may mix some of its own thoughts, images, and impressions with those received from God, including certain favorite or preconceived ideas. Second, the record of divine revelation may be altered when the visionaries write or dictate it at a later time, or those who act as secretary may introduce either errors or their own thoughts not found in the original. Third, a printed text may be an incomplete version or inaccurate translation of the original manuscript.⁷

Yet another consideration: Spiritual writings may have difficulties arising from terminology. As Saint Robert Bellarmine observed: “Writers on mystical theology are usually blamed by some and praised by others because what they say is not understood in the same way by all.”⁸

For all these reasons, then, we should view these writings as a kind of spiritual drama prompted by God: The events described, though offered in reference to historical events, are presented through an angle of vision akin to that of the poet, the novelist, the playwright, or the film director, rather than the historian, the scientist, the philosopher, or the theologian. We find here a fusion of realistic detail and mystical imagery, such as we might encounter in the best of visionary cinema.

Priorities for Creating This Compilation

To craft this narrative, I compared the original texts and various translations of the primary sources whenever possible. Based on these, I combined, condensed, and adapted into a single style and voice many narrative threads from each mystical account.

⁷ Poulain, 323–40.

⁸ Quoted in Edward A. Ryan, “Foreword,” in Raphael Brown, comp., *The Life of Mary as Seen by the Mystics* (1951; repr., Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 1991), xii.

In selecting from among the many threads available, and in weaving them together into a single story, I have kept several priorities in mind.

First, since all but one of the works consulted were primarily focused on Our Lord, the Blessed Virgin, or other subjects, I had to draw from those texts the particular passages that had special relevance to Saint Joseph. In these pages you will find visions of his interior and exterior life: his thoughts, words, and attitudes; his character, deeds, and impact on others.

In some scenes included here, though he is always an essential figure in the story, Joseph appears only in passing or in the background. But of course that is how the good saint most often appears in the Gospels as well. In his great humility, he is no doubt content with that modest position.

Second, when I had to choose between the various visionaries' accounts of a particular event or scene, I drew from the one that seemed to me the richest, or the most profound, or the most beautiful. This was necessarily a subjective decision on my part, but unavoidable. Where possible, I wove together, even within the same sentence or paragraph, elements from various accounts. (For this reason, it was not feasible to footnote the source of each thread; a complete list of the sources is provided.)

At times, as we have noted, the details of various accounts did not agree. In that case, I omitted them or included those that were most in keeping with the arc of the overall story as presented.

Most readers will probably know the general outline of the Gospel accounts with regard to the events in Our Lord's life in which Saint Joseph appears. Those events are obviously part of this narrative, but the focus here is on details of the visions that do not appear in Scripture. It may be useful to read again, before taking up this book, the first two chapters of Matthew's Gospel and the first three of Luke's.

Before moving on to the story of the man who served as Christ's adoptive father here on earth, we should acquaint ourselves with each of the visionaries involved in this account so we can place them in their historical and spiritual context.

Saint Bridget of Sweden (c. 1303–73)

Bridget (Birgitta; not to be confused with Saint Brigid of Ireland) was born in Sweden about 1303 to the family of a provincial governor. She married at the age of fourteen, becoming in time the mother of eight children. In 1343, her devout husband, Ulf Gudmarsson, entered a Cistercian monastery and died the following year.

After some years at the court of the Swedish king, Bridget established a new religious community of both women and men, the Order of the Most Holy Savior, now known as the Bridgettines. She went to Rome in 1349, where she spent most of her days until her death in 1373. Her fervent devotion, her charitable works, and her stern admonitions to certain powerful men of her day spread the fame of her holiness, and Pope Boniface IX canonized her in 1391.

From an early age, Bridget experienced heavenly visions. She began dictating her revelations and prophecies to one of her spiritual directors, which primarily concerned the sufferings of Christ and events that were about to happen in various kingdoms. These “Heavenly Revelations” fill nine volumes with more than 1,500 pages, and they were among the most popular books in late medieval Europe.

Pope Benedict XIV (1675–1758) declared that “there is no doubt: the Revelations of Bridget are included among those which have the approval of the Church; they are orthodox.” As with other private revelations, however, this formal approval means only that they contain nothing contrary to faith and morals and that there is good evidence for their authenticity.⁹

More recently, Pope Saint John Paul II (1920–2005) observed in the apostolic letter *Spes Aedificandi*, which declared Saint Bridget as one of the co-patronesses of Europe: “There is no doubt that the Church, which recognized Bridget’s holiness without ever

⁹ Alban Butler, *Lives of the Saints*, ed. Herbert Thurston and Donald Attwater (New York: P. J. Kenedy and Sons, 1963), vol. IV, 56–58.

pronouncing on her individual revelations, has accepted the overall authenticity of her interior experience.”¹⁰

Venerable Marina de Escobar (1554–1653)

Venerable Marina de Escobar was born into a pious and well-connected family in Valladolid, Spain. Her father, noted for his learning and saintly life, was a professor of civil and canon law and for a time served as ruler of the town of Osuna. Her mother was the daughter of the physician of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V.

Marina was given to study, and from her early years, she showed considerable intellectual gifts. In her youth, she often experienced seasons of spiritual fervor, dryness, and scruples. She offered herself completely to God at the age of thirty-three, during the Lent of 1587.

After becoming bedridden, Marina spent the last thirty years of her life in a small, dark, poorly ventilated room, though Mass was daily celebrated for her in an adjacent room. Through her conversations with the small group of pious women who cared for her, they came to see her as their spiritual mother. Before her death, she was instrumental in founding the Spanish Bridgettine religious order.

During these same years, Marina often conversed as well with God, the angels, and the saints. These conversations are recorded in the book *The Marvelous Life of the Venerable Virgin Doña Marina de Escobar*, which includes accounts of visits from Saint Joseph. By divine command, as she believed, Marina wrote down her revelations, and when she became too feeble to write, she dictated them. One of her spiritual directors, Fr. Luis de Ponte, arranged them for publication after her death.

Father La Puente bestowed high praise on both Marina’s life and her visions. He believed her personal holiness was an indication that the revelations were genuine. She was advanced in virtue, he noted; preserved free from temptations against

¹⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, “Saint Bridget of Sweden, General Audience, October 27, 2010; https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20101027.html.

purity; showed no pride; had peace in prayer; feared deception; desired no extraordinary divine favors; loved suffering; was zealous for souls; and was obedient to her confessor.¹¹

Venerable Mary of Ágreda (1602–65)

Mary Coronel entered the convent in Ágreda, Castile, Spain, as a teenager and took the name Mary of Jesus. By the age of twenty-five—over her protests—she was made abbess and, except for three years, remained the superior there for the rest of her life. During the time of her administration, the convent became one of the most fervent in all Spain, and she died with a reputation for great holiness. The cause for her canonization was introduced in 1762 by the Congregation of Rites at the request of the Court of Spain.

We should mention a remarkable fact about Mary that bears witness to her visionary gifts: She is the subject of one of the most thoroughly documented cases of bilocation in history. In the 1630s, without ever leaving her convent in Spain, she appeared on numerous occasions to certain native Americans of what is now western Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico.

Mary catechized them in the Catholic faith and instructed them to seek out and be baptized by Franciscan missionaries. The friars were amazed to hear of the natives' encounters with "the Lady in Blue." (The habit of her order, the Conceptionists, was white with a blue cloak.) This miraculous ministry was amply corroborated by witnesses on both sides of the Atlantic: She reported to her sisters in the convent accurate details of the people and places she had encountered in the areas where she had appeared.¹²

Mary is chiefly known, however, for writing a book entitled *The Mystical City of God: A Divine History of the Virgin Mother of God*. Though the text focuses on the life of the Blessed Virgin

¹¹ E. Graham, "Ven. Marina de Escobar," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909); <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05534a.htm>; J. Verbillion, "Ven. Marina de Escobar," in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 5 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 538–39.

¹² Brown, *Life of Mary*, 8.

Mary, her life is of course intimately intertwined with that of Saint Joseph. For this reason, the work devotes considerable time to her visions of Our Lord's foster father.

The Mystical City was first conceived nine years after Mary became a nun, but written down ten years later at the command of her confessor. She wrote the first part, consisting of four hundred pages, in only twenty days. Her desire was to keep it from publication, but a copy was sent to the Spanish King Philip IV. Later, in obedience to another confessor, she tossed the book and all her other writings into the flames. Then, in 1655, a third command of her spiritual director caused her to start again. She finished the project in 1670.

The Mystical City is presented as a record of special messages from God, received in contemplation and revealed in mysteries, that tell the life of the Virgin Mary. It overflows with elaborate detail, describing both interior and exterior events beginning with the Virgin's conception and extending to her coronation in heaven. As soon as the text found a public beyond Spain, it provoked a fierce storm of controversy.

It is not difficult to see why. Read as a precise theological treatise, a reliable historical account, an accurate scientific text, or even an exact record of what Mary heard and saw in her visions, the book presents numerous problems. She herself had been reluctant to see it published, perhaps thinking that the visions were intended more for her personal reflection than for public dissemination, and that much of what she saw and heard, as she often put it, was "indescribable" in the first place.

Difficulties were compounded by several factors: claims that Mary's confessors had tampered with the text, political tensions between France and Spain, theological debates between the Franciscans (her order) and their philosophical rivals, and certain mistranslations and misinterpretations of the original Spanish by non-native speakers. In general, the book was widely praised and approved in Spain, but condemned elsewhere.¹³

¹³ Paul Thigpen, *The Passion: Reflections on the Suffering and Death of Christ* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 2004), xvi–xvii.

In time, however, Mary's mystical work attracted an enthusiastic international following. Servant of God Prosper Guéranger (1805–75), the celebrated abbot of the Benedictine monastery in Solesmes, France, wrote twenty-four articles in defense of the book. He concluded: "The revelations of Mary of Ágreda on the life of the Blessed Virgin have a right to the respect and the esteem of all those who are capable of undertaking to read them . . . they deserve to occupy a distinguished place among writings of that kind, and . . . the judicious use that can be made of them can serve as a powerful stimulus to a revival of devotion in souls."¹⁴

Servant of God Maria Baij (1694–1766)

Maria Cecilia Baij was born in 1694 in Montefiascone, an Italian village about sixty miles north of Rome. At the age of twenty, she professed her religious vows with the Benedictine community there, in St. Peter's Convent. In 1743, she was named abbess of the community and remained in that position until her death at the age of seventy-two.

Maria's spiritual life was characterized by many attacks from the Devil. But she also received mystical revelations about the life of Jesus Christ, Saint Joseph, the Holy Family, and Saint John the Baptist. In obedience to her confessor, she wrote these down in extensive manuscripts that are still in the possession of the community she led.

The manuscript of her book *The Life of Saint Joseph* was completed before Baij's death in 1766, but it remained unknown until 1900, when a Benedictine monk named Dom Willibrord van Heteren found it in St. Peter's Convent. He published some excerpts.

In 1920, a local priest, Msgr. Pietro Bergamaschi, became interested in Baij's writings in the convent archive. He presented them to Pope Benedict XV in a private audience on March 17, 1920, during the month of Saint Joseph. The pope urged Bergamaschi to publish them.

¹⁴ Dom Guéranger, "La Cité Mystique de Dieu," *L'Univers*, 1859, Dec. 5, 1858.

Unlike the works of Mary of Ágreda and Anne Catherine Emmerich, *The Life of Saint Joseph* presents visions that focus largely on Our Lord's adoptive father, telling his life story in great detail. It has received from the Vatican an imprimatur and *nihil obstat* officially declaring it free from doctrinal and moral error. But as with the works of the other visionaries, it must be read as a kind of sacred drama rather than biographical history, and some of its details differ from those in other accounts.

Fr. Pascal Parente (d. 1971), a theology professor at the Catholic University of America, has summed up the value of her visions in his introduction to the English edition of the book: "The account of St. Joseph's life . . . was not intended essentially to provide exegetical or historical instruction but rather to serve as a means of edification. In this respect it has succeeded marvelously. It reveals the most loving and lovable head of the Holy Family in a new light which cannot fail to impress both the mind and the heart of the reader, thereby making him a partaker of the heavenly peace and harmony that reigned in the Holy Family of Nazareth." Parente deemed Maria's visions "a major contribution to our Catholic heritage of . . . mystical literature."¹⁵

Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774–1824)

Anne Catherine Emmerich entered the Augustinian convent of Agnetenberg in Dulmen, Germany, at the age of twenty-eight. Beginning in her childhood, the supernatural realm seemed ordinary to her; she frequently experienced mystical visions and displayed extraordinary gifts. She predicted certain happenings accurately and could hear and see remote events. When the sick came to visit her, though she had no medical training, she could diagnose the causes of their problems and prescribe remedies that worked. Nevertheless, her own physical condition was frail and troublesome.

¹⁵ Courtney Mares, "How a Forgotten Nun's Visions Shed 'New Light' on the Life of St. Joseph," *Catholic News Agency*, March 16, 2021; <https://angelusnews.com/faith/how-a-forgotten-nuns-visions-shed-new-light-on-the-life-of-st-joseph/>; Maria Cecilia Baij, *The Life of Saint Joseph* (Asbury, NJ: The 101 Foundation, 1997), i–iii.

The sisters in the convent remained suspicious of her because of her unusual powers and poor health, and they were annoyed by her frequent ecstasies. In 1812, the government of Napoleon closed the institution, and Anne Catherine was forced to seek lodging with a poor widow. In 1813, she became bedridden.

Soon after, the stigmata—the wounds of Christ—appeared on her body, including the marks of the thorns. She tried to conceal them, as well as the crosses that appeared on her breast, but word got out, and soon the local bishop sent a commission to examine the unusual phenomena. Though the examination was strict, in the end, the vicar general and three physicians who administered it were thoroughly convinced that the stigmata were genuine.

Some years later, a noted German poet, Clemens Brentano (1778–1842), visited her, was converted, and remained daily at her bedside from 1820 to 1824, taking notes on her visions and mystical experiences as she described them. Each day he would rewrite the notes, replacing her local dialect with standard German, then read them back to her for her revision and approval. Brentano was deeply impressed by her purity, humility, and patience under remarkably intense suffering.

In 1833, some years after the nun's death, Brentano published the compilation of these notes, under the title *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ According to the Meditations of Anne Catherine Emmerich*. The book focuses on her visions of His suffering, death, and resurrection. They are remarkable for their vivid detail, their simplicity of style, and the passionate participation of the visionary in the events described.

We cannot be certain how much Brentano may have added in his attempt to organize and clarify the material. For this reason, the Church explicitly declared that these texts would not have any role in the process of her consideration for canonization. (Anne Catherine was declared “Blessed” by the Church in 2004.) Even so, the work reflects brightly the fire and purity of a soul who was consumed by love for her Lord.¹⁶

¹⁶ Thigpen, *Passion*, xvii–xviii.

Archbishop William H. Elder of Cincinnati wrote approvingly of the work in 1892: “*The Life of Our Lord*, according to the revelations of Catherine Emmerich, I have found extremely interesting and edifying. . . . If received according to the explanations given and if read in the spirit of piety, it is wonderfully adapted to increase in our heart the love of Our Lord Jesus Christ, by giving us vivid pictures of what He did and said during His mortal life.”¹⁷

A Final Encouragement

To echo the archbishop’s encouragement, I present *The Life of Saint Joseph as Seen by the Mystics* with the hope that these visionaries’ powerful insights will increase in your heart a love of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and of all the Holy Family as well. I offer it to my personal patron, Saint Joseph the Worker, as a humble labor of love and with gratitude for his constant care in my life and the life of my family.

At the same time, I recall a few lines from a fascinating apocryphal book of the sixth or seventh century entitled *The History of Joseph the Carpenter*. Perhaps you will forgive me if I dare to hope that the imagined promise made in its pages might at least be possible. In that story, Jesus says to Joseph at the saint’s death: “Whoever shall write the history of your life, your labor, and your departure from this world . . . I will commit to your care as long as he remains in this life. And when his soul departs from the body, and when he must leave this world, I will burn the book of his sins; I will not torment him with any punishment in the day of judgment; but he shall cross the sea of flames, and shall go through it without trouble or pain.”¹⁸

THE COMPILER

Solemnity of Saint Joseph, 2022

¹⁷ Quoted in Brown, *Life of Mary*, 17.

¹⁸ *The History of Joseph the Carpenter*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Fathers Down to a.d. 325*, vol. 3, *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries* (1886; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 392–93.

THE EARLY LIFE OF JOSEPH



JOSEPH'S marvelous holiness began with the formation of his body in the womb of his mother. In this the providence of God Himself intervened, making his body a blessed earth fit for the dwelling of an exquisite soul and well-balanced mind. The holy child was born most beautiful and perfect of body.

Joseph's first words were "My God." That is what his guardian angel had taught him. His parents heard it with amazement. He often renewed this gift of himself to God.

The Lord advanced in Joseph the use of his reason, perfecting it at an early age. He endowed his mind with infused knowledge and enhanced his soul with new graces and virtues. From that time the child began to know God by faith, and also by natural reasoning and science, as the Cause and Author of all things.

After he was able to walk unhampered, little Joseph often went and hid himself in order to pray. With uplifted hands, he would offer thanks to God for all the good things He had given him. His words were still somewhat stammering, but they came from a heart inflamed for God.

In time the child began to see how seriously God was being offended by His creatures. For that reason, he would often cry in grief, but he did it in a way that was hidden from his parents so that they would not be troubled by his tears. By offering these innocent tears, he obtained from God greater graces and illuminations. In return, Joseph would give thanks once more to the most gracious God.

Whenever the little boy was carried around by his mother, and found himself where he could see the open sky, he would gaze firmly up into the heavens. His joy and exultation showed that all his happiness and treasure lay in heaven. As his mother observed this, she would often bring him to a place where he could have an unobstructed view of the sky. She also did it whenever she saw that he was sad, because it would lift his spirits.

In addition to his regular guardian angel, Joseph had another angel assigned to him by God. This guardian spoke to him often in his dreams and was given to Joseph to instruct him in all those things that would be required of him. In this way he could become ever-more pleasing to God.

Joseph's parents and his angel told him about the coming of the Messiah. So he sent fervent appeals to God, asking Him to grant that the time of waiting would be shortened. From that time on, he applied all his prayers to this intention.

The young boy eagerly listened to and understood profoundly all that was taught him in regard to God and His works. At a precocious age he already practiced the highest kinds of prayer and contemplation and eagerly engaged in the exercise of the virtues proper to his youth. At the time when others come to the use of reason (at the age of seven years or more), Joseph was already a perfect man in the use of it and in holiness. He was of a kind disposition, loving, affable, sincere, showing inclinations not just holy but angelic, growing in virtue and perfection and advancing toward an altogether irreproachable life.

Joseph always undertook any task that he knew would please God. Among other gifts, he had received a special talent for giving effective assistance to the afflicted. Whenever he talked with them, his attitude and behavior always managed to alleviate their sorrow.

Of course, he always turned to God and pled fervently for comfort on behalf of those he was assisting. His ability to ease the burden of the oppressed became known throughout the town and brought many to his home to listen to him and receive his help.

The Lord gave young Joseph a special concern for the poor who were dying. He realized that Satan would make every effort to conquer a soul and lead it into eternal misery. His angel had once told him about the great danger faced by the dying; after that, God inspired his heart with a great sympathy and fervent love for them.

Joseph came to their aid with deep concern. The Lord intended that he would be the patron saint of the dying, so He wanted him to begin even in this life such a great work of love. He enabled Joseph to discern the needs of various souls in their last moments. Knowing that the hour of death determines for every soul an eternity of either unceasing happiness or perpetual misery, Joseph had an urgent desire to assist these souls.

Whenever anything took place in Joseph's home that would offend God—this sometimes happened among the servants through moral weakness—the young boy would grow sad and sorrowful. At such a young age, he could not take them to task. But he would demonstrate his displeasure at their sins by crying.

Satan was aware of the light that dwelt in young Joseph. He feared that this child would stir up others to engage in battle with him, and by his example lead many souls toward a life of devotion. He attempted many times to take Joseph's life, but his plotting was always thwarted, because the child was protected by the all-powerful arm of God.

Just the sight of such a virtuous child enraged the Devil. Once, he pushed the boy headlong down a flight of stairs. The Lord allowed such an attack to allow Joseph a chance to practice virtue and to humiliate the Enemy. As he was falling, the child cried to God for help, who protected him from harm. While Satan was forced to withdraw in confusion, Joseph received another opportunity to give thanks and praise to God for His care.

Joseph was protected by the two angels who had been assigned as his guardians. Though the Enemy raged with fury, he could not carry out his plans. He tried to stir up strife and confusion between the boy's parents. He even tried to attack others in the household. But every time, he failed.

In every such situation, Joseph prayed, and God heard his prayers. Often he would join fasting to his petitions, and the Devil was deprived of his might. He always found himself conquered and beaten, because Joseph's prayers had great power.

The angel who had been assigned to speak to Joseph when he dreamed always counseled him about what he must do to overcome the infernal spirit. As soon as the Devil began to prepare to mount another attack on the household, the guardian would let Joseph know, and the young saint never failed to heed the angel's warning.

Joseph's parents lived in a large mansion outside of Bethlehem. It was the ancient birthplace of David, whose father Jesse had owned it. But by Joseph's time only the main walls were still in existence as part of the structure. He was the third of six brothers; three of them were his natural brothers and two were his stepbrothers.

In front of the house was a large courtyard with a garden. In it was a stone house built over a spring whose waters gushed forth out of faucets, each of which was crafted to represent some animal's head. The garden was enclosed by walls like a cloister and surrounded by colonnades with sculptures like the heads of men. Alongside the colonnades were trees and shrubbery. The lower story of the dwelling had a door, but no windows.

In the upper story there were circular openings. Over these there ran, around the whole top of the house, a broad gallery with four little pavilions capped by cupolas. From these cupolas, a view far into the surrounding country was possible.

Above the center of the flat roof arose another, smaller story, also crowned by a tower and cupola. Joseph and his brothers occupied that last story with an aged Jewish man, their tutor. The tutor lived in the highest room in the story, while the brothers slept in one chamber, their sleeping places separated

from one another by mats, which in the daytime were rolled up against the walls.

They often played up there, each in his own separate space. They had toys shaped like little animals. Their tutor gave them all sorts of unusual lessons, including lessons in measurement.

The father and mother of the boys were neither good nor bad. They did not trouble themselves much about their children; they paid very little attention to them. When they were absent, Joseph's brothers used to play all kinds of tricks on him and knock him around.

The brothers were mean to him because they recognized that Joseph was quite different from them. He was very gifted and he learned quickly. But he was simple in his tastes, quiet, devout, and not at all ambitious.

The boys all had separate little gardens where they grew herbs, bushes, and small trees. Joseph's brothers would often sneak into his garden to trample and uproot the plants there. They always treated him roughly, but he bore everything patiently.

Sometimes, when Joseph was kneeling in prayer in the colonnade that ran around the courtyard, with his face turned to the wall, his brothers would push him over. Once, when he was praying this way, one of the brothers kicked him in the back, but Joseph appeared not to notice it. The other child repeated his blows with such violence that at last Joseph fell forward onto the hard, cold floor.

Joseph, however, had not been in a waking condition, but in an ecstasy of prayer. When he came to himself, he did not lose his temper or seek to take revenge. He merely turned away quietly and sought another secluded spot.

Joseph's parents were not well satisfied with him. They wanted him, on account of his talents, to fit himself for a position in the world. But he had no desire for that. He was too simple and unpretentious for them. His only inclination was toward prayer and quiet work at some handicraft.

At about the age of twelve, he often went beyond Bethlehem to escape the harassment of his brothers. Not far from the cave

that would one day hold the crib of Jesus, there was a little community of some very pious, old Jewish women. Joseph often went to them in his troubles and shared their devotions.

Sometimes he spent time in their neighborhood with a master carpenter, lending him a helping hand. The carpenter taught him his trade, and Joseph found the lessons in measurement he had learned from his tutor to be of use in that work.

The hostility of his brothers at last went so far that, when he was eighteen, Joseph could no longer remain in his parents' home. So he fled the house by night. A friend, who lived outside of Bethlehem, had brought him clothes in which to make his escape.

Joseph settled at first in a small village, carrying on carpentry. He worked for his living in a very poor family. The father of the family supported himself by making the kind of rough wicker partitions that Joseph knew how to put together. The saint humbly assisted the family as much as he could. He gathered wood and carried it to the house.

Joseph's parents, in the meantime, believed that he had been kidnapped. But his brothers found him out, and then he was again persecuted. Yet Joseph would not leave the poor family nor stop practicing the humble occupation of which his own family was ashamed. Wherever he lived, he was always loved by those who knew him. He was a good, kind, and devout workingman—lovable, gentle, and utterly sincere.

Later, Joseph moved again to another village. There, he did better work for a well-to-do family, and the carpenter's work which they did was of higher quality. Though a small place, the village had a synagogue. At last he worked for a master carpenter in Tiberias, where he lived alone near the water.

By that time, Joseph's parents had died, and his brothers had scattered. Only two of them still dwelled in Bethlehem. His father's mansion had passed into other hands, and the whole family had rapidly declined.

Now a grown man, Joseph remained deeply pious. He prayed fervently for the coming of the Messiah. He showed great reserve in the presence of females. From the age of twelve he

had made and perfectly kept a vow of chastity, and his purity of soul, which was known to all, was that of an angel.

The saint was so reserved and careful in his speech that not one word ever issued from his mouth that was not good and holy, nor did he ever indulge in unnecessary or less than charitable conversation. He was most patient and diligent in bearing fatigue; he practiced extreme poverty; he was most meek in bearing injuries; he was strong and constant against enemies; and he was the faithful witness of the wonders of heaven.