



**His Excellency,
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Diocese of Belleville**

Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 21, 2025, 9:00 AM Mass
St. Luke Parish, Belleville

(This is the text as originally written. During the actual delivery, some passages were omitted and other comments were added spontaneously. *Nota bene*: This text has not been thoroughly proofread. Therefore, there may be errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation.)

**“How Can This Be?
St. Joseph: A Real Man of Silence and Action”**

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

We know almost nothing about him. He never speaks a single word in the story. He and his wife may well have been teenagers when the baby was born. He drops out of the story when the boy is twelve. We do not know how old he was or where or when he died. All of us, especially American men, have a great deal to learn from him.

When we meet him this morning in Mathew 1, 18-24, Joseph is planning to divorce Mary after he finds out she was going to have a baby. Many Christians wonder how he could divorce her when they were not yet formally married. At the time of Jesus, Betrothal was not a mere engagement, but a legally binding marriage commitment, the first of two stages, making the couple husband and wife in the eyes of the law, even though they lived apart for a year until the second stage of home-taking. A betrothed couple did not consummate their marriage until after the formal home-taking ceremony. Breaking the betrothal required a formal divorce, just as marriage did. The angel calls Mary Joseph’s “wife” because they were betrothed, meaning people who learned she was with child would not think she had an “affair,” but that she had committed adultery, punishable by stoning to death. Matthew stresses these details to make sure we understand his theological belief that Joseph was NOT the natural father of Jesus.

That Mary was expecting in these circumstances was obviously a scandal. Joseph, being a “just,” man planned to divorce her quietly to protect her honor, showing both compassion for her and his obedience to Jewish law. If he divorced her publicly, Mary would have been a shamed woman, and Jesus would not have had an earthly father.

We might wonder why Joseph did not discuss the situation with Mary. She could have told him about the apparition of the angel Gabriel and God's unique call to be the mother of the Lord as recorded only in Luke. We do not know if Joseph would have believed such a story. Would his relatives and friends have believed it? Would you have believed it? Even Mary's initial response was, "How can this be?"

Matthew says Joseph's divorce plans are interrupted when an unnamed angel appears to him in a dream revealing that Mary's child was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Joseph was probably a quite young when he learned of Mary's unique motherhood. You should not be thinking of the elderly man with a white beard you see in churches. There is nothing in scripture to suggest that he was so old that he could not have children.

The angel tells Joseph he should name the child "Jesus," "the one who saves." (Jesus is the Greek version of name Joshua, the man who, with Moses, led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land. But the angel tells Joseph that Jesus' work is not to save his people from an oppressive Pharaoh, but to save humanity from the web of sinfulness.) Matthew says Joseph awoke and accepted Mary as his wife, in an act of profound obedience to God. But this does not mean he fully understood what was happening. Humanly speaking, Joseph must have had questions, doubts, and even fears.

It is not surprising that modern secular scholars and many "common sense" Christians argue that the stories of the birth of Jesus told by Matthew and Luke are myths that no critical thinker can accept as literal truth since from the perspective of science, it is impossible to conceive of a child born without a biological father. More than that, they argue, talking angels simply do not exist! These secular thinkers argue that the gospel writers created the virginal conception story of Jesus because they thought it beneath the dignity of the Word of God to be born in the same way that all human beings are born. Insisting that Joseph was not Jesus' father asserts Jesus' uniqueness and protects Him from being associated with human sexuality which many early Christians viewed negatively. Such scientists do not realize that, even if Joseph were His biological father, Jesus could still be the incarnate Word of God. As St. Elizabeth told her kinswoman, Mary, after she learns she is to have a child in her old age, "Nothing is impossible with God."

Though quiet, Joseph, a righteous man, was a man of action who observed religious law and civil laws. He went to Jerusalem for the Jewish festivals. He took Mary to Bethlehem when Emperor Caesar Augustus decreed that everyone in the Roman empire should travel to his ancestral home to be registered for the census. Matthew also tells us that Joseph had dreams and believed God spoke to him in his dreams and he acted on his dreams. In a later dream, he is told to take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt to escape King Herod's desire to kill the newborn "King of the Jews." Why does Joseph take these dreams seriously and act on them believing that God is communicating with him? The text does not say he had special "religious dreams." You and I might not be so quick to think of our dreams as divine messages and take decisive actions because of them. We might think that dreams are just dreams.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

Matthew's extraordinary gospel story about Joseph on this last Sunday of Advent calls us to pray about Joseph and Mary as real people and not as paintings on a Christmas card. Joseph, the guardian of Jesus, was a real man. (During the Christmas Eucharist, you will hear Luke's version of this story from Mary's perspective.)

In American culture today there is much discussion about the nature of masculinity, what it means to be a real man and the great responsibilities of fatherhood. While many men fully accept what are sometimes considered the feminine and the masculine dimension of manhood and happily share parenting with their wives. But statistics indicate that a growing number of men expect women to care for children. Other men think real men do not show tenderness and emotions. Some say real men do not weep over disasters and tragedies. Real men with power should govern with absolute authority. Sadly, a growing number of men do not feel the responsibility for caring for their children and the mothers of their children. More and more children are born to parents who never marry. The idea of a permanent commitment to marriage is no longer desirable for many. Sadly, some fathers, not wishing to have a baby, encourage the destruction of developing human life in the mother's womb. Tragically, some fathers are known to harm abuse their young children.

You may think it is out of place to bring up these real-world issues about manhood in America in an Advent sermon which should focus on the idyllic Christmas scene of St. Joseph, St. Mary and the infant Jesus in the manger, surrounded by exotic magi, quaint shepherds, and singing angels. But would Christmas be more real if some men in American society could learn a great deal from the example of St. Joseph? If there was ever a time when the United States needed fathers who were strong, loving and wise men of faith, it is now. Real fathers, like St. Joseph, are men who display paternal strength and compassion in the challenging situations in which they live.

Joseph was clearly a man who faithfully followed the path on which the Holy Spirit guided him. Though he was poor, he worked to provide for his family. (When he and Mary took Jesus to the Temple to be circumcised and Mary to be purified, he offered the sacrifice of two turtledoves which was only allowed for couples too poor to afford a fattened lamb.) When Jesus was 12, Joseph thought he was lost in the temple and searched frantically for him with a father's love for three days (Luke 2:48). Joseph shows us that family life is not built on power and possessions but on goodness, fidelity, purity and mutual love. (Can you imagine Joseph, who suffered under the Roman Empire, being indifferent to the national and global suffering humanity is enduring as we approach the New Year? Can you think of Joseph, who devoted himself to caring for his wife and protecting her wondrous Son watching football games while Mary and Jesus did all of the cleaning, cooking, serving, and dishwashing for a family feast?)

Since there is so much that we do not know about Joseph, he may seem like a “father in the shadows.” From those shadows, he teaches Christian men to be faithful to God’s call providing for their families, serving God in ordinary life through silent, courageous action, trust, and deep love. He lived his humble, ordinary life for an extraordinary purpose, making him the patron saint of families, workers, and the entire Church. He was a real man!

St. Joseph, husband of Mary and guardian of the youthful Jesus: Pray for us!

Praised be Jesus Christ.

Both now and forever. AMEN!