**SAINT JOSEPH**

***Trusting and Trustworthy***

What do we make of St Joseph? We see artists' impressions of him as a lovable, grey‑headed old man holding the Child Jesus. They convey the idea that Joseph was much older than Mary his wife, although there's no foundation for it in Scripture.

Perhaps, the reasoning behind making St Joseph an old man is to make him more like a father than a husband to his young wife, whose virginity is therefore safeguarded, and the supernatural conception of Jesus is made more credible.

In order to explain the gospel’s mention of “the brothers of Jesus”, some think that Joseph must have had children of a previous marriage and that as a widower and an older man he married Mary. This explanation is also intended to save Mary’s virginity. But “brothers” can also include cousins in the Middle East.

Our scriptural knowledge of the foster father of Jesus is sparse. We have none of his spoken words, and there's very little said about him.

Following the lead of Pope John XXIII, it's best that we base our devotion to St Joseph on what scriptural basis there is. We should accord to him the importance that God himself gave him as guardian of Jesus and Mary.

The Church’s public worship is an excellent guide for personal devotions. The Mass of the Solemnity of St Joseph on the 19th of March appreciates the husband of Mary at his proper worth. The words of the Book of Sirach, speaking about Moses, are often applied to St Joseph. One line in particular is apt: "For his trustworthiness and meekness, God selected him from all mankind."

The gospel reading demonstrates both his trustworthiness and his trust in God. It also weakens any grounds for thinking that Joseph was a lot older than Mary. If Mary was engaged to Joseph (Mt 1:18) and soon to be married, then normally she would have been about fifteen and he about twenty.

He found her to be pregnant. By Jewish law, which they both strictly observed, her husband was therefore bound to expose her as an adulteress. He knew that he wasn't the father of her child, but he loved her and trusted her, so much that he didn't want to give the Law its way, which stoned adulteresses to death. So, can you imagine the ordeal he went through? In this kind of human situation, trust in God is heroic when he alone has the answers, but God is often slow to tell us why he has subjected us to such a tragedy.

Even when Joseph received the answer, “because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit” (Mt 1:21), how could he understand it? He had to accept it entirely on faith.

St Joseph emerges, then, as a young man with extraordinary, even heroic, trust, and faith. "For his trustworthiness and meekness, God selected him from all mankind."

An important detail that we have from Scripture is often mistranslated and tends to be misinterpreted. Our popular piety takes an odd turn.

We read the common translation of the gospel account of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem (Lk 2:1-7), and we may well wonder.

Why did Joseph leave such a small margin of safety seeing that Mary's time to bear her child was near? If he was in such a hurry to register for the Roman census, why did he bring Mary along with him at all? Women didn’t have to register or even accompany their husbands to a census. If these are the facts, then St Joseph seems to have bungled his first big job as the trustworthy guardian of Mary and her child. But Christian piety has been quite content to picture him as an impractical and worried old man searching for shelter at the last moment.

No, this interpretation of the gospel account doesn't make sense. We read: "There was no room for them at the inn". Reference to “the inn” is vague, but there's a more accurate translation than that, based on the original Greek text: "There was no room for them to lodge in the house". That’s the important statement of fact on which a valid interpretation can be built.

What house? The house of Joseph's parents or his close relatives. That's why he had to come to Bethlehem to register. His family must have owned property there. Apart from the census, both Joseph and Mary would have been keen that the child Jesus be born in Bethlehem, the city of David, so Mary came for the birth, hopefully in time.

Excavations of the foundations of family homes reveal that the houses had a large upper room (καταλυμα *kataluma*) where the whole family lived, had meals, and slept, and a lower room or stable for the animals. When Mary’s time came, Joseph thoughtfully moved her out of the crowded and noisy living quarters that the extended family was occupying during the census and settled her down in the privacy and quietness of the stable. There’s no need to think of their desperately looking for lodging at the last moment.

We can take our pick of the translations and the interpretations that are based on them. There's no question here of the Church's official teaching. It's simply a question of trying to understand the Scriptures and basing one's personal devotion solidly on them.

Joseph then stands out as a capable young tradesman, trusting and trustworthy, deeply considerate for his young wife and her child, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. There's a man we can all admire and imitate. That’s the sort of men we need, men who are considerate, trusting, and trustworthy. We can put feeling into the prayer of the Mass: "By the help of his prayers, may your Church continue to serve its Lord.”