

COLUMNISTS

What do you know about St. Joseph?

St. Joseph, whose feast is celebrated on March 19, is patron of the universal church as well as of carpenters (of course) and workers, and of Belgium, Canada, China, Korea (with Mary), and Peru. And yet few saints have less known about them than he.

In spite of his important supporting role in the mystery of redemption — as husband of Mary and foster father and guardian of the Child Jesus — not a single word is attributed to Joseph in the New Testament.

A few decades ago one well-meaning theologian tried to make something more of him, attempting to create a new subdiscipline in theology known as Josephology. It never caught on.

However, a less devotional, more critical reading of the New Testament narratives of the birth, infancy, and early childhood of Jesus yields a more positive profile of Joseph than traditional piety accorded him.

In earlier translations Matthew's Gospel spoke of him simply as "a just man" (1:19; more recent versions use "righteous"). But he wasn't "a just man" only in the sense that he never lied, cheated, or stole. His justice was tempered by compassion and understanding.

The same verse that refers to him as a just man also tells us that he was "unwilling to expose Mary to shame" and so "decided to divorce her quietly."



essays in
theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

The discomfiting point of the biblical story is that Mary was already pregnant, even though she and Joseph had not yet come together as husband and wife.

According to law, if a woman were determined to have had sexual relations with someone other than her betrothed, a divorce or annulment could be decreed.

Why Joseph wanted to divorce Mary secretly once he learned of her pregnancy has evoked several different interpretations. The pious explanation is that, even then, Joseph knew all about God's plan and about the virginal conception as well, and simply didn't want to expose Mary to ridicule and public shame from people who couldn't possibly understand. But that doesn't explain why he wanted to divorce her.

The narrative goes on to report that an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph subsequently in a dream, directing him

to take Mary into his home as his wife. Which he did.

Joseph proved a dutiful foster father to Jesus and husband to Mary. He had taken Mary with him to Bethlehem for the census even though women did not need to be present. He took special care of the newborn child's life when, after being warned in another dream, he took Mary and Jesus to Egypt to escape the slaughter of the innocents ordered by King Herod.

After Herod's death, he was told in yet another dream that it was safe to return home. When he learned that Herod's son was ruling over Judea, however, he settled his family in Nazareth instead.

Each year Joseph took Jesus and Mary to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, and when Jesus was 12 years old they went up "according to the festival custom" (Luke 2:42). It was on this occasion that, without his parents' knowledge, Jesus stayed behind in the Temple, engaging the teachers in discussion.

Then Joseph drops out of the story entirely. Mark's Gospel, which starts with Jesus' baptism by John, never even mentions Joseph. Commentators assume that Joseph died some years before Jesus' public ministry began.

The subsequent veneration of Joseph seems to have originated in the East where the apocryphal fourth-century "History of Joseph the Carpenter" en-

joyed wide popularity. Veneration of Joseph developed much later in the West, his feast not appearing on the Roman liturgical calendar until 1479.

Devotion to Joseph was popularized by St. Teresa of Avila and St. Francis de Sales in the 16th century, and he was declared patron of the Universal Church in 1870. It was Pope John XXIII who added his name to the Canon of the Mass in 1962. One of the pope's baptismal names was Joseph.

Perhaps the strongest practical testimony to the enduring force of Joseph's sanctity and his witness to justice lies in those communities which minister selflessly and often courageously, under his tutelage: the Josephite priests and brothers, who have a special ministry to African-Americans, and the Sisters of St. Joseph.

There are many outstanding communities of religious women, to be sure, but none more dedicated to the service of others and to the promotion of justice in particular. The nun at the center of the outstanding film, "Dead Man Walking," is a Sister of St. Joseph, Helen Prejean.

She comes across therein, like so many of her sisters, as a model of pastoral ministry and an uncommon witness to the Gospel. Just like Joseph himself.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Courier welcomes readers' input

In the waning months of 1995, I used this column to tell you about several initiatives that interdepartmental teams of our staff were working on to improve the content of the *Catholic Courier*.

We implemented the first of them — the weekly "On the Move" centerfold — in November and, I believe, that revamped youth package already has hit its stride. (Several attractive submissions have arrived in response to our call for teens to design an "On the Move" T-shirt; we'll soon announce the winning design.)

The monthly "Parenting" feature debuted in late 1995, and a monthly feature for young-adult Catholics began Jan. 18. We're also working on a series of quarterly sports supplements that will wrap up concluding seasons and look forward to the seasons ahead. The first of these supplements will appear April 4.

The forgoing doesn't even address the behind-the-scenes efforts also underway by staff teams. You may have noticed, for example, a series of "house ads" appearing in February to introduce the staff of the various *Courier* depart-



between
the lines

BY KAREN M. FRANZ

ments during Catholic Press Month. The team that developed those ads also has been working on other activities to broaden community awareness of the *Catholic Courier* and the services it provides.

Another team is looking into ways of improving our internal operations — from space allocation and office organization to the ways we communicate information internally. One team is working with diocesan Catholic Charities to enhance the effectiveness of fund raising on behalf of the annual Christmas Appeal, which this newspaper established in 1969. Last, but not least, is a

team looking into the potential the Internet and World Wide Web offer the *Catholic Courier* and its subscribers.

In addition to these staff efforts, the *Courier's* Board of Directors has established a Strategic Planning Committee, comprising board members, staff and pastor representatives. This group, which is charged with charting the *Courier's* future through the year 2001, will be considering such topics as the expansion of advertising revenues, alternative circulation programs and online services.

As the Strategic Planning Committee begins its work, I'd like to ask your input on some of these questions. While you might not consider yourself an expert on such matters, we have found your ideas very helpful in the past and believe you could offer unique insights in these areas as well.

How do you think the *Courier* could attract more businesses to advertise their products and services to our readership?

Have you ever mentioned the *Courier* to a non-Catholic or someone from an-

other parish? Was that person aware of the paper's existence and how he or she could obtain a copy?

Did you realize that the *Courier* is sold on the newsstands of many grocery and drugstores?

Do you operate or know of a business that should consider advertising in the *Courier*?

What kinds of improvements do you think the *Courier* should make in its circulation program?

Do you use a computer at home? Do you have access to an online service (America Online, Prodigy or CompuServe) and the Internet?

If the *Courier* were to go online, would you find it easier to access it through an online service or on the World Wide Web?

What kinds of information or assistance would you like to see the *Courier* offer in an online service?

I look forward to receiving your responses and promise to share them in an upcoming column.

Franz is general manager/editor of the *Courier*.

Kids' Answers

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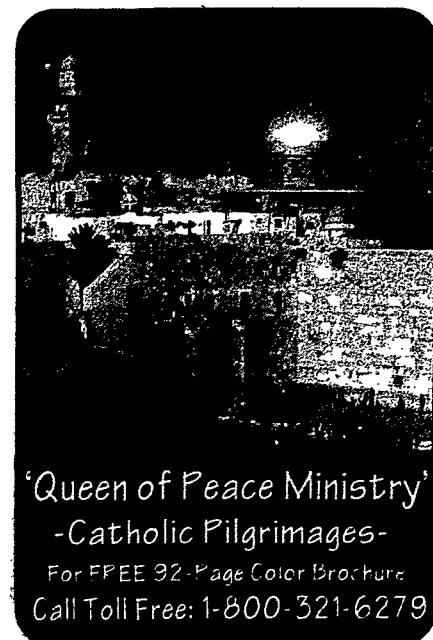


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