

# The Sorrows of St. Joseph

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**News:** Commentary



by **Fr Paul John Kalchik** • ChurchMilitant.com • February 29, 2024

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On March 19, we will celebrate the Solemnity of St. Joseph, the foster father of Our Lord and the spouse of our Blessed Mother. Saint Joseph was a man who took his dreams seriously and, like the patriarch Joseph in the Old Testament (for whom he had been named), heard the voice of God in his dreams and, with no qualms, did what God asked.



St. Joseph and the Christ child

Much has been written about St. Joseph as the most admirable "foster father" of Jesus. But less written about are the many sorrows that St. Joseph endured to complete his life's work of raising the Christ child to manhood. People more readily recognize the sorrows of our Blessed Mother, who was a witness to Our Lord's Passion and death, but arguably fewer acknowledge the sorrows that Joseph endured during the course of his long life to ensure God's Son was raised to adulthood.

I'd argue too that the more we acknowledge and meditate on the sufferings of St. Joseph, the more we'll be able to push back against our culture's maligning of fathers and fatherhood. Meditating on the sorrows of Joseph may provide a perfect Lenten reflection, especially for all men who are fathers, who, in the course of being a dad and caring for their children and families, suffer many such sorrows.

I submit eight sorrows endured by St. Joseph, and all are worthy of reflection and meditation. I am certain that there are many more sorrows endured by the beloved saint, but these eight jump out after a reading of the gospels.

1. Dealing with the public shame involved in taking an expectant Mary into his home

2. Guiding the Blessed Mother with Child to Bethlehem
3. Finding shelter in Bethlehem as Mary is close to giving birth
4. Completing the unplanned flight into Egypt
5. Securing work to provide for the Holy Family as a foreigner in Egypt
6. Setting up a workshop in Nazareth after a protracted absence
7. Witnessing humanity's rejection of God's Son
8. Dying before seeing Jesus fulfill His mission of reconciling humanity to God

## **The First Sorrow of St. Joseph: Taking an Expectant Mary Into His Home**

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Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her." (Matthew 1:18-20)

To start this discussion on the sorrows of St. Joseph, it's important to talk about the suffering that comes with dealing with pharisaic individuals within the faith community. These holier-than-thou individuals pride themselves on following the rules and shower down ridicule upon those who don't measure up to their high standards. From day one of taking Mary into his home, I am certain that Saint Joseph was the target of loads of ridicule from these individuals.

It was not like Saint Joseph could share with anyone other than the Blessed Mother what God had revealed to him in his dreams—that the child Mary was pregnant with God's very own Son. For Saint Joseph to do so would have made their ridicule worse. Joseph probably had to slug through many months, if not years, with the ridicule of such people in Nazareth.

### ***Meditation***

*Persevere in the completion of God's will despite heavy ridicule from family and neighbors.*

## The Second Sorrow of St. Joseph: Transporting the Pregnant Blessed Mother to Bethlehem

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In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town. And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. (Luke 2:1-5)

Even today, with all the modern means of transportation and conveniences, it's tricky to facilitate the safe journey of a pregnant woman. It's easier to leave her home where she has family, friends and doctors. For a pregnant woman, traveling at the end of her term involves many risks. From Luke's Gospel, we know that St. Joseph and Mary were forced to travel on foot to Bethlehem at the worst of all possible times for such a trip.

I am certain that these risks would have played heavily on St. Joseph's mind as Jesus' stepfather. God's holy angels certainly aided Joseph in this long journey. But the angel's spiritual protection probably did little to ease Joseph's worry about caring for a full-term mother on a road trip. You could bet St. Joseph was one hot mess of worry from the first step outside of the village gates of Nazareth until he arrived with Mary in Bethlehem.

### ***Meditation***

*Trust in God's providence and care despite obstacles.*

## The Third Sorrow of St. Joseph: Finding Shelter for Mary Who Is With Child in Bethlehem

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She wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7)

Most of us can't imagine the anguish that St. Joseph must have endured upon finding that there was no room for him and Mary in any inn in Bethlehem. Scripture does not recount how long it took for Joseph to find shelter or who thought to seek shelter in a stable.

Any father who has gone through similar circumstances to provide safe shelter for his family in an emergency knows that the time spent doing so is utter hell. You can imagine the torturous thoughts that went through Joseph's mind: "Will anyone help us in our need? Mary will have her child any moment now; she can't give birth on the street. What am I to do?"

How many doors were shut in St. Joseph's face before someone came to his aid? No one knows the answer to these questions, but Joseph persevered until shelter was found. How many of us would have just given up in a similar situation?

### ***Meditation***

*Keep the faith when things look bleak.*

## **The Fourth Sorrow of St. Joseph: Completing the Flight to Egypt**

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When they had departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy Him. (Matthew 2:13)

I can't fathom what a hardship it must have been for St. Joseph to, at a moment's notice, flee to Egypt with his family. What a test of his faith and a trial of his wits! Few men would have passed this trial. I know I would not have passed!

Idyllic paintings of this biblical account show Mary seated on a donkey with the Christ child. But there is no scriptural record of how the Holy Family traveled. Did they have a donkey for their journey, or did they travel in a caravan?

It's important to think beyond what we see in these paintings and to feel the heat of traveling two millennia ago through the hot, barren caravan routes that led from Jerusalem to Egypt. We can only speculate that this trip was arduous and filled with many perils. Remember, St. Joseph only had a staff to fend off wild beasts and wilder men. Because of Joseph's tenacity and good survival skills, the Holy Family's flight was successful, and they were able to get to Egypt — away from Herod's long and wicked reach.

### ***Meditation***

*Deal with unexpected journeys in order to protect one's family from harm.*

## **The Fifth Sorrow of St. Joseph: As a Foreigner, Finding Work and Caring for the Holy Family in Egypt**

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Rise, take the child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. (Matthew 2:13)

Saint Joseph obediently followed God's instructions to a tee, and because of his faithfulness and obedience, Mary and Jesus thrived in Egypt. It would be ludicrous for us to imagine that living for many years in a foreign nation — in which there were different

religious practices, customs and languages — was all hunky dory. I am certain that St. Joseph, like any immigrant, suffered much to learn the necessary words to find shelter, food and work.

Unlike our Lord's relatively short Passion, this cross of Joseph went on for years. As a man who struggled to learn Spanish in his 50s, I understand the pain of having people mock you for mispronouncing words and failing to communicate effectively. After Herod's death, I am certain St. Joseph welcomed the return trip home to Galilee — where people ridiculing him simply because he was a Jew and a foreigner would come to an end.

### ***Meditation***

*Bear the heavy cross of being misunderstood, i.e., of being a foreigner in a foreign land.*

## **The Sixth Sorrow of St. Joseph: Setting up His Workshop in Nazareth After a Protracted Absence**

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When Herod had died, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Rise, take the child and His mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." He rose, took the child and His mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go back there. And because he had been warned in a dream, he departed for the region of Galilee. He went and dwelt in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled: "He shall be called a Nazorean." (Matthew 2:19-23)

With this single, abrupt line ("He shall be called a Nazorean."), Matthew ends the narrative of Christ's infancy.

In the gospel's third chapter, the evangelist jumps forward a full 23 years, to the point in which Our Lord begins his public ministry. Sadly, St. Joseph is never mentioned again. This is not because Matthew thinks the saint's role in raising and caring for the Holy Family is not important, but it's because this minor story is eclipsed by the evangelist telling the story of humanity's redemption in Jesus.

It is fair to presume that St. Joseph, in the 23 years not mentioned, took the many crosses that came his way in reestablishing a home and a livelihood in Nazareth. Some of the crosses Joseph most likely had to deal with were competing with rival tradesmen for work, not getting paid for jobs and not being able to obtain tools and materials. We need to keep in mind that Joseph did not have a slew of angels at his command to make his work any easier, simply because he had God's son to take care of. But Joseph persevered, and the Holy Family thrived.

***Meditation***

*Carry a heavy burden of work for the love of God without complaint.*

## **The Seventh Sorrow of St. Joseph: He Witnesses Humanity's Rejection of God's Son**

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He came to Nazareth, where He had grown up, and went according to His custom into the synagogue on the sabbath day. He stood up to read ... and He said to them, "Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place. Indeed, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah when the sky was closed for three and a half years and a severe famine spread over the entire land. It was to none of these that Elijah was sent, but only to a widow in Zarephath in the land of Sidon. Again, there were many lepers in Israel during the time of Elisha the prophet; yet not one of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." When the people in the synagogue heard this, they were all filled with fury. They rose up, drove Him out of the town, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their town had been built, to hurl Him down headlong. But He passed through the midst of them and went away. (Luke 4:24-30)

It's hard for us to imagine such an evil scene: The Nazareth villagers attempting to kill Jesus. They attempted to kill him not because he committed a crime, but because he challenged their assumptions and misconceptions.

You hear the disdain of these villagers for Jesus in Mark's Gospel:

When the sabbath came, He began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard Him were astonished. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What kind of wisdom has been given Him? What mighty deeds are wrought by His hands! Is He not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the relative of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not His sisters here with us?" And they took offense at Him. (Mark 6:2-3)

The villagers of Nazareth's hatred must have been intense to attempt to hurl Jesus over a cliff. Instead of welcoming back their native son with joy, they attempt to murder Him.

This kind of violence, targeted at Jesus by Nazareth's villagers, was probably not the first time. Although the gospels are silent about the 23 years Jesus lived in Nazareth, I would wager that Joseph and Mary both witnessed similar incidents of Jesus being rejected and threatened by violence.

What a cross it must have been for both Joseph and Mary to witness firsthand the villagers' rejection of God's Son in the years they lived in Nazareth. As it was not their place to tell anyone who Jesus was, the scorn of their fellow villagers must have been a hard cross for both of them to carry.

### ***Meditation***

*Endure the sadness that comes with witnessing the rejection of Jesus Christ.*

## **The Eighth Sorrow of St. Joseph: He Dies Before Seeing Jesus Fulfill His Mission**

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Scripture tells us nothing about St. Joseph's death. Over the centuries, many saints have speculated about this venerable man's passing, but no one knows anything for certain. Of all the sorrows that Joseph suffered throughout his life, perhaps not seeing the fulfillment of Jesus' redemption of humanity had to be the hardest. Up until the day Joseph died, he did not witness any of Jesus' miracles, he did not hear Jesus preach publicly, and he did not witness the great number of people who would become His disciples.

Saint Joseph unflinchingly did what God asked him to do. He was a stalwart man of faith like Noah of old, who built the Ark with total trust in God despite the ridicule of his neighbors. The faith of Joseph is truly remarkable.

In the Resurrection accounts, we hear of the many doubts that were harbored by the apostles, most notably by St. Thomas. Saint John cites that on that first Easter, Thomas, instead of believing what the other disciples reported to him about the Lord's Resurrection, voiced his doubts: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in His hands and put my finger into the nail marks and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." (John 20:25)

Despite not being an eyewitness to Jesus' public ministry, St. Joseph believed and remained steadfastly obedient to the end. He died, a man who raised the Redeemer to manhood, yet suffered for not being a witness to humanity's redemption in Jesus. Few saints in the long history of our Church have shown such faith.

### ***Meditation***

*Remain steadfast in the Faith despite doubts and temptations.*

## **Closure**

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Because of the gospel's silence about 23 years of Jesus' life and St. Joseph's role in raising our Lord, many of the sorrows that the saint endured in bringing Christ to manhood have been lost. This does not excuse us from meditating prayerfully on those that we surmise happened.



Spending Lenten time reflecting on St. Joseph and his suffering to provide and protect the Holy Family according to God's will will make us more thankful Catholics.