

Young Husband of Mary

I don't agree with the traditional picture of St. Joseph as an old man, even though it may have been prompted by a desire to emphasize the perpetual virginity of Mary. I see him as a strong, young man, perhaps a few years older than Our Lady, but in the prime of his life and work.¹

— St. Josemaría Escrivá

Have you ever read such a statement from a saint about the age of St. Joseph? Saint Josemaría has good reason for asserting that St. Joseph was a young man when he married Our Lady — and St. Josemaría is not the only one who thinks this way.

The Catholic Church has no formal, official teaching on the age of St. Joseph. You are free to believe that St. Joseph was an old man when he espoused Mary if you want to. You are also free to believe he was a young man. Personally, I find it very hard to believe that St. Joseph was an old man. The physical demands of his mission make the probability of him being an old man practically zero.

If you consider the titles that the Church gives St. Joseph in his Litany (Guardian of the Redeemer; Chaste Guardian of the Virgin; Guardian of Virgins; Model of Workmen; Terror of Demons; etc.), they lean in the direction that St. Joseph was young and strong. These titles are not descriptions of an elderly man. Is an old man capable of guarding virgins? Can an elderly man serve as a model of laborers? It takes strength to be a guardian; it takes health to be a worker. Can an old man do these things? As Mother Angelica said, "Old men don't walk to Egypt!" Neither do old men guard anything whose safekeeping requires mobility and strength. None of this implies any moral fault in elderly men, of course. The world is filled with countless holy old men who are virtuous, wise, and saintly. Yet old men are not known for their physical capacity to do the kinds of things that St. Joseph was required to do for the Holy Family.

Then why has the vast majority of art over the centuries depicted St. Joseph as an old man? The most articulate answer to this question is provided by Venerable Fulton J. Sheen. He writes:

Was he [St. Joseph] old or young? Most of the statues and pictures we see of Joseph today represent him as an old man with a gray beard, one who took Mary and her vow under his protection with somewhat the same detachment as a doctor would pick up a baby girl in a nursery. We have, of course, no historical evidence

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on the having watched over

by Mary Martha Chambon

whatsoever concerning the age of Joseph. Some apocryphal accounts picture him as an old man; Fathers of the Church, after the fourth century, followed this legend rather rigidly ...

But when one searches for the reasons why Christian art should have pictured Joseph as aged, we discover that it was in order better to safeguard the virginity of Mary. Somehow, the assumption had crept in that senility was a better protector of virginity than adolescence. Art thus unconsciously made Joseph a spouse chaste and pure by age rather than by virtue. But this is like assuming that the best way to show that a man would never steal is to picture him without hands ...

But more than that, to make Joseph out as old portrays for us a man who had little vital energy left, rather than one who, having it, kept it in chains for God's sake and for his holy purposes. To make Joseph appear pure only because his flesh had aged is like glorifying a mountain stream that has dried. The Church will not ordain a man to his priesthood who has not his vital powers. She wants men who have something to tame, rather than those who are tame because they have no energy to be wild. It should be no different with God.

Furthermore, it is reasonable to believe that Our Lord would prefer, for a foster-father, someone who had made a sacrifice rather than someone who was forced to it. There is the added historical fact that the Jews frowned on a disproportionate marriage between what Shakespeare called "crabbed age and youth"; the Talmud admits a disproportionate marriage only for widows or widowers. Finally, it seems hardly possible that God would have attached a young mother, probably about sixteen or seventeen years of age, to an old man. If he did not disdain to give his mother to a young man, John, at the foot of the Cross, then why should he have given her an old man at the crib? A woman's love always determines the way a man loves: she is the silent educator of his virile powers.

Since Mary is what might be called a "virginizer" of young men as well as women, and the greatest inspiration of Christian purity, should she not logically have begun by inspiring and virginizing the first youth whom she had probably ever met — Joseph, the Just? It was not by diminishing his power to love but by elevating it that she would have her first conquest, and in her own spouse, the man who was a *man*, and not a mere senile watchman!

Joseph was probably a *young* man, strong, virile, athletic, handsome, chaste, and disciplined. Instead of being a man incapable of loving, he must have been on fire with love. Just as we would

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give very little credit to the Blessed Mother if she had taken her vow of virginity after having been an old maid for fifty years, so neither could we give much credit to a Joseph who became her spouse because he was advanced in years. Young girls in those days, like Mary, took vows to love God uniquely, and so did young men, of whom Joseph was one so preeminent as to be called the "just." Instead, then, of being dried fruit to be served on the table of the king, he was rather a blossom filled with promise and power. He was not in the evening of life, but in its morning, bubbling over with energy, strength, and controlled passion. Mary and Joseph brought to their espousals not only their vows of virginity but also two hearts with greater torrents of love than had ever before coursed through human breasts ...

How much more beautiful Mary and Joseph become when we see in their lives what might be called the first Divine Romance! No human heart is moved by the love of the old for the young; but who is not moved by the love of the young for the young? In both Mary and Joseph, there were youth, beauty, and promise. God loves cascading cataracts and bellowing waterfalls, but he loves them better, not when they overflow and drown his flowers, but when they are harnessed and bridled to light a city and to slake the thirst of a child. In Joseph and Mary, we do not find one controlled waterfall and one dried-up lake but rather two youths who, before they knew the beauty of the one and the handsome strength of the other, willed to surrender these things for Jesus. Leaning over the manger crib of the Infant Jesus, then, are not age and youth but youth and youth, the consecration of beauty in a maid and the surrender of strong comeliness in a man.²

Wow! Fulton Sheen is brilliant! As far as I know, no other person in the entire history of the Church has articulated a more convincing argument for a young St. Joseph than Fulton Sheen. As he so clearly states, theology and art only depicted St. Joseph as an old man in order to protect the virginity of Mary.

Now, to be fair, the decision to depict St. Joseph as an old man, whether in preaching, writing, or art, did work to safeguard Mary's virginity and purity. As an extreme example of this, an ancient Coptic text on the life of St. Joseph presents him as being 91 years of age when he espoused Mary! However, all historians and theologians acknowledge that the sources for presenting St. Joseph as an old man come from apocryphal — that is, non-canonical — documents. Relying on apocryphal writings to offer an age for St. Joseph led to presentations of him as an old man, diminishing his virtue, importance,

and greatness in the minds of Christians. No wonder so few people have paid attention to St. Joseph over the centuries.

How drastic an effect did this approach to St. Joseph have? To this day, St. Joseph is rarely included in seminary classes on Christology, Mariology, soteriology, or ecclesiology. The man universally acclaimed as the most loving, just, chaste, prudent, courageous, obedient, and faithful man to ever live doesn't even get mentioned in classes on the theological or moral virtues. This needs to change! Thank God for the wisdom and insights of people such as St. Josemaría Escrivá, Mother Angelica, and Venerable Fulton Sheen. The Church needs to re-present to her children an image of St. Joseph that depicts him as strong, masculine, and young. The constant presentation of him as an old man has severely warped our understanding of the greatest saint (besides Mary) to walk this earth! It's time to reclaim St. Joseph!

Now, don't take this the wrong way. The Lord loves elderly men. God loves a man's years of hard work, service, selfless dedication, and sacrificial love. Calm, just, and peaceful societies rest on the foundations established by old men. Yet those men built the foundations and pillars of civilization when they were young, not when they were old. Likewise, the formative years of Jesus Christ were lovingly ruled by a strong young father named Joseph. It was this hardworking, caring, and virtuous father who laid the foundations for the human growth and development of Jesus Christ. While there is no doubt that an old man is just as capable of being holy as any young man, it takes a strong young father to teach a boy how to swing an axe, work with wood, carry lumber, walk great distances, and earn a living by the sweat of his brow.

If earthly princes consider it a matter of so much importance to select carefully a tutor fit for their children, think you that the Eternal God would not, in his almighty power and wisdom, choose from out of his creation the most perfect man living [St. Joseph] to be the guardian of his divine and most glorious Son, the Prince of heaven and earth?³

— St. Francis de Sales

Blessed William Joseph Chaminade echoes a similar idea, but looks at St. Joseph's manhood from the perspective of his marriage to Our Lady. He writes:

If God had charged you with the honorable task of choosing from among the kings a husband for the Blessed Virgin, would

you not have given her the greatest mind in the world? And if he had ordered you to pick one of the saints, would you not have given her the greatest saint who ever trod the earth? Now, do you think that the Holy Spirit, who is the author of this divine marriage, is less concerned than you are to provide her with a husband suited to her merits?⁴

— Blessed William Joseph Chaminade

Makes a lot of sense, right? Sure it does. Saint Joseph was the loving husband of Mary, not a “retired” husband incapable of manual labor and long journeys on foot. Saint Joseph was known by everyone in Nazareth as the father of Jesus, not the grandfather of Jesus.

As the father of Jesus, St. Joseph was a zealous defender and strong protector of his beloved Son. Saint Joseph sacrificed everything — including the pleasures of conjugal love — to fulfill his mission as “Guardian of the Virgin” and “Guardian of the Redeemer.” Incidentally, when popes and saints use the word “guardian” in reference to St. Joseph, they are using it in more than just a legal sense. They use it in the protective, fatherly, and manly sense. A guardian is someone who is strong, not only in mind and heart, but also physically. Saint John Henry Newman spoke of the guardianship of St. Joseph in the following way:

He [St. Joseph] was the Cherub, placed to guard the new terrestrial paradise from the intrusion of every foe.⁵

A man charged with guarding a territory from the intrusion of every foe needs to be a physically powerful man, not an elderly man requiring a cane. Like a powerful cherub, dedicated to the protection and service of the Queen of Angels, St. Joseph was given the task of guarding the temple of Mary’s body, and in particular, her virginity. Mary’s guardian had to be young and strong in order to successfully fulfill his mission. An elderly man would probably not have the strength to guard a young wife. Neither would an elderly man be likely to have the stamina needed to raise an infant son.

Saint Joseph’s manhood was a protective shield, a protective cloak, for the Blessed Virgin. No man or beast could do any harm to the Virgin because St. Joseph stood attentive and ready to defend her, even to the point of death.

The cloud [that] in the Old Law overshadowed the tabernacle is a figure of St. Joseph’s marriage with the Blessed Virgin. *The cloud covered the tabernacle of the covenant, and the glory of the*

Lord filled it (Ex. 40:32). Saint Joseph's marriage is a sacred veil which covers the mystery of the Incarnation. Everyone sees that Mary is a mother, but only Joseph knows that she is a virgin.⁶

— Blessed William Joseph Chaminade

As a young husband and father, St. Joseph modeled manhood for his Son, Jesus. Every boy should be able to look to his father to understand what it means to be a man. If St. Joseph had been an elderly man, would Jesus have observed in his father any physical strength or true love put into practice through heroic chastity, hard work, and bodily gestures of piety — kneeling, for example? If St. Joseph were two or three times the age of his wife, what would Jesus have observed in his father: afternoon naps and forgetfulness? Again, there's nothing wrong with old age. Growing old is part of human life. Saint Joseph himself aged as life went on, as happens to all men. But would God the Father entrust the upbringing and education of his Son — the Lion of Judah and King of Kings — to an elderly and fragile man? Probably not.

What the Church and the world can learn from a younger depiction of St. Joseph — especially in theology, preaching, literature, and art — is that young men can be chaste, heroic, and holy. Indeed, the Church has countless examples of young men who kept themselves chaste and pure for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. And St. Joseph was the greatest of them all. Saint Josemaría Escrivá tells us:

You don't have to wait to be old or lifeless to practice the virtue of chastity. Purity comes from love; and the strength and gaiety of youth are no obstacle for noble love. Joseph had a young heart and a young body when he married Mary, when he learned of the mystery of her divine motherhood, when he lived in her company, respecting the integrity God wished to give the world as one more sign that he had come to share the life of his creatures. Anyone who cannot understand a love like that knows very little of true love and is a complete stranger to the Christian meaning of chastity.⁷

In my opinion, St. Joseph was a young husband, tender and loving toward his wife, but always chaste, modest, and pure. Mary loved her Joseph. His manly love for her was strong and always controlled by reason and faith. His virile powers, always held in restraint and service to God's will, made him the most virtuous husband and father ever to walk this earth. No woman ever had a greater man than St. Joseph.

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God would not have given the most holy Virgin to Joseph as his wife unless he had been holy and righteous. What right-minded father would ever give his most beloved daughter in marriage to a man who was not moral and beyond reproach according to his rank and state in life?⁸

— St. Lawrence of Brindisi

So what are you to gain from this wonder of St. Joseph? Are you required to believe that St. Joseph was young? No, you are not. But do you understand, at least based on the physical demands his mission would have inevitably placed on him, why it makes more sense that St. Joseph was young rather than old when he married Our Lady? Regardless of which depiction of St. Joseph you prefer, know that St. Joseph is your loving, strong, and fearless spiritual father. Thank him for all that he did out of selfless love for Jesus and your spiritual mother, Mary. Thank him for all that he does for love of you.

I thank you, O holy patriarch Joseph, because we who are incapable of even knowing how to love Jesus and our Immaculate Mother, know and rejoice that you at least loved her as she deserved to be loved, the worthy and true Mother of Jesus.⁹

— Blessed Gabriele Allegra

The Consecrated Knight

Saint Joseph sweetly and continuously stimulates us to love, serve, and imitate the Queen of his heart, the Immaculate Mother of Jesus.¹

— Blessed Gabriele Allegra

Saint Joseph is the most Marian of all saints. His love for Mary is greater than that of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, St. Louis de Montfort, St. Alphonsus Liguori, St. Maximilian Kolbe, and St. John Paul II combined. There has never been a greater Marian saint than St. Joseph, and there never will be.

Saint Joseph is the model for total consecration to Mary. Long before Calvary, when Jesus commanded all of his disciples to take Mary into their hearts and homes (see Jn 19:26-27), St. Joseph had already taken Mary into his heart and into his home. She is his heart; she is his home. Everything he did was done for Jesus and Mary. He lived and died for Jesus and Mary.