

Art & Belief

Joseph, an image of fatherhood

Joseph is a righteous and kind carpenter who follows the laws of God, tries to protect Mary from embarrassment, and travels with his family to and from Egypt. The Bible gives us this minimal description, which extra-Biblical sources elaborated upon. Though they've been denounced as apocrypha, that has done little to impact their popularity. I think of them as fanfiction or a show like "The Chosen." Scripture is the foundation for writers to tell fictional stories that are so compelling that they alter depictions in art—sometimes for the worse.

Take the case of Joseph. A popular 7th-century text distorts him as a timid, useless, old man who was a clueless dad. So he was depicted in art for the next nine centuries, until two Spanish priests advocated for him as a symbol of masculine fatherhood—a man who protects and provides for his family. They argued that he must be strong and vigorous to make long journeys with a young family and continue working in manual labor. Their campaign worked because today, Joseph is the patron saint of families, fathers, workers, and travelers and the Spanish variant of his name, José, is among the most common names worldwide.

My favorite story about Joseph comes from the 2nd-century *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, which imagines Jesus at age eight working alongside his legal father, the carpenter. A rich man commissions a couch, which requires two cross piece boards cut at equal length, but one is cut too short! Joseph does not know what to do, but Jesus suggests that he hold the two pieces together at one end while Jesus holds the other end. Joseph does and Jesus lengthens the short piece to the right length. Joseph is so happy he hugs his child and says: "Blessed am I, because God has given me this child!"

I see this sentiment in Joseph's loving expression in Pietro Annigoni's painting of *St. Joseph the Worker* (1964). Wearing workman's clothing, a carpenter's belt, and a cap upon his graying hair, a triangle of gold light illuminates Joseph from behind forming a halo-like aura of sacredness around manual labor and ordinary moments in life. Notably, Joseph pauses his woodwork to focus instead on his work as an earthly father. He humbly watches this sweet boy Jesus. Annigoni reminds us of Jesus's sacrifice—Jesus pauses with three nails, he wears a sacrificial red



Pietro Annigoni, *St. Joseph the Worker*, 1964. Altarpiece in *St. Joseph Chapel*, San Lorenzo, Florence, Italy.

garment, and a beam of light highlights both the top of the child's head and the wood beam leaning on the table to the left. If we follow the line of the wooden beam into the sky, we can see a slanted golden cross.

Joseph's hand is positioned over Jesus's head gesturing both protection and a loving stroke of his hair. They are in a ramshackle building, but Joseph's strong and capable body provides shelter and security for the small child. However, it is God, indicated by the red clouds that stretch across the sky that protects them both and redeems Christ on the cross.

Happy Father's Day to all the fathers who, like Joseph, keep showing up and growing in love!

-- Gayle L. Goudy, PhD

Art & Belief Adult Education returns to the Dotterer Library on Sundays at 10:30 on June 8, 15, and 22!