

Why Did St. Joseph Intend to Divorce the Blessed Virgin Mary?

There is no formal Church teaching on St. Joseph's motives for *sending the Blessed Virgin Mary away quietly* upon learning of her pregnancy. In fact, the saints and doctors of the Church are not in agreement.

If we examine Sacred Scripture we can see why St. Joseph likely never doubted the Blessed Virgin.

When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to send her away quietly." But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. (Matthew 1:18-21)

Most people will tell you that the reason St. Joseph intended to "send her away quietly" was because he suspected that the Blessed Virgin had been unfaithful. That makes sense because when most women show up pregnant before getting together with their husbands....well, you know. However, Sacred Scripture does not present St. Joseph's reasoning for this decision.

What are the facts presented in Sacred Scripture?

Before they came together the Blessed Virgin Mary was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit.

The description of the discovery of the Blessed Virgin Mary's pregnancy includes the Holy Spirit being the cause. If we read a sentence, "before they (Dick and Jane) came together Jane was found to be with child of John," we would likely assume that Dick knew that John was the father.

There is no clarification that St. Joseph did or did not know the reason for the Blessed Virgin's pregnancy and we have *no reason* to assume that he did not know the miraculous nature of her pregnancy. When the Blessed Virgin revealed her pregnancy to St. Joseph did she tell him the truth about the visit of the angel? He was her husband and the head of their family. He would be entitled to know the facts and not to tell him would be to lead him into suspecting untrue possibilities. She would not lie to him. I think it is safe to assume that she told St. Joseph the truth.

Did St. Joseph believe her?

If she had told him he would have had to conclude she was telling the truth or lying. If he knew her well he would have known that she would not tell a lie. The Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit was the cause of her pregnancy and all Christians believe it. We do not get an angel; we just get a story. While we know the Blessed Virgin by reputation, St. Joseph knew her personally. It is at least possible that if the holiest person he knew had told him about her amazing pregnancy he would have believed her.

Being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, St. Joseph resolved to send her away quietly.

Justice demanded that a betrothed woman found pregnant by willing relations with a man other than her husband be stoned to death (Deuteronomy 22:23-24). If St. Joseph suspected his betrothed of infidelity and decided to spare her it would have been because he was a merciful man not because he was just. If his sense of justice spared her, then it would have been because he believed she was guilty of no crime.

If he believed she was innocent why did he still intend to put her away quietly?

She had been chosen to give birth to a child *by God*. Once she had accepted, that made her the spouse of the Holy Spirit. If he had continued to pursue marriage he would be vying for someone who now belonged to God. A holy man like St. Joseph would have been unwilling and even *afraid* to do so without permission. The Angel Gabriel had not told the Blessed Virgin that St. Joseph had permission to have such a role. In fact, St. Joseph should have reasoned that as soon as the Blessed Virgin said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." (Luke 1:38) to God's plan for her motherhood that he was not in the picture any longer. It would seem logical that if St. Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary were to be raising Jesus together that St. Joseph would have been asked to give his consent, too.

Why didn't the Angel Gabriel appear to St. Joseph and ask for his cooperation before the Holy Spirit overshadowed the Blessed Virgin?

God's plan for redemption of the human race did not just involve Our Lord's Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection. It included an undoing of original sin. Eve had participated in Adam's failure. With Adam standing beside her and failing to intervene, Eve had said, "yes," to the offer made by the fallen angel. Adam had stood separate from Eve, although he was physically present. In Eve's "yes" she had said "no" to God. In response, God sent a holy angel to the New Eve. Standing alone, the New Eve said "yes" to the holy angel and to God. St. Joseph should not have been there because Adam had chosen to act as if he was not. So, as part of God's plan, St. Joseph learned of his betrothed's choice after she made it.

Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

The angel recognizes that St. Joseph was fearful. Why? Was it because that which was conceived in her was of the Holy Spirit? No other cause of fear is mentioned. Would a man who had suspected that his betrothed was unfaithful be fearful of being married to her? People who discover unfaithfulness are usually described as angry or sad, but not fearful.

For St. Joseph not to be fearful of offending God by marrying the Blessed Virgin he would need to know that God wanted him to act in the role of the father of Our Lord. By telling St. Joseph to name Him, St. Joseph was being directed, not so much to marry the Blessed Virgin, but to act in the role of parent to Our Lord.

The wording is unclear as to whether the explanation “that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit,” was an explanation of why he feared or an explanation why he should not fear.

St. Joseph would be a better man and a better husband if he had correctly discerned that the Blessed Virgin was telling the truth, if he had trusted his betrothed when she should have been trusted. However, he would NOT have been a better man if he had taken parental authority over the Son of God without explicit permission from God to do so. For that, he needed an angel.

St. Joseph stands as the perfect example for Christian husbands and fathers. He would trust his wife when she should be trusted. He would seek to know the will of God in all things and accept God’s will when it was revealed.

Good St. Joseph, protector of virgins and terror of demons, pray for us. In Christ’s name we pray.
Amen.