

The Feast of the Espousals of Mary and Joseph

Jean Gerson

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Introduction

Jean Gerson (1363-1429) was born in Gerson-lès-Barby, on the Seine River. At the age of fourteen, he went to the University of Paris, eventually earning a doctorate in theology in 1395; the same year, he became chancellor of the University and head of the theology faculty. Though he resigned from academia in 1398, criticizing the academic life and its focus on fulfilling the whims of patrons rather than true study, he later resumed his post in 1400, after an illness made him realize the importance of writing for an audience outside academia. Throughout his life, he met with the various Popes, working to end the papal schism. After attending the Council of Constance (1414-1418), he spent some time at the Abbey of Melk in Austria, as well as some time in Vienna, before returning to France in 1419. He ended his life in Lyon, where he spent his last decade teaching and writing copiously.

Gerson was an extremely prolific writer, in both Latin and French. Among his most famous works are *Speculative Mystical Theology*, *Practical Mystical Theology*, and *Opus Tripartitum*, a guide to the Christian life. His sermons, in either language, were incredibly popular; also somewhat known were his writings on the true purpose of universities, as well as his critique of the famous allegorical love poem *Romance of the Rose*, initially written by Guillaume de Lorris (1200-1240) and then excessively completed by Jean de Meun (1240-1305).

Amidst all this writing, Gerson had a particular devotion to St. Joseph, often being heralded as one of the first exemplars of Josephite devotion. One fruit of this devotion was his attempt to promulgate a Feast of the Espousals of Mary and Joseph. In two letters, written in 1400 and 1416, respectively, he laid out a scheme for this feast, and he even composed a set of Office texts for the feast. Gerson's original proposal seems to have never been accepted: though I have found some claims that a Feast of the Espousals was instituted in Chartres in 1482, the first definite record of a similar feast is among St. Jeanne de Valois' Nuns of the Annunciation, who first celebrated the feast (per permission of Pope Leo X) on October 22, 1517. In 1537, the Servites were allowed a similar feast on March 8; as the feast was picked up by various dioceses, though, the most common date became January 23. (This date originated in the Diocese of Arras in 1556.) The feast never entered the general Roman calendar, but it was fairly widespread until a curtailment in 1961; after that time, only those communities with a distinct connection to the feast could celebrate it. Prime among those is the Oblates of St. Joseph, who were granted permission in 1989.¹

In this collection, I provide summaries of Gerson's two letters regarding the feast (with copious excerpts), as well as a translation of the complete Office texts Gerson composed.

Source: *Ioannis Gersonii, Doctoris et Cancellarii Parisiensis, Quarta pars Operum...* (Paris, 1606), 215B-218F (Letter of 1400), 213C-215A (Letter of 1416), 219A-223 (Office Texts).

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1 A more detailed history of the feast can be found in Michael P. Foley, "The Feast of the Espousals of Mary and Joseph," *The New Liturgical Movement*, January 21, 2021. Some additional information can be found in the "Feast of the Holy Spouses" article on the website of the Oblates of St. Joseph.

Letter of August 13-17, 1400

In this letter, Jean Gerson discusses his proposal for a Feast of the Marriage (*conjugium*) of Mary and Joseph:

It has pleased divine wisdom (who *reaches from end to end strongly, disposes all things sweetly* (Wis 8:1)) to, in these last times, incline the hearts of many to teach that the virginal (so Jerome calls it) marriage of the just Joseph and Mary should be venerated with the solemn cult of the Church, and to promote its devotion. They are moved (so I deem) by the Gospel's word, excellently and often preaching the prerogatives with which that just Joseph shone. They are moved by the honor and love of his most blessed wife, who called him "Lord," as Sarah did to Abraham—so the Apostle says (1 Pet 3:6). They are moved by the humanity and benignity of Jesus our Savior, Who submitted to them. They are moved, again, by the working of the miracles which they deem to have been done to themselves and others by the invocation of the same just Joseph. They are moved, finally, by the manifold edification of morals which the devoted mind receives from religious meditation on this most sacred marriage, and which makes it burn with the copious fire of chaste devotion.

Such souls argue for a feast of this marriage, with texts taken, not from apocryphal sources, but from the Scriptures themselves, particularly the Song of Songs, "the marriage-song [*Epithalamium*] of this nuptial and virginal marriage," per Hebrew custom. Such a feast could be celebrated on the Thursday of the Fourth Week of Advent, since the preceding Wednesday includes the reading "The Angel Gabriel was sent..." (Lk 1:26).

For, probably, without prejudice against a truer opinion [*sine praeiudicio sententiae verioris*] and without boldness of assertion, the marriage of Joseph with Mary was solemnized as soon as possible after the Angelic annunciation, when the Angel taught Mary, saying, "And behold Elizabeth your kinswoman, and she has conceived a son in her old age" (Lk 1:36), wherefore one can assume she was incited by a desire to visit Elizabeth and to minister to her. But Mary, at that time, was not only betrothed to the same Joseph by words of the future, but also by those of the present, and received into familial cohabitation into the very house of her husband, as was the custom observed by the Jews.

When Joseph found Mary to have conceived by the Holy Spirit, this occurred “before they had come together,” as the Gospel said, meaning, before “the rite of the nuptial celebration had occurred.” Joseph wanted to put her away quietly, but the Lord revealed the truth of this miraculous birth to him. “And Joseph, arising from sleep, immediately did as the angel prescribed, and accepted his wife in a renowned [*celebri*] way, just as one could believed he had prepared before [*prout antea præparasse credit potest*]. Therefore, the solemnity of the nuptials being consummated, it happened that, as Luke says, ‘Mary, arising, went unto the mountain with haste’ (Lk 1:39), with Joseph’s permission. We gather from these things the reason for placing this Gospel according to Matthew (‘But Joseph, arising from sleep, etc.’ (Mt 1:24)) immediately after the Gospel ‘The Angel Gabriel was sent.’ And, next, that according to Luke, which is read on the Thursday of the aforementioned Fourth Week of Advent: ‘But Mary, arising, went unto the mountain.’”²

After this discussion, Gerson then goes into his arguments for why Joseph was a young man (“that is, under fifty years of age”) when he married Mary, and not an old man, as well as for the ways living with Joseph protected her from the charge of adultery. He further argues that “Joseph, before he was joined with the virgin Mary, was not corrupted or wedded.”

He brings up one final point:

Let us confidently add that, as the eternal wisdom of God, foreseeing the whole mystery of the Incarnation, preordained the just Joseph to be the guardian and witness of His mother, to be, furthermore, His continual nurse [*nutricium*], so He gave to this guardian and nurse all that was befitting, decent, and honest. For this reason, it is probable that He consecrated the just Joseph in his mother’s womb, that He cooled all the smoldering lures of concupiscence in him [*ab omni fomitis illecebrosi refrigaverit concupiscentia*]. So that, later, when he died, as the law of Adam commanded, He personally visited him, and, so that He would console him, leading his soul unto the repose of the just, until he arises, He said to his soul “Today you will be with Me in paradise.” Perhaps He meant by this that his

2 This final reference is a mistake, as Gerson wrote “Thursday” (*feria quinta*) when he meant to write “Friday” (*feria sexta*). In the traditional lectionary, during the Ember Days that fall between the Third and Fourth Sundays of Advent, the reading “The Angel Gabriel was sent” (Lk 1:26) is read on Wednesday, and the reading “But Mary, arising, went unto the mountain” (Lk 1:39) is read on Friday. Gerson proposes that his feast, with its reading of “But Joseph, arising from sleep” (Mt 1:24), be placed on the intervening Thursday.

soul and body would arise together, just as many bodies who slept arose when He died (cf. Mt 27:52). Thereafter, perhaps he appeared to his sweetest wife Mary on that day of resurrection, when her Son said to her, “Hail, holy parent,”³ saying also to the same Joseph, “Hail, most-graced [*charissima*] spouse.”

3 These words (*Salve, sancta parens*) are the opening words of the traditional Introit for Feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Letter of September 7, 1416

In this later letter, Gerson reiterates his proposal, and includes some more liturgical details. In this letter, writing to a “Parus” (*Parui*), Cantor of Chartres, he mentions that, in Chartres, that had traditionally been a solemn commemoration of Joseph, “knowing that praise of him is praise of Mary,” and that the cantor Henry Chicoti [*Henricus Chiquoti*] had offered some funds to re-establish such a feast, particularly in connection with St. Joseph’s patronage of good and happy deaths. Said Henry also helped inspire Gerson in his Josephite devotion.

One method of promoting such devotion is the feast Gerson recommended in his letter from 1400 (which letter he references here): a feast to be celebrated “on the Thursday in Advent when the fasts of the fourth week are celebrated.”⁴ Just as the reading “The Angel Gabriel was sent” is read at Matins and the Mass for that Ember Wednesday, so “Joseph, arising from sleep” should be read at Matins and Mass on Thursday.⁵ There should follow three Matins readings expounding this text, which Gerson later wrote.

As an alternative to this feast of the wedding of Mary and Joseph, Gerson also offers a feast of the passing of Saint Joseph (*transitus sancti Joseph*), already celebrated in some places overseas. “This celebration is regularly assigned to the octave day of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, unless this occurs on Septuagesima or Sexagesima Sunday; then, there is an anticipation.” However, the Augustinian Friars in Milan celebrate it on March 19; many parts of Germany celebrate it, but Gerson knew not the day.

Gerson ends by begging that his correspondent acquiesce to these ideas, which can lead to “virtue, praise, and merit, through the intercession, for you, of this most venerable and divine Trinity of Jesus, Joseph, and Mary.”

4 An interesting note: here, he uses pagan names for days of the week (*die Iovis*, “day of Jove” for Thursday; *die Mercurii*, “day of Mercury” for Wednesday) instead of liturgical names (*feria quinta*, “fifth day”; *feria quarta*, “fourth day”), as he did in his letter from 1400.

5 Gerson here specifies that the reading ends with “and call His name Jesus” (Mt 1:25).

Office of the Espousals of Mary and Joseph

Introit: “Let us all rejoice in the Lord, celebrating the feast day in honor of Joseph and Mary, in whose marriage the angels rejoice, and they together praise the son of God.”

Verse: “This is a great sacrament, but I speak of the Church and of Christ.” (Eph 5:32)

Glory etc. Glory in the highest etc.

Collect: “God, Who gave Your only-begotten to temporal parents without carnal commerce, to the just Joseph and Mary, wedded virgins, make us, we pray, through their intercession, participants in the heavenly nuptials. Through the same Lord,” etc.

Epistle: “For Sion I will not be silent, and for Jerusalem I will not be quiet, until there arises within her like splendor, and her savior is kindled like a lamp. And the nations will see your justice, and all the kings your fame. And a new name will be called to you, which the mouth of the Lord has named; and you will be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord, and a diadem of a king in the hand of your God. You will no more be called ‘derelict,’ and your land will no more be called ‘desolate.’ But you will be called ‘my will in her,’ and your land will be inhabited, since it pleased the Lord to dwell in you. For a youth will dwell with a virgin, and your sons will dwell in you, and a husband will rejoice over his wife, and your God will rejoice over you” (Is 62:1-5).

Gradual: “You know, Lord, that I never desired man, and I preserved my soul clean from all concupiscence” (Tob 3:16).

Verse: “But I consented to receive a man because of fear of You, not because of my lust” (Tob 3:18).

Alleluia with the melody of *Dulce lignum*.⁶ “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to accept Mary your wife, for what is born in her is of the Holy Spirit.” (Mt 1:20)

⁶ *Dulce lignum* (Sweet wood) is part of the hymn *Crux fidelis* (Faithful Cross), drawn from the long hymn *Pange lingua* (Sing, tongue) by St. Venantius Fortunatus (530-609). *Crux Fidelis* was traditionally sung during the Veneration of the Cross on Good Friday.

Prose. “To Joseph was sent a messenger in dreams,” etc. is placed after the end of the sermon. “But Jacob...”, as is found before in the third part of the works of Gerson.⁷

To Joseph was sent a messenger in dreams;
he spoke to the just man hoping, meanwhile,
for a nod of assent: “Do not fear,
Davidic offspring, to accept a spouse;
heavenly commands wed you to this virgin.

“To you the King of Glory joins Mary;
see how grace postulates this modest
matrimony. Believe, magnanimous one.
Hear, do not hesitate; these things are too great.
How you will sing a new Epithalamion!⁸

“Be conscious, if you please, that she has a son;
fulfill the commands quickly while you know the mystery;
do not reveal this; arise, tell the message
to your wife straightforward: ‘For the Lord wills this:

7 In the third volume of Gerson’s works (1606 edition), there is a sermon on the Nativity of Mary beginning with the words, from Matthew, “But Jacob become Joseph, the man of Mary, from whom was born Jesus, Who is called...” (128-147). Before the sermon is a sequence (127-128), modeled on that previously used for the Feast of the Annunciation (see next note). I have inserted the full text of this sequence here. See *Ioannis Gersonii Doctoris et Cancellarii Parisiensis Tertia pars Operum...* (Paris, 1606), 127-128.

8 An epithalamion is a wedding hymn.

I promptly give myself, as husband, to you, Mary.”

Virgin, may you receive the deposit of God,
in which may you perfect the proposed vow
with the grace of offspring; I will that you announce;
the Virgin humbly, giving thanks, returns,
therefore, the wedlock is solemnly joined.

They wed with angelic choirs singing,
the parents clasp hands with sacred joy;
they chastely dance, sweetly singing;
Hymen,⁹ drawing them to the joy, introduces
what occurs in heaven, and they are amazed.

The Virgin, quickly visiting her kin,
asks, “Joseph, do you want me to go?” He wills, and gives equally
faithful friends; secretly Elizabeth and
the infant give applause, a kind of prophet;
then the Virgin returns, gives birth, without doubts.

9 Hymen is the Greek god of marriage (later adapted by Romans): a strange pick for an Office hymn.

In Joseph see a little decorum;
Joseph gives an eye; carry, warm, refresh.
O, such glory is set in you,
which commands heaven; He serves, He obeys,
Who tempers the world—O miracles!

Tell your Son, “Now, by body’s right,
You have Your own right, agreement through strength;
You were given to my wife, the Holy Spirit
gave Himself vicariously, making the womb
of my wife pregnant with You, voluntarily, from heaven.”

Word-begetting Virgin, Virgin, font of grace,
come to us, full of mercy for our race,
and, full of vice, we plead you, virgin,
you, famed Joseph, your Son Whom we worship,
Jesus, may He placidly arrange us in joy.

O Trinity to be venerated, Jesus, Joseph, and Mary,
whom the concord of divine charity conjoined;
the mother, virgin, gave birth in an inn,

on whose breasts Jesus sucked; Joseph rejoices in service;
 here a virgin serves a virgin with humble benignity.
 But to the twin virgins, full of charity,
 be great praise of humility; to Joseph, but to a greater virgin,
 and to the offspring of deity, there is praise in the summit;
 here, the throne of humility, distinct in three grades,
 and likewise grace's gift, we now extol in praises,
 that, through their prayers, it be given to follow
 the life of humility and, through grace, to enjoy eternal joys;
 "amen" we say to each, this sacred triple union,
 singing the praises of servants to the Lord, one and three.

And it is sung with the same tune with which this prose is sung: "¶He did not send the virgin any messenger..."¹⁰

Gospel according to Matthew: "But Joseph, arising from sleep, did as the angel ordered him, and received his wife, and did not know her, until she bore her only-begotten Son, and she called ¶His Name Jesus." (Mt 1:24-25)

10 *Mittit ad Virginem / Non quemvis Angelum* is a sequence that was formerly used for the Feast of the Annunciation. It is often attributed to Peter Abelard (1079-1142). The sequence reads: "The lover of man did not send the virgin any angel, but His strength, the archangel. May he declare for us the strong message, may make the fore-judgment of a virgin's birth occur in nature. // May the King of glory, born, overcome nature, may He reign and rule and remove from our midst the weight of dross. May the one mighty in battle frighten the battlements of the proud, trampling, through His force, the high necks. // May He toss outside the prince of the world and may His mother be a partaker in the Father's empire with Him. Go, you who are sent to spread these gifts, remove the veil of the old letters by virtue of the message. // Bring your message in person; say, "Hail," say, "Full of grace," say, "The Lord is with you," and say, "do not fear." Virgin, may you receive the deposit of God, in which may you perfect the proposed chastity and keep your vow. // The maiden hears and receives the message, she believes and conceives and bears a son, but admirable, counselor of the human race, and strong God, and Father of the later age, stable in faith. // Whose stability renders us stable, lest the slippery mobility of the world keep us from being partakers with Him. But may the giver of pardon, through excessive pardon, having obtained grace through the mother of glory, dwell in us." Gerson erroneously uses the word *nuncium* ("messenger" or "herald") instead of *angelum* ("angel") in his reference.

Offertory: “The parents of Jesus took the boy to Jerusalem, that they would place Him before the Lord, and they would offer a pair of turtle-doves or two young doves.” (cf. Lk 2:22, 24)

Another offertory: “Let each one love his wife as himself, but let the wife fear her husband.” (Eph 5:33)

Secret prayer: “We venerate that virginal marriage, Lord, in which we believe Him born Who was circumcised, and presented in the Temple, and immolated on the altar of the Cross for us, our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, Who with You lives and reigns, God, through all the ages of ages.”

Preface: “And on the betrothal of the blessed...”¹¹

Communion: “His father and mother were amazed at the things which were said about Him. And Symeon blessed them, saying: ‘Now You have dismissed Your servant, Lord, according to Your word, in peace. Since my eyes have seen Your salvation.’” (cf. Lk 2:29-34).¹²

Another Communion: “Whom Moses wrote of in the Law and the Prophets, we have found: Jesus, the son of Joseph of Nazareth.” (Jn 1:45)

Another Communion: “‘Son, what have You thus done to us? Behold, Your father and I, sorrowing, sought You,’ and He descended with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them.” (Lk 2:48, 51)

Prayer after Communion: “We give You thanks, Lord, for the virginal marriage of the just Joseph and Mary, asking that we might enjoy the blessed Fruit born in it with perpetual sweetness. He Who with You lives and reigns in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, through all ages of ages. Amen.”

11 The Roman Canon has various Prefaces for the different major feasts of the liturgical year. The Preface for feasts of Mary was the same for each of her feasts, except for one phase that specified the feast being celebrated. Gerson here gives the replacement phrase for his feast, though there is a transposal of two words: the text reads *Et in te desponsatione beatæ*, but, to match the Preface, it should read *Et te in desponsatione beatæ*. Here is how the phrase reads in the context of the Preface: “It is truly meet and just ... for us to always and everywhere give You thanks ... And to praise, bless, and proclaim You on the betrothal of the blessed Mary ever-Virgin...”

12 Gerson has rearranged the order of the Scriptural text; in the text of Luke, the *Nunc dimittis* comes before “his father and mother were amazed,” but Gerson puts vv. 29-32 (*Nunc dimittis*) after vv. 33-34.

Matins Readings for the Feast

[Note: In the Tridentine Divine Office, the Office of Matins was generally equivalent to the modern Office of Readings; however, while the Office of Readings can be read at any time of day, Matins was a midnight office (though its name means "morning"). The traditional arrangement of readings was three groups (Nocturns), each consisting of three readings. For a normal day, these would consist Psalms or portions of Psalms; on feast days, or during certain liturgical seasons, some or all of these Psalms would be replaced by other readings (maybe Epistles; maybe lives of the saints; maybe Patristic writings, often commenting on particular Scriptural texts). For his proposed feast, Gerson wrote a commentary on his selected Gospel text for the feast (Mt 1:24-25), which he split into three sections, to make up a single Nocturn.

Paragraph divisions in the third reading are my own addition, to aid in reading. Note that my translation distinguishes two similar terms: bride (sponsa) and wife (coniunx), as well as their male counterparts.]

At that time: But Joseph, arising from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and accepted his wife, and did not know her until she bore her firstborn son, and he called His name Jesus (Mt 1:24-25).

First Reading

¶The consecration of the most chaste and most devoted marriage of the just Joseph and Mary Ever-Virgin should be recalled with veneration, beloved brethren. By Matthew's referring and the angel's ordering and Joseph's obeying, we know it was celebrated. Let every century marvel at this, let every age rejoice, and let every state and sex exult. ¶Therefore, if the apostle handed on that any marriage performed according to rite, even among sinners and those joined in concupiscence, is a great sacrament in Christ and in the Church (cf. Eph 5:32), how much more so should that matrimony be judged, where

virginity weds, where those who are marrying have no violation nor concupiscence, where, moreover, faith remained most whole and inseparable, where, unlike most [*rursus pleros*], there was none other than that very Jesus Who is God, blessed unto the ages. What other [marriage] could be considered to have such praise? The evangelic Isaiah once foretold this to the congregation of the just, saying, *For a young man will dwell with a virgin* (Is 62:5), that is, Joseph with Mary, as the authentic doctors explain it. And, again, *the groom will rejoice over the bride* (Is 62:5). Further, regarding the praises and prerogatives of those who are marrying, who are the just Joseph and Mary, no power of speech is enough to tell them, no tongue, either of men or of angels, would suffice to express them. But you, etc.

First Responsory

The angel Gabriel was sent to Mary the virgin, betrothed to Joseph, announcing to word to her, and the virgin was terrified of the light. Do not fear, Mary, for you have found grace with the Lord. Behold, you will conceive and bear a son, and He will be called “Son of the Most High.”

Verse. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.

Behold, you will conceive.

Second Reading

Therefore, let your devotion think of how the new covenants of weddings are contracted with celebrated rites among nearly all peoples. Invited friends come, they are adorned with more elegant clothing, they indulge in more luxurious foods, then they show joy in whatever ways they can. For musical instruments are played, singing voices resound, and the earth is beat with free foot in rhythm. For so we read that Ahasuerus made a magnificent feast for the joining and wedding with Esther (cf. Est 2:18). So in the wedding of the younger Tobias with Sarah (cf. Tob 8:19), so with others in the Old Testament, we find marriages solemnized. Here is that spiritual wedding-song, which we call the Song of Songs. Furthermore, the evangelic parable hints at this, damning the

man who entered the wedding-feast without a wedding garment (cf. Mt 22:12). But you, etc.

Second Responsory

While the mother of Jesus was betrothed to Joseph. Before they came together, she was found pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

Verse. But Joseph, her man, since he was just, and did not want to hand her over, he willed to dismiss her secretly.

Before, etc.

Third Reading

Let these things be thus prefaced, so that we might show that the virginal marriage of the just Joseph and Mary is to be honored and celebrated. Therefore, “Joseph accepted Mary his wife,” as the present Gospel says (Mt 1:24). But how did he accept? Was it secretly? Was it in hiding? Was it without the solemnity of a wedding? Far be it for him to transgress the custom of his people. Far be it from him to blush at doing openly what he did, by the angel’s command, after the first betrothal. Therefore, he called together relatives, friends, and neighbors, with the festal apparatus. Neither frugal poverty hindered him, nor did the holy man’s severity prohibit him from following the custom of his people. And he who attends will judge this, just as it is read that the very mother of Jesus, now more aged and elder, adorned another wedding-feast, in Cana of Galilee, with her presence. For so John her guardian wrote, that *the mother of Jesus was there* (Jn 2:1). To which [wedding-feast] Jesus was invited, with His disciples, and He consecrated it, deeming it worthy of His first miracle, when, at His mother’s pious plea, He changed water into wine, and gave joy to the feasters.

And we, beloved brethren, venerate the memory of such a mystery and such a sacrament with pious and sober jollity, which the evangelist Matthew explains, saying, *But Joseph, arising from sleep* (Mt 1:24). Beautifully does he say that Joseph arose. For “Joseph,” by his interpretation, means “increase” or “addition”: such was he who, always adding to

his perfection daily, arranged ascents in his heart, arising and going from virtue to virtue, until God was seen below in Sion (cf. Ps 84:6-7); furthermore, rightly, as Luke says of Mary the virgin, betrothed to Joseph, that, after the revelation of the mystery of the Incarnation, *arising, she went unto the mountain* (Lk 1:39), so does Matthew tell of her husband Joseph, who knew the sacrament through his own angelic inspiration, saying, *But Joseph, arising from sleep* (Mt 1:24): both arose. But it is not said of Mary that she arose from sleep, though perhaps she also did from sleep. For the rational spirit has its sleep, which the royal prophet himself announces, saying: *In peace, in it, I will sleep and rest* (Ps 4:8). Similarly the devoted soul in the Song speaks of it: *I, she says, sleep, and my heart keeps vigil* (Sgs 5:2). Indeed, a man sleeps, and happily sleeps, when, having put to sleep and, in a sense, bound the lower powers of thought and affection, the spirit itself, set in the desire for eternity alone, reposes. There it dwells on the holy mountain of the Lord, protected in the secret of the admirable tabernacle, in divine mist, in opulent rest, in its husband's nuptial chamber, zealous and saying: *I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, that you not arouse nor awaken love until it wills* (Sgs 8:4). There it sleeps, marveling at the law of God. There the uncertain and hidden things in the wisdom of God become manifest to it.

Let not Paul, nor Moses, nor Mary, be an example to us, but that just Joseph, to whom the super-admirable mystery of the Incarnation was revealed in sleep. *Joseph* (the angel says), *son of David, do not fear to accept Mary your wife, for what is born in her is of the Holy Spirit. But she will bear a son, and you will call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins* (Mt 1:20-21). Therefore, in this sleep, and in others, later, Joseph received the prophetic spirit for all the differences of time, for the past, the present, and the future. He knew that Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit, in regards to the past. He knew that God was the boy whom she presently had in her womb, knowing, from the Sacred Scriptures, that none except God forgives sins (cf. Lk 5:21; Mk 2:7). Therefore, He is God, of Whom this is said: *you will call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins*. And this is likewise a prophecy of future things.

Furthermore, Mary arose (cf. Lk 1:39), but to what did she arise? Certainly, so that, through eager action, she would minister to Elizabeth, the ancient woman and new mother, her kinswoman, where she was worried and stirred about many things (cf. Lk

10:41), but not troubled [*ubi sollicita, ubi turbata...sed non conturbata*],¹³ for she laughed assiduously in this [*ridebat assidue in idipsum*], namely, in that one thing that is necessary. Likewise, Joseph is to be deemed to be arising when he does as the angel commanded him. *And he accepted his wife*: we understand, with the celebrated rite and the apparatus of a wedding, where, similarly, he was concerned and vigilant towards Mary, through action. The same Joseph first accepted the adolescent Mary as his bride in the temple of Jerusalem, where she had dwelled, dedicated to God, with the other virgins. Joseph knew her before this, from familiar visitation, when, each year, he went to the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. For Mary was closely related to him, since Anna, her mother, after the man Joachim, married Cleophas, Joseph's brother. Further, Joseph, after some days, accepted Mary according to the manner of his people, in familiar cohabitation with him in Nazareth. For so he did test his bride's manners.

There follows: *And he did not know her until she bore her firstborn son* (Mt 1:25). There were those who, finding an occasion in these words, blasphemed against the blessed Mary's perpetual virginity, against the just Joseph's most religious chastity, among whom there was a certain Helvidius, a heretic, against whom Blessed Jerome wrote copiously and religiously.¹⁴ And since that contumelious error is now (by the will of God and the tradition of the saints) far removed from all the hearts of the faithful, no one thinks it necessary to bring up this dispute in a curious way. But we, conscious participants in such a sacrament, let us lift up our hearts, with our hands, to the Lord. Let us ask that we, through this virginal and temporal sign, might avail to be participants in that eternal and happy marriage, where they do not marry nor are given in marriage fleshily, but they are, spiritually, like the angels of God (cf. Mt 22:30), married to God alone, in the presence of Him Whom Joseph named Jesus, Who is God, blessed unto the ages. Amen.

13 The level of Mary's doubt about her conception, if any, has long been a topic of debate. For an analysis of the views of two early Fathers—Jacob of Serug (452-521) and Antipater of Bostra (5th c.)—on this topic, see my paper "Two Views of Mary's Faith" (2016).

14 St. Jerome's treatise *Against Helvidius* is sometimes given the name *The Perpetual Virginity of Blessed Mary*, denoting its topic.

Third Responsory

Joseph, son of David, do not fear to accept Mary your wife. For what is born in her is of the Holy Spirit.

Verse: But Joseph, arising from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and accepted his wife.

For what, etc.