

Joseph's response to Mary's pregnancy. There are three theories about why Joseph acted the way he did. Each theory has well-known proponents.***

- The Suspicion Theory. Some hold that Joseph suspected Mary of adultery when he discovered her pregnancy. Joseph thus intended to pursue a divorce in accord with Deut 24:1-4 until the angel revealed to him the miraculous cause of the conception (1:20). Joseph is said to be righteous because he shuns immorality and directs his life by the Law of God. Proponents of this view include St. Justin Martyr, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Augustine.
- The Perplexity Theory. Others hold that Joseph found the situation of Mary's pregnancy inexplicable. Divorce seemed to be his only option, and yet he wished to do this quietly, for he could not bring himself to believe that Mary had been unfaithful. Joseph is said to be righteous because he lives by the Law of God and judges Mary's situation with the utmost charity. The main proponent of this view is St. Jerome, whose exegesis was adopted into the notes of the medieval Bible.
- The Reverence Theory. Still others hold that Joseph knew the miraculous cause of Mary's pregnancy from the beginning, i.e., he was made aware that the child was conceived "of the Holy Spirit" (1:18). Faced with this, Joseph considered himself unworthy to be involved in the Lord's work, and his decision to separate quietly from Mary was a discretionary measure to keep secret the mystery within her. On this reading, the angel confirms what Joseph had already known and urges him to set aside pious fears that would lead him away from his vocation to be the legal father of the Messiah (1:20). Joseph is said to be righteous because of his deep humility and reverence for the miraculous works of God. Proponents of this view include St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Thomas Aquinas.

Regardless of what Joseph initially believed, what is important is that once Gabriel explained the situation, Joseph responded by believing Gabriel's word and acted on it. How do we respond to the message proclaimed in the gospel? Saint Joseph, pray for us.

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