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**In THE DREAM OF SAINT JOSEPH, Georges de La Tour
portrays a peaceful Joseph, illuminated by the coming
light of the world.**

The Coming Light

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

After recounting the genealogy of Jesus stretching from Abraham through King David to Joseph, “the husband of Mary,” the Gospel of Matthew introduces a problem. Joseph learns that Mary, before they have lived together, is with child. Being a good man who does not want to publicly humiliate his fiancée, Joseph decides to dismiss Mary secretly. Exhausted by making this difficult decision, Joseph falls asleep and an angel appears to him in a dream (Matthew 1:18-25).

In *The Dream of Saint Joseph*, the French Baroque artist Georges de La Tour depicts the moment when the angel comes to Joseph with a message from God.[†] The open book on Joseph’s lap signifies that he has turned to Scripture to find strength and guidance. The angel’s raised left hand with open palm toward heaven symbolizes the reception of God’s message, which now the angel passes to Joseph by touching his arm with the other hand. The presence of the candle, partially blocked by the angel’s arm, is a sign of Jesus as the coming light of the world. This single light source – a painting technique known as tenebrist light – reflects strongly off the face of the angel and illuminates Joseph, creating a sense of meditation and mystery. The message from God is: “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (1:20b-21). This marvelous event, Matthew notes, will fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy that “‘the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel’ – which means ‘God with us’” (1:23).

Down-to-earth portrayals of Joseph like La Tour’s were very popular during the Catholic reform of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Joseph became a representative figure of a supportive father. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) encouraged devotion to Joseph through her Carmelite Order, and Pope Gregory XV (1554-1623) dedicated a feast day to him on March 19, 1621.

NOTE

[†] For more information about the artist, see Philip Conisbee, ed., *Georges de la Tour and His World* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art/New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).