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2016

Joseph of Nazareth as Man and Father in Jerónimo Gracián's Summary of the
Excellencies of St Joseph (1597)

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CHAPTER SIX: PATRON OF THE DYING

The *Summary*'s final engraving, which depicts the scene of Joseph's death, precedes a litany of the saint which is believed to have been composed by Gracián.¹ The image does not bear a particular connection with the litany; rather, its inspiration comes from the third section of Book V.² This chapter will engage in a discussion of the engraving's artistic features, noting the connection the artwork has with Gracián's writing, with apocryphal references, writings of the Church Fathers, and with other artworks depicting the same subject. In this way, it will be shown that Blancus' engraving, its accompanying epigram, and Gracián's discussion of Joseph's death and privileges found in Book V work together to present Joseph as the patron of a "good death" and as the recipient of many privileges by his death.

The *Summary*'s final image (Plate 6) is notable for its palpable tranquillity and uncluttered simplicity.³ In a small room with a single latticed window the Holy Family is gathered. Joseph, an elderly man with creased brow, upturned eyes and wizened face, lies on a bed which occupies much of the compositional space. He appears to be dressed in an undershirt and his legs are covered by a blanket. Beside him, Mary is seated. She is attired once more in long garments and a veil and gently takes Joseph's left hand in hers. The line of Mary's arm and her extended fingers encourage the eye to be easily drawn from her to Joseph. She raises her right hand and gestures towards Jesus, standing at Joseph's right, who is also the focus of her gaze. A man with long, curling hair, a neatly-cut beard and dressed in a voluminous cloak, Jesus looks down at Joseph, taking his right hand in his left while at the same time imparting a blessing. The position of Jesus' raised hand, and its proximity to Joseph's face, draws the viewer's eye again to the central figure. Once more, the true meaning of this image is explicitly conveyed by the epigram, which reads: *Mors bona laus Iusti est, laus ergo quanta Iosephi cum Sponsa, et Christo, sic bene qui moritur*, "A happy death is the reward of the Just; how great then is Joseph's reward as he dies so happily with his Spouse and Christ."

There is no historical evidence for the death of Joseph. Scripture bears no reference to or account of his death; indeed, the evangelists make no direct references to him after Luke's narrative of Jesus' coming-of-age. This narrative closes with Jesus returning to Nazareth with

¹ Chorpenning, "St Joseph as Guardian Angel, Artisan, and Contemplative", 2011: 122. Chorpenning writes (129, n. 99) that the litany in the *Summary* differs from that which is in current use, and cites Roland Gauthier, "Les litanies de Saint Joseph au XVII^e siècle", *Cahiers de Joséphologie* 35 (1987): 521-48, especially 522-24.

² Chorpenning, "St Joseph as Guardian Angel, Artisan, and Contemplative", 2011: 122.

³ Chorpenning, "St Joseph as Guardian Angel, Artisan, and Contemplative", 2011: 123.

his parents and living in obedience to them (Luke 2:51), a description which indicates that Joseph held the responsibility as head of the family for some time. The Gospels, however, are silent regarding the death of Joseph. It seems as though, at some unidentifiable point, his mission is simply ended, his task completed. Therefore, as there is no Scriptural basis, all details regarding his death have been surmised.

In his discussion of Joseph's death in Book V, Gracián first considers the supposition that Joseph had already died by the time of Jesus' Passion and, in fact, before he had begun his public ministry.⁴ In supporting his view, he draws particularly from two passages contained in the Gospel of John. John pinpoints the commencement of Jesus' public ministry at the wedding at Cana, at which he performed "the first of his signs...and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him" (John 2:11). While John notes that the wedding was attended by Jesus' mother, Mary, and by Jesus and his disciples, Joseph is omitted from the account; a perceivable sign that he had died before the wedding took place. Additionally, after the wedding Jesus is described as travelling to Capernaum with "his mother and his brethren and his disciples", indicating that Joseph was not present (John 2:12).⁵

The second Scriptural passage referenced by Gracián in his argument is found in the account of Jesus' crucifixion, where John notes:

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus was his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home (John 19:25-27).

Gracián here states that the fact Mary is entrusted into the care of Jesus' disciple indicates Joseph was not living at the time of Jesus' death. He writes that not only would Joseph not leave the Virgin alone at the foot of the cross if he were alive, but also that Jesus would not

⁴ Gracián cites from a wealth of sources, including Epiphanius (*Panarion*, 7.8); Vincent (*Sermons on St Joseph*); Gerson (*On St Joseph*); and Ubertino (*Arbor vitae crucifixae Jesu*). See Gracián, *Sumario*, 1597: 133.

⁵ The reference to Jesus "brethren" has attracted a lot of interest, in particular inspiring the view that Mary and Joseph were parents to other children. Matthew's account of the attempt of Jesus' countrymen to refute him by naming the living members of his family, omitting Joseph but making reference to Jesus' "brothers" and "sisters", has been particularly influential in formulating this view. In order to preserve Mary's perpetual virginity, these children were attributed to Joseph, particularly in apocryphal literature. These writings also presented Joseph as a widower. The words "brothers" and "sisters" are, however, most frequently interpreted to mean "cousins", and so the precise meaning and use by the evangelist remains ambiguous.

have entrusted Mary into the care of his beloved disciple if her spouse were still living.⁶ Gracián further supports his view with references to the writings of those including Epiphanius, Vincent, Ubertine and Jean Gerson, when considering the time when Joseph died.⁷ While some writers, such as Ubertine, propose that Joseph died shortly after the finding of the Christ Child in the temple, none specifies the time.⁸ Gracián states he holds as fact the opinion of Master Tomás de Trujillo, who writes in his *Harmony of the Gospels* that Joseph died when Jesus was twenty-nine years old, shortly before he was baptised by John.⁹ He notes that it does not take much to be persuaded that this was the case if we consider that Joseph's responsibility was to serve Jesus and his mother according to the poverty they had chosen in this world.¹⁰ Gracián writes that until he began his preaching, Jesus spent his days "in silence and prayer, separate from the conversation of mankind", and so it was necessary that Joseph take care of the business of carpentry, by which he supported his family; thus, Gracián indicates, God allowed Joseph to remain alive until the time Christ began his preaching.¹¹ This is arguably visualised in the accompanying engraving and epigram. Jesus is depicted by Blancus as a grown man at the time of Joseph's death, and the epigram's titling of Jesus as "Christ" indicates that he has full knowledge of his role as the Messiah.

Gracián continues with the assertion that "What has the most weight in this matter is what the *Oriental History* says about St Joseph."¹² The *History of Joseph the Carpenter*, also known as the *Oriental History*, is the only apocryphal text to deal primarily and independently with St Joseph.¹³ The text, which was translated from Hebrew into Latin in 1522 by Isidoro Isolano, is written almost completely in the voice of Jesus as he speaks to his disciples atop the Mount of Olives.¹⁴ The *Oriental History* was used in liturgy by the Judeo-Christian community in Nazareth as early as the second century and soon spread to Egypt where a feast commemorating

⁶ Gracián, *Sumario*, 1597: 223.

⁷ Gracián, *Sumario*, 1597: 233.

⁸ Gracián, *Sumario*, 1597: 233.

⁹ Gracián, *Sumario*, 1597: 234-235.

¹⁰ Gracián, *Sumario*, 1597: 235.

¹¹ *Y pues se lee, que el Redemptor hasta que comenzo a praedica estuu siempre en silencio, y oracion, apartado de trato, y conversacion de hombres, decasse entender, que para el trato del officio de Carpinteria, y buscar obras que hazer, y comprar la madera, y vender lo que se hazia para el sustento.* Gracián, *Sumario*, 1597: 235.

¹² *Lo que mas puede hazer al caso en la doctrina deste capitulo es unas palabras de la historia Oriental de Sant Josef.* English translation taken from Chorpenning, *Just Man*, 1993: 224.

¹³ Filas, *Joseph, the man closest to Jesus*, 1962: 26-7.

¹⁴ Elliott (*The Apocryphal New Testament*, 111; 115) writes that in chapters 30 and 32 there are lapses in Jesus' narration, where the apostles ask him questions. Livio Pestilli, *Paolo de Matteis: Neapolitan Painting and Cultural History in Baroque Europe* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013): 207.

the death of Joseph was instituted by the Coptic Monophysites on the second of August.¹⁵ This feast appears to have been the first of its kind ever celebrated.¹⁶

Chorpenning indicates that Gracián would have had access to Isolano's translation, noting that this text had "a marked influence" on the *Summary's* discussion of Joseph's death and privileges.¹⁷ In the *Oriental History*, Jesus offers this description of Joseph to his disciples:

There was a man named Joseph who was from Bethlehem, the city of the Jews, which is the city of King David. He was well versed in the skills and art of carpentry. This man, Joseph, was joined in holy matrimony with a woman [Melcha or Escha] who gave him sons and daughters: four boys and two girls; and their names were Judas and Justus, James and Simon, and the names of the girls were Assia and Lydia. Joseph's wife died, as is decreed for all men, and left James still at a tender age. Joseph was a just man who glorified God in all his deeds. He was accustomed to leave his village to practice his trade as a carpenter, he and his sons, since he lived by the work of his hands, according to the law of Moses.¹⁸

This passage presents a characterisation of Joseph that differs from those presented in other apocryphal narratives. The *Oriental History's* description of Joseph begins with identifying him as having been born in Bethlehem and in this vein affirming his Davidic ancestry. Gracián supports this view in his own description of the saint's heritage. In the *Oriental History*, Joseph is not the inept carpenter as presented in other apocryphal works, particularly the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, but is a man "well versed in the skills and art of carpentry" who is "accustomed to leave his village to practice his trade as a carpenter", and who "lived by the work of his hands, according to the law of Moses". Gracián appears to adhere to this representation: as has been seen, he openly describes Joseph's aptitude and skill in working with both wood and iron. He also shows him as a competent teacher and model for the boy Jesus. This representation of Joseph in the *Oriental History* characterises him not only as an adept worker, but as a man perfectly capable of supporting a family and who dutifully adheres to the Mosaic Law. The *History* seeks to justify the Scriptural references to Jesus' "brothers and sisters" by attributing six children to Joseph by a previous marriage, and further references

¹⁵ Corresponding to Abîb 26 in the Coptic calendar. Larry M. Toschi, José Antonio Bertolin, and Rick Sarkisian, *Husband, Father, Worker: Questions and Answers about St Joseph* (Liguori: Liguori Publications, 2012): 59.

¹⁶ Larry M. Toschi, O.S.J., "Liturgical Feasts of St Joseph in the 19th and 20th Centuries", in *Saint Joseph Studies: Papers in English from the Seventh and Eighth International St Joseph Symposia: Malta 1997 and El Salvador 2001*, ed. Larry M. Toschi (California: Guardian of the Redeemer Books, 2002):25.

¹⁷ Chorpenning, *Just Man*, 1993: 228.

¹⁸ Barbagallo, *St Joseph in Art*, 2014: 19.

Scripture through its description of Joseph as a “just man who glorified God in all his deeds.” While Gracián challenges the view of Joseph’s previous marriage in his affirmation that Joseph was, like Mary, a perpetual virgin, he notes in Book III Joseph’s justice, which he presents as the means by which the saint glorifies God. The overwhelmingly favourable description of Joseph in the *Oriental History* exists in distinct contrast to the often unflattering portraits of other apocryphal texts.

The *History* provides for the reader a chronology which indicates that Joseph marries at forty, is widowed at 89, receives Mary at 91, and dies at 111.¹⁹ While the Scriptural accounts indicate that Mary and Joseph enjoyed a true marriage and that Jesus was considered to be the natural son of Joseph, the *Oriental History* presents Mary and Joseph’s ages as differing by over seventy-five years. Joseph Lienhard, S.J. notes in his analysis that this text brushes over the “indignity” of the union of an old man with a child.²⁰

This work presents Joseph’s marriage to Mary, who again is portrayed as having lived in the temple for much of her childhood, as occurring when she is twelve and not taking place by apparent miraculous or divine intervention, as Joseph is selected by the priests drawing lots.²¹ While Gracián’s description of Mary’s consecration in the temple bears similarity with the account given in the *Oriental History*, in Book I of the *Summary* he clearly establishes the presence of the divine in the selection of Joseph, a theme which is also employed in the accompanying engraving and epigram. The *Oriental History* notes that while the Annunciation and discovery of Mary’s pregnancy caused great emotion for Joseph, he was a pious man, returning to his trade as a carpenter after the family’s Flight into Egypt and journey to Nazareth.²² The resuming of his trade is a clear indication of his fatherly responsibility and of his calling to take care of and protect Mary and Jesus. Gracián’s approach is similar. He notes that while Joseph suffered greatly at the discovery of Mary’s pregnancy, he assumed a fatherly responsibility and a protective role within his family that was bestowed upon him by God.

Joseph is presented in the *History* as being of great youthfulness and vigour despite being very old. His advanced age yet remarkable vitality is regarded as a miracle, with his age helping to preserve the virginity of Mary and his physical vigour necessary to support the needs of his family. The characterisation of Joseph in this way may reflect the common Patristic view that

¹⁹ Lienhard, “St Joseph in Early Christianity”, 2011: 19.

²⁰ Lienhard, “St Joseph in Early Christianity”, 2011: 22.

²¹ *History of Joseph the Carpenter*, 4. As cited by Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 1993: 114.

²² *History of Joseph the Carpenter*, 9. As cited by Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 1993: 114.

asceticism creates physical, psychological, and spiritual equilibrium.²³ This view finds its origin in St Athanasius's *Life of St Antony*. After Antony had spent nearly twenty years practicing asceticism alone in the desert, his friends broke down the door of the place where he lived and removed it. Following this,

Antony came forth as out of a shrine, as one initiated into sacred mysteries and filled with the Spirit of God. It was the first time that he showed himself outside the fort to those who came to him. When they saw him, they were astonished to see that his body had kept its former appearance, that it was neither obese from want of exercise, nor emaciated from his fastings and struggles with the demons: he was the same man they had known before his retirement. Again, the state of his soul was pure, for it was neither contracted by grief, nor dissipated by pleasure nor pervaded by jollity or dejection. He was not embarrassed when he saw the crowd, nor was he elated at seeing so many there to receive him. No, he had himself completely under control – a man guided by reason and stable in his character.²⁴

This perception of Antony bears similarity with the description Jesus gives of Joseph in the *Oriental History*. Jesus says that Joseph:

did not...labour under any bodily weakness, nor had his sight failed, nor had any tooth perished from his mouth nor, for the whole time of his life, was he ever insane; but like a boy he always showed youthful vigour in his business and his limbs remained unimpaired, and free from all pain.²⁵

The *History* itself presents a contrast against the poetic discretion of the Gospels in delving into the particular details of Joseph's life and final moments.²⁶ Indeed, the *History* describes the final moment of Joseph's life as so violent and agonising that only Jesus, whom Joseph describes as "the Saviour and Redeemer of my soul", is able to calm him by recalling to Joseph's mind his past, the particular wonders he had seen, and the great faith that had sustained his life.²⁷

Blancus' engraving actively references the following lines from the *History*, which are recorded by Gracián in the *Summary*:

²³ Chorpenning, *Just Man*, 1993: 228.

²⁴ Athanasius, *The Life of St Antony*, trans. Robert T. Meyer (Glen Rock: Newman Press, 1950): 32.

²⁵ *History of Joseph the Carpenter*, 10. As cited by Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 1993: 116.

²⁶ Zuffetti, *L'uomo dei sette silenzi*, 2012: 143.

²⁷ Zuffetti, *L'uomo dei sette silenzi*, 2012: 144; Chorpenning, *Just Man*, 1993: 225.

Y el viejo boluio su rostro a mi, y con grandes suspiros me estava mirando, yo me incline y le toque los pies, y tenia su mano entre las mias por una larga hora, y Ioseph hazia señales como mejor po dia, que no le dexasse teniendo los ojos enclauados en mi.

[The old man turned his face toward Me, and with great sighs he was looking at Me. I leaned over him, and I touched his feet and held his hand between My hands for over an hour. Joseph indicated, as best he could, that I should not leave him; his eyes were fixed on Me.]²⁸

These words are seen expressed in the engraving. Joseph's eyes are raised to Jesus, "fixed on him", and their hands are joined, and the intensity of this connection between Jesus and Joseph can be interpreted as a powerful communication of their relationship, of the love between father and son, and of the presence of God in Joseph's final moments.

The *History* continues with the arrival of death itself, which is dramatically conveyed. The room is filled with maleficent power, visible only to Jesus and ready to take Joseph's soul; Jesus, however, drives the evil spirits away and implores God the Father to send His angels, along with Michael and Gabriel, to bring the soul of Joseph to eternal mercy without additional fear or suffering.²⁹ Jesus imparts Joseph peace and beseeches His heavenly Father to send a multitude of angels to prepare the body of the saint for burial.³⁰ While Blancus' Holy Family is contained within an intimate space, alone and with no representation of violent spirits or the presence of evil, Joseph is presented as anxious and fearful. His shadowed face, with sombre expression, is raised to Jesus, and his right hand is tense, the fingers splayed. The anxiety of Joseph as conveyed in the *History* is thus clearly expressed by Blancus.

The *History of Joseph the Carpenter* was primarily influential in the fields of literature and art in that it describes the death of the saint through the viewpoint of Christ, who narrates the tale to His disciples, and thus it acts as a sort of eyewitness report.³¹ The spread of Isolano's translation of the *History of Joseph the Carpenter* not only influenced the popularity in the Death of St Joseph as an artistic subject, but also led to the saint becoming recognised as the patron of a "good death", "the shelter of the agonising", and the intercessor of many confraternities.³² The traditional consideration of Joseph as the "patron of a good death" has

²⁸ Gracián, *Sumario*, 1597: 237. English translation taken from Chorpenning, *Just Man*, 1993: 226.

²⁹ Zuffetti, *L'uomo dei sette silenzi*, 2012: 144.

³⁰ Toschi, *Joseph in the New Testament*, 1991: 180.

³¹ Pestilli, *Paolo de Matteis: Neapolitan Painting and Cultural History in Baroque Europe*, 2013: 207.

³² Pestilli, *Paolo de Matteis: Neapolitan Painting and Cultural History in Baroque Europe*, 2013: 207.

been accepted as early as St Bernardine of Siena who, along with other theologians such as Irenaeus, maintained that, as with the Virgin, Joseph's body had been assumed into heaven.³³

As the cult of St Joseph spread over the sixteenth century, particularly in Spain, many texts began to emerge with him as their subject.³⁴ A prominent example of these is the *Vita Christi*, or "Life of Christ", written by the nun Isabella de Villena and published in Valencia in 1513, which narrates the story of the death of Joseph in particularly romanticised language and in accordance with popular appeal, thus encouraging the people to come to learn about, know, and love God.³⁵ The *Vita Christi* narrates that when Jesus was already twenty-five, Joseph heard him speaking to Mary of his Passion. Following this, he was seized with an unbearable blow, and said to his son: "Allow me to die before I can see all your pain. I cannot bear it."³⁶ The text indicates Jesus accepted this request, yet when it came to the time for Joseph to leave the world, even he trembled, yet is consoled by Jesus, who says: "Be calm, my father, because I have great love for you", and promises Joseph that all his sins will be forgiven, and that he will be given a throne with the seraphim on the day of Jesus' ascension.³⁷

In his study of the *Summary's* engravings, Chorpenning notes that the Death of St Joseph does not appear as an artistic subject prior to the sixteenth century.³⁸ As previously explored, martyrdom was exalted and glorified within the Catholic Church, with the martyr seen as possessing heroic virtue, and so Joseph, who died a natural death, was in a sense excluded.

Representations of the scene of Joseph's death, while certainly less frequent than other scenes which present him as a participant in the life of Christ, grew in popularity as an artistic theme after the Council of Trent.³⁹ This is perhaps a reflection of the way in which death was perceived during the late medieval period and into the Renaissance. The twelfth-century French monastic Peter of Celle commented that the monk should "depict death before your eyes, how

³³ Barbagallo, *St Joseph in Art*, 2014: 80.

³⁴ This rise in devotion to Joseph was so prominent that in Émile Mâle's classic art historical study (*L'art religieux de la fin du XVIIe siècle*, 1951) Spain is described as "the chosen land of St Joseph". English translation taken from Joseph F. Chorpenning, *Mexican Devotional Retablos: From the Peters Collection* (Philadelphia: St Joseph's University Press, 1994): 39.

³⁵ Zuffetti, *L'uomo dei sette silenzi*, 2012: 145.

³⁶ Zuffetti, *L'uomo dei sette silenzi*, 2012: 145.

³⁷ Zuffetti, *L'uomo dei sette silenzi*, 2012: 145. In this passage, the author alludes to the fact that Joseph would have been freed from Purgatory at this moment, along with the ancient patriarchs and those who had lived spotless lives on earth.

³⁸ Chorpenning, "St Joseph as Guardian Angel, Artisan, and Contemplative", 2011: 122.

³⁹ Bolger Foster, *The Iconography of St Joseph*, 1978: 16.

horrifying the face”.⁴⁰ The particular efforts of the mendicant friars, with their appeal to the emotions and common reference to “memento mori”, meant that death never faded from the medieval mind.⁴¹ Death was, therefore, so much at the forefront of daily life that it could not be considered as more than a fact of nature, yet it was still seen as essential for a person to die well in order to achieve salvation.⁴² The image of Joseph’s peaceful death, supported and comforted by Jesus and Mary and provided with the proper preparations for salvation, meant that the saint was considered one who could accompany and intercede for the soul on their final journey. Furthermore, paintings of Joseph’s death visualised for audiences the “exemplary Catholic death” and raised Joseph as the patron of such a death.⁴³

At the beginning of the thirteenth century and continuing into the fourteenth century, people feared death less than they dreaded the possibility of dying without receiving the sacraments, making a will, or having someone attending to their remains.⁴⁴ Calamitous events leading to significant loss of life, particularly the Hundred Years’ War and the Black Death, seem to have intensified the dread surrounding sudden death. Perhaps adding to this fear was the Beatific Vision controversy. In 1331, Pope John XXII stated that the souls of the just did not possess eternal life or experience a beatific vision of God before the resurrection of the body. The pontiff was forced to recant this on his deathbed due to the outcry of indignation it caused.⁴⁵

For the Christian faithful of this period, their ultimate spiritual fate was determined by unseen forces which could only be guided by tangible devotions, such as images of the saints or the “wound of Christ”, the Eucharist, intercessory prayers, or prayers seeking indulgences.⁴⁶ The Church guided the faithful in outlining specific criteria essential for a “good death”, with an emphasis on the individual making a confession to their parish priest and receiving Extreme Unction, or the Last Rites.⁴⁷ In their desire for salvation, it often happened that the faithful would, at the end of their lives, retire to monasteries and affiliate themselves with a religious community in the hope of reaping the rewards of prayer and asceticism, while others would

⁴⁰ The English translation here quoted is taken from Ashby Kinch, *Imago Mortis: Mediating Images of Death in Late Medieval Culture* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2013): 7. Original Latin text sourced from J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 202, col. 1131-2.

⁴¹ Phoebe S. Spinrad, *The Summons of Death on the Medieval and Renaissance English Stage* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1987): 1.

⁴² Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages*, 1993: 86.

⁴³ Black, *Creating the Cult of St Joseph*, 2006: 135.

⁴⁴ Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages*, 1993: 86, 23.

⁴⁵ Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages*, 1993: 24.

⁴⁶ Kinch, *Imago Mortis*, 2013: 7.

⁴⁷ Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages*, 1993: 86.

bequeath gifts to abbeys or join a confraternity with the assurance of themselves and their relatives being remembered in prayer.⁴⁸ Perhaps as a response to this deepening interest, confraternities dedicated to the souls in Purgatory multiplied during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁴⁹

It seems almost from this preoccupation with salvation that the image of Joseph as patron of a “good death” began to emerge. Representations of his peaceful passing, supported and comforted by Jesus and Mary and provided with the proper preparations for salvation, meant that the saint was understood as one who could accompany and intercede for the soul on their final journey. Furthermore, paintings of Joseph’s death visualised for audiences the “exemplary Catholic death” and also raised Joseph as the patron of such a death.⁵⁰

The fact that the Death of Joseph is a later iconographical development means that there is very limited reference to the scene which precedes the writing of Gracián’s *Summary*. Villaseñor Black notes that the composition of the scene of Joseph’s death is modelled on the Dormition of Mary.⁵¹ This tradition is based on multiple apocryphal accounts, such as the *Protoevangelium of James* and Pseudo-Dionysius, which themselves became sources for the Eastern Church’s Feast of the Dormition and for the Mariological doctrine of the Roman Church of the Assumption.⁵² Scenes of the Dormition typically depict the Virgin reclining on a bed, with the apostles looking on. This compositional structure is represented in Fra Angelico’s predella panel for his altarpiece of the Coronation of the Virgin (Plate 6.1), painted between 1430 and 1435 and housed in Florence’s Museo del San Marco.⁵³ In this artwork, the Virgin, robed and with a nimbus, lies on a bier and is surrounded by the apostles and two angels who hold a thurible and an incense boat, items which are used to burn charcoal or incense during worship services. The inclusion of these symbols, which would conceivably have been recognisable for Fra Angelico’s original audience, work to convey within this scene reverence and sanctity. In the centre of the piece, Christ appears in glory within a mandorla, raising his right hand in blessing over the Virgin while in his left hand he supports a small child,

⁴⁸ Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages*, 1993: 87.

⁴⁹ Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages*, 1993: 23.

⁵⁰ Black, *Creating the Cult of St Joseph*, 2006: 135.

⁵¹ An expression of the belief that Mary did not truly die, but fell into a deep sleep for three days before she was assumed into heaven.

⁵² Virginia M. Kimball, “Mary of Galilee, Mother and Mystic: Prophet to a World in Need”, *Mary, God-bearer to a World in Need*, ed. Maura Hearden and Virginia M. Kimball (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013): 13.

⁵³ Magnolia Scudieri, *Museum of San Marco* (Florence: Giunti, 1999): 16.

traditionally understood to be the soul of Mary.⁵⁴ Several of these features are also seen in El Greco's painting of the scene (Plate 6.2.), completed before 1567 for the Holy Cathedral of the Dormition of the Virgin in Syros.⁵⁵ The centrally-placed figure of the Virgin lies on a bier, surrounded by the apostles and various saints. Christ stands above her, surrounded by angels. Holding in his hands her soul, rendered as a newborn baby wrapped in swaddling clothes. Unlike in Fra Angelico's predella scene, El Greco's Christ is not standing upright, but instead leans over the body of the Virgin, a gesture which can be read as a sign of intimacy and relationship.

Villaseñor Black notes that while there are similarities between the Dormition of Mary and the composition of Joseph's death, the mood conveyed in the two scenes are distinctly different. Joseph's passing, she writes, is presented as "less formal, less peaceful, and ultimately, less dignified."⁵⁶ The inclusion of objects relevant to liturgical worship, especially the thurible, conveys within the Dormition scene a sense of the sacred which is not emphasised as strongly in the scene of Joseph's death. While in Dormition scenes, the peaceful, often richly-dressed body of Mary is surrounded by mournful onlookers, Blancus' depiction of the dying Joseph shows him dressed in an undershirt, his expression tense and the bedsheets creased. Such a representation can be seen to convey a sense of the ordinary and profound humility, which would arguably have been poignant for the original viewers of Blancus' engraving. The peaceful yet formal overtones of the Dormition scenes appear to emphasise the dignity of Mary rather than appeal to the sensibilities and experiences of the audience. Thus, representations of Joseph surrounded by Mary and Jesus, and as fearful and unsettled, perhaps resonated more clearly with sixteenth-century audiences which may have held anxieties regarding death and salvation.

Villaseñor Black further draws a contrast between the good death of Joseph and the Old Testament scene of the Blessing of Jacob (Plates 6.3. and 6.4.), in which Jacob deceives his blind, infirm father, Isaac the patriarch, into bestowing upon him the birthright of his older

⁵⁴ This representation may be taken from the ancient account given of Mary's dormition, as quoted by Kimball: "The Lord embraced her, and he took her holy soul and placed in in Michael's [the archangel] hands....And we, the apostles, beheld the soul of Mary as it was given into Michael's hands." See Kimball, "Mary of Galilee, Mother and Mystic", 2013: 15. It is also important to note that this is not an exclusive feature of Marian iconography; depictions of other saints and holy figures also include miniatures of themselves, an image of their soul, being taken into heaven.

⁵⁵ Nikolaos M. Panagiotakes, *El Greco: The Cretan Years*, trans. John C. Davis (Oxon: Routledge, 2016): 101.

⁵⁶ Black, *Creating the Cult of St Joseph*, 2006: 138.

brother Esau.⁵⁷ The deception of Isaac by his wife and son is contrasted against scenes of Joseph's death, which frequently show Jesus imparting a blessing and Mary offering comfort.⁵⁸ Thus, Mary and Jesus provide for Joseph's physical and spiritual needs in a manner which is not found in representations of the blessing of Jacob. The presence of Mary and Jesus at the death of Joseph, and their provision for his needs, enables this death to be classified as blessed and "happy". Blancus himself employs this approach in his own work. Joseph is turned towards Jesus, who is shown blessing him, while Mary is seated by the bed, holding her husband's hand in her own. Blancus thus not only presents an intimate familial scene, but emphasises that Joseph in his final moments was afforded spiritual and physical comfort by virtue of his connection with Jesus and Mary. In this way, the artist offers a clear message to his readers: if they, like Joseph, stay close to Jesus and Mary, they also possess the hope of a "happy death".

Blancus' scene is particularly notable in that, unlike many depictions of Joseph's death, it does not contain overt references to the supernatural or the divine. Blancus represents a simple scene with Joseph dying in the close company of Mary and Jesus, which contrasts the prevailing iconographic type of including several onlookers, angels visiting Joseph at the hour of his death and preparing to carry his soul to heaven, or *putti* who sometimes hold a crown above Joseph's head or the saint's attributes of the stem of lilies or the flowering staff (Plates 6.5. and 6.6.).⁵⁹ The inclusion of angels renders the scene idyllic, stresses the presence of the divine, and further works to convey a sense of peace which presents a clear contrast with the often-mournful expressions of Mary and Jesus. It was itself seen as a means of enabling the viewer to identify death with peacefulness and life with God, and thus established death as an artistic theme particularly meaningful to popular devotion.⁶⁰ Blancus' omission of these elements not only strengthens the intimacy of the scene but also emphasises the "ordinariness" and humility of Joseph's life and of his death. The *Summary* does not present Joseph's "happy death" as a distant ideal, but as one which could be both aspired to and attained by the faithful.

The subject of the death of Joseph would have held particular importance for the confraternity of San Giuseppe dei Falegnami. Death itself was a prominent theme in the devotional life of confraternities, as members could expect that brethren would make appropriate funerary

⁵⁷ Ferruccio Canali, *The Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi* (Florence: Bonechi, 2000): pl. 13.

⁵⁸ Black, *Creating the Cult of St Joseph*, 2006: 141.

⁵⁹ Black, *Creating the Cult of St Joseph*, 2006: 139; Chorpenning, *Just Man*, 1993: 128. For Trevisani, see Barbagallo, *St Joseph in Art*, 2014: 82. For Maratta, see Martina Pippal, *A Short History of Art in Vienna* (Vienna: C.H. Beck, 2001): 73.

⁶⁰ Barbagallo, *St Joseph in Art*, 2014: 83.

arrangements and, if necessary, guarantee financial assistance to their surviving family.⁶¹ In *Italian Confraternities in the Sixteenth Century*, Christopher F. Black emphasises that joining a confraternity was for many people a primary means of ensuring their own salvation, and possibly the salvation of those close to them.⁶² Membership of the group, along with the practice of charitable works and devotion, was seen as preparatory measures for a good death, after which the individual's confreres and consociates would "honour the body, and help dispatch the body as quickly as possible through Purgatory."⁶³ Death was, therefore, something that may have incited feelings of anxiety or dread, and it was certainly something of an unknown. Thus, it seems, individuals would seek ways of guaranteeing they would die well, have a suitable passage into the afterlife with a decent funeral, be relieved swiftly from Purgatory, and thus enter Heaven.

Although the current artworks found in the church of San Giuseppe dei Falegnami, and in its adjoining oratory, were completed after the *Summary* was published, they, not surprisingly, do emphasise the significance the death of Joseph held for the confraternity. The first chapel on the right side of the church has as its altarpiece the Transition of Joseph, completed in 1690 by Bartolomeo Colombo. It is situated opposite Orazio Bianchi's altarpiece depicting the marriage of Mary and Joseph. Upon entering the oratory, the viewer is immediately drawn to the altar directly opposite, above which is depicted a fresco scene of the death of the saint, completed by Marco Tullio Montagna in 1637 (Plate 6.6). It is thus clear that the death of Joseph, represented in both instances as a calming scene in which he is consoled by Jesus and Mary, and devoid of any supernatural symbolism, was a prominent focus for the confraternity's brethren and one they wanted to give visual significance. This scene of Joseph comforted in his last agony perhaps acted as consolation for the brethren and instilled in them a hope that if they stayed close to Joseph throughout life, at their own death they would receive comfort from Jesus and Mary.

Gracián writes that as patron of "a good death", Joseph provides particular spiritual and temporal consolation and mercies to those who are devoted to him: too many to contain within his *Summary*.⁶⁴ The author indicates that if the devotees of Joseph truly love, honour and celebrate him, they will be great servants of God, receiving in all tribulations deep

⁶¹ Christopher Kleinhenz, *Medieval Italy: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2004): 245.

⁶² Black, *Italian Confraternities in the Sixteenth Century*, 1989: 107.

⁶³ Black, *Italian Confraternities in the Sixteenth Century*, 1989: 107.

⁶⁴ *Si quisiese particularizar los bienes, consuelos, y mercedes, que reciben* Gracián, *Sumario*, 1597: 325.

consolation.⁶⁵ He once again draws attention to the importance of devotion to the Virgin Mary, the spouse of Joseph and the most affable mother.⁶⁶ This, along with fervent devotion to Jesus Christ, will ensure that at the hour of death the devotee will be accompanied by a good friend, Joseph.⁶⁷ In this sense, Gracián unites his writing with the message conveyed in the epigram, that a “happy death” is the reward of those who are “just”.

In the *Summary*, Joseph is not only presented to the brethren as a practical model for living, and particularly worthy of emulating in the way he exercises his roles as father and husband, but also as a model for dying. Joseph is distinctly humanised in this scene, shown agitated and being comforted and supported by his family members, and this conceivably establishes a distinct connection between him and the *Summary*'s original audience for whom death would have been a significant preoccupation. In his conclusion to Book V, Gracián parallels the devotee with Joseph in his emphasis on the importance of devotion to Jesus and Mary. As seen throughout the *Summary*, this is visualised in Blancus' depiction of physical intimacy between Jesus, Mary and Joseph, primarily expressed through their gestures and gazes. Gracián's text, Blancus' engraving and Morale's epigram ultimately present Joseph as a model to be emulated. Joseph, the just man, who died in the company of Jesus and Mary, stands as the model for all men who, if they practice a virtuous life, will attain the “happy death” that is their reward.

⁶⁵ Gracián, *Sumario*, 1597: 325.

⁶⁶ Gracián, *Sumario*, 1597: 326.

⁶⁷ Gracián, *Sumario*, 1597: 326.