

Mary's Perpetual Virginity

ISSUE: What does the Church teach concerning Mary's virginity?

RESPONSE: The Church has always professed that Mary was a virgin “*ante partum, in partu, et post partum*,” i.e., before birth, during birth, and after the birth of Christ. Mary conceived Jesus in her womb “by the power of the Holy Spirit” without loss of her virginity. She remained a virgin in giving birth to Jesus; His miraculous birth did not diminish her virginal integrity but sanctified it (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 57). Following the birth of Jesus, Mary remained a virgin for the rest of her earthly life, until such time as she was taken body and soul into heaven, where she reigns as Queen (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 59).

DISCUSSION: In examining Mary's Perpetual Virginity, or any Church teaching, the most fundamental questions is: “How do we know this is true?” We do not gain such knowledge through intuition or through merely human effort or reasoning, but from the obedience of faith that we give to God who has revealed the truth to us (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, nos. 2, 5).

In examining this revealed truth, we must acknowledge that Tradition and Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church (*Dei Verbum*, no. 10). We must further recognize that the task of safeguarding (cf. 1 Tim. 6:20) and interpreting the Word of God, oral or written, has been entrusted to the Magisterium alone (*Dei Verbum*, no. 10; 2 Thess. 2:15).

The doctrine of Mary's Perpetual Virginity brings to light two distinct errors that are rooted in misconceptions concerning the nature of divine Revelation. The first error is the “*sola Scriptura*” approach that collapses the Word of God to merely that which has been written, thereby denying the role of Tradition and the Magisterium. Curiously, such a position, developed during the Protestant Reformation, is not taught in Scripture. Indeed, the testimony of Scripture conveys otherwise. For example, in 2 Thess. 2:15, St. Paul exhorts his followers to “stand firm and hold fast to the traditions [they] were taught, either by an oral statement or by a letter. . . .” In 1 Tim. 3:15, St. Paul further states that the Church is “the pillar and bulwark of the truth.” *Sola Scriptura* constitutes an attempt to understand Scriptures apart from Mother Church, even though the Church was “alive” for decades before the New Testament in its entirety was written, and for centuries before the Church definitively determined which texts were inspired.

The other error is an approach that fails to accord the necessary weight and dignity to Scripture. This error can manifest itself in many forms, often so as to render “truth” an elusive, if not illusory, reality (see St. Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, nos. 3, 24-26). An example would be an inclination to relegate the infancy narratives to the level of pious fables, as additions that are merely the product of the so-called second or third generation Church. Against such an “enlightened” modern interpretation of Scripture, Vatican II, citing the encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* by Pope Leo XIII, affirms “that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to Sacred Scripture” (*Dei Verbum*, no. 11; Catechism, no. 107). The sacred authors consigned to writing what the Holy Spirit wanted, and no more (*Dei Verbum*, no. 11; Catechism, no. 106; see also *Providentissimus Deus*, in which Leo XIII unequivocally confirms that this is the “ancient and unchanging faith of the Church”). As if the foregoing reaffirmation of scriptural inerrancy were not enough, the Council then “unhesitatingly affirms” the historicity of the Gospels (*Dei Verbum*, no. 19).

Aside from the relative merits of particular methods of Scripture study, the simple fact remains that the charism of authentic interpretation resides with the Magisterium and not the supposed “experts.” Any scholarship that calls into question established doctrine, or even produces conclusions in conflict with doctrines affirmed by the Teaching Church, must necessarily be defective.

In treating Mary's virginity *ante partum, in partu, and post partum*, we see in action “the supremely wise arrangement of God,” whereby Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium work together under the action of the Holy Spirit to communicate the truth about Mary to successive generations of Christians (cf. *Dei Verbum*, no. 10).

Mary's Virginity Before the Birth of Christ

Both Mt. 1:18-25 and Lk. 1:26-38 provide explicit scriptural evidence for Mary's virginal conception of Jesus.

St. Matthew describes the virginal conception as a fulfillment of the prophecy of Is. 7:14: "The virgin shall be with child, and give birth to a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel." St. Matthew's Gospel is also unique in that it presents the virginal conception from the perspective of St. Joseph, to whom an angel appeared to confirm, by a special revelation, the miraculous origin of the child. Scholars draw the reasonable conclusion that Mary and Joseph themselves probably recognized the accomplishment of Isaiah's prophecy.

It is clear from Luke's account of the Annunciation that the angel appeared "to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph," and that "the Virgin's name was Mary" (Lk. 1:27). The critical verses, however, are verses 34 and 35, in which Mary asked how this conception would occur (since she was a virgin) and was advised by the angel that she would conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit. If Mary at some time in the future intended to consummate her relationship with St. Joseph, her question would have been nonsensical. The literal-historical sense of these passages, which provide that Mary conceived Jesus without the loss of her virginity, is simply beyond reasonable dispute.

The teaching of the Fathers, dating back to St. Ignatius of Antioch, unanimously supports the teaching of the virginal conception, as does the testimony of the earliest creeds and Marian prayers. The popes seem to take as a given the virginal conception when addressing the issues of Mary's virginity during or after the birth of Christ.

The expression "ever virgin" was taken up by the Second Council of Constantinople (553), which affirms that the Word of God, "incarnate of the holy and glorious Mother of God and *ever virgin* Mary, was born of her." This doctrine is confirmed by two other ecumenical councils, the Fourth Lateran Council (1214) and the Second Council of Lyons (1274), and by the text of the definition of the dogma of the Assumption (1950) in which Mary's Perpetual Virginity is adopted as one of the reasons why she was taken up in body and soul to heavenly glory.

Objections to the Virginal Conception of Christ

Since Lk. 1:34-35 establishes beyond all doubt the virginal conception of Christ, critics have had no other means of escape in their arbitrary denial of the doctrine than to deny the genuineness and authenticity of these verses. Yet not a single manuscript containing the first chapter of Luke omits verses 34 and 35. It is rather clear in such a circumstance that the text is being interpreted according to uncritical, preconceived biases—e.g., the impossibility of miracles, angelic messages, etc.—which are radically divorced from an obedience of faith to divine Revelation.

One point that is raised is the contention that a better translation of the original Hebrew text of Is. 7:14 would use "maiden" or "young woman" instead of "virgin." Leaving aside the relative merits of etymological arguments, the point remains that from the beginning the Church (as reflected in St. Matthew's Gospel) has interpreted the passage as the prophecy of the virginal conception of Christ in the womb of Mary. The argument originally made by St. Justin Martyr in the second century is still instructive: "If a virginal conception were not the clear, literal sense of the passage, there simply would be no question of a 'sign.'"

The act of calling into question the certainty of biblical truths that have been dogmatically defined by the Church betrays a convergence of several Modernist attitudes identified by the Church last century. Such attitudes unfortunately have resulted in a questioning of the virginal conception in contemporary Catholic circles. This modern doubt, which obviously does not affect the status of the teaching, stems from an attempt to conduct biblical study without considering—and at times systematically rejecting—the inspired, ecclesial nature of Scripture.

It is beyond dispute that there is no explicit reference to the virginal conception in the New Testament outside the infancy narratives. The reason this is an important area of inquiry is because of the Modernist charge that the virginal conception was unknown to (i.e., not yet "invented" by) the first generation of Christians, and for that reason the supposed earliest New Testament writings (St. Mark's Gospel and St. Paul's epistles) make no mention of a virginal conception. This line of discussion again betrays a misunderstanding of the sources of Revelation, and in any event, the point remains that the Church's teaching on the virginal conception is, at minimum, not in conflict with St. Mark and St. Paul. This issue is beautifully laid to rest in the Catechism, no. 498:

People are sometimes troubled by the silence of St. Mark's Gospel and the New Testament Epistles about Jesus' virginal conception. Some might wonder if we were merely dealing with legends or theological

constructs not claiming to be history. To this we must respond: Faith in the virginal conception of Jesus met with the lively opposition, mockery, or incomprehension of non-believers, Jews and pagans alike; so it could hardly have been motivated by pagan mythology or by some adaptation to the ideas of the age. The meaning of this event is accessible only to faith, which understands in it the “connection of these mysteries with one another[.]” . . . St. Ignatius of Antioch already bears witness to this connection: “Mary’s virginity and giving birth, and even the Lord’s death, escaped the notice of the prince of the world: these three mysteries worthy of proclamation were accomplished in God’s silence” (footnotes omitted).

The Virgin Birth

The Church has traditionally understood Mary’s virginity *in partu* (during birth) as meaning that Jesus passed from His Mother’s womb into the light of day without the womb being opened and consequently without the destruction of the physical signs of virginity possessed by one who is virgin in conception. Secondly, Mary’s virginity *in partu* involves the absence of labor pains and usual infirmities (e.g., rupturing, bleeding, etc.) involved in gestation. It was, in reality, a miraculous birth, which relates more to her role in the New Creation (and thus her Immaculate Conception and Assumption) rather than her virginity before and after.

The teaching on Mary’s virginity *in partu* and the “miraculous birth” that did not violate her physical integrity has been clearly taught throughout the life of the Church. While the teaching of Mary’s virginity *in partu* “protects” the miraculous nature of birth, in turn the miraculous birth points to a physical integrity that goes beyond the mere absence of sexual relations, and which further is a sign of Mary’s interior virginity. Mary’s virginity *in partu* is fundamentally (albeit not exclusively) a biological statement, which is “embarrassing” only to those theologians who would systematically exclude the possibility of miracles.

There are several Old Testament images that are offered in support of virginity *in partu*. St. Ambrose in the above letter refers to Mary as the closed gate of Ez. 44:2. Is. 66:7 refers to the delivery of a male child born without labor pains. Lastly there is the reference in the Song of Songs (4:12) to the bride being an enclosed garden and a sealed fountain.

Mt. 1:22-23 is not the only New Testament reference cited in support of this teaching. There is the statement that Mary wrapped the Child in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger, which some conclude points to the absence of the usual pains and infirmities of childbirth—because Mary was able to wait on Jesus—and consequently to virginity *in partu*. There is also the reference in the account of the Presentation (Lk. 2:22-30) to Lev. 12:8, which deals with the consecration of a child to God, but omits the part about taking away the uncleanness of the mother. A less obvious scriptural basis is found by some in the words “Blessed art thou among women,” (Lk. 1:42) understood in light of Gen. 3:15 and the New Eve image.

St. Ambrose wrote on the eve of the Synod of Milan in 390 that the prophecy of Is. 7:14 “declares not only that a virgin shall conceive, but also that a virgin shall bring forth.” Thus, St. Matthew’s use of this prophecy in his Gospel at least implies a virgin birth. It should also be noted that St. Ambrose’s interpretation of Is. 7:14 as referring to the virginal conception and the virginal birth represents the interpretation of the early Church Fathers, and indeed St. Ambrose’s teaching on Mary’s virginity *in partu* was adopted by the Synod of Milan in 390. Meanwhile, in the East, Mary’s virginity in childbearing is a constantly recurring theme in the writings of St. Ephraem of Syria (circa 373), who taught the sublime truth that Emmanuel was able to “open the womb” of Mary without violating her virginity. At the turn of the fourth century, Ss. Augustine and Jerome also give important testimony concerning the miraculous nature of Christ’s birth.

Pope St. Leo the Great, in his famous “Tome,” provided the following teaching concerning the virgin birth:

[Jesus] was born in a “new type of birth” in that undefiled virginity experienced no concupiscence, yet supplied the material for the flesh. . . . [T]he Lord Jesus Christ, born from a virgin’s womb, does not have a nature different from ours just because His birth was an unusual one.

This remarkable work was read to the assembly at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, at which it was accepted unconditionally and enthusiastically, thereby reflecting both universal acceptance of this teaching.

Virginity *Post Partum*

In one sense, Mary’s virginity *post partum* (after birth) is the easiest aspect of Mary’s virginity to accept,

inasmuch as her virginity *ante partum* and *in partu* required a miracle, whereas virginity *post partum*, while granting the first two aspects, merely means that Mary remained a virgin (and consequently had no more children) after the birth of Christ.

In another sense, virginity *post partum* can be the most difficult aspect to explain, inasmuch as (1) those who would reduce divine Revelation to Scripture alone cannot find evidence to support this contention in the New Testament, and (2) there are New Testament passages that seem to suggest that Mary was not in fact continent after Jesus' birth. Without a proper understanding of the sources of Revelation, the first point cannot be overcome, because indeed it is true that a compelling case for Mary's Perpetual Virginity cannot be made explicit by Scripture alone. However, for the confused Catholic and curious Protestant alike, it is important to demonstrate that this Church teaching is not in conflict with the inspired text, lest Mary's Perpetual Virginity needlessly serve as a stumbling block for one who rightly venerates Sacred Scripture. In other words, it must be shown that a Church teaching firmly rooted in Tradition (i.e., the oral word of God) and proposed by the Magisterium does not—at minimum—contradict the witness of Scripture. If this cannot be done satisfactorily, the Catholic view of divine Revelation lacks plausibility.

Mary's virginity *post partum*, while not explicitly taught in Scripture, is repeatedly taught by the Latin, Greek, and Syriac Fathers. Outstanding among the patristic sources is St. Jerome's zealous treatise *On the Perpetual Virginity of the Blessed Mary Against Helvidius* (383), which not only affirms the teaching but specifically addresses the objections against Mary's virginity *post partum* that are typically raised in Protestant circles even today.

The following statement comes from Pope St. Siricius (circa 392), in the course of approving the refutation of a certain Bonosus, who had asserted that Mary had other children:

We surely cannot deny that you were right in correcting the doctrine about children of Mary, and you were right in rejecting the idea that any other offspring should come from the same virginal womb from which Christ was born according to the flesh. . . . For if they accept the doctrine on the authority of priests that Mary had a number of children, then they will strive with greater effort to destroy the truths of the faith.

Perhaps the most persistent objection to Mary's virginity *post partum* is the frequent scriptural references to Jesus' "brothers" (e.g., Mt. 13:55; Mk. 3:31-35; Lk. 8:20; Jn. 2:12; 7:3-5; Acts 1:14; Gal. 1:19; 1 Cor. 9:5). The most fundamental response is that the Greek word rendered "brother" in English (i.e., *adelphos*) can be used to designate not only a blood brother, but it also can be used to denote varying and even remote degrees of relationship. "*Adelphos*" (i.e., "brother"), standing alone, is thus inconclusive on the point. Further examination of the biblical texts alone reveals that at least some of these purported "brothers" were not the children of Mary. Indeed, nowhere in Scripture is the Blessed Virgin Mary ever explicitly identified as the earthly mother of anyone other than Jesus. There is additional argument that the "brothers" appear to be older than Jesus, and there is ample scriptural support for the proposition that Mary had no children *before* Jesus (e.g., Mt. 1:18-25; Lk. 1:26-38; 2:7).

Another objection is the reference to Christ as being a "firstborn" son. St. Jerome convincingly responds that every only child is a firstborn child, and he further explains that the Jewish practice was to offer sacrifice upon the birth of a "firstborn," without the necessity of waiting for subsequent children to be born. Scripture scholars recognize that *prototokos* ("firstborn") is only a legal status and only means no prior child, and it is sometimes the equivalent of *monogenes* ("only-born").

Similar analysis can be used to dispel the inference drawn from Mt. 1:18, 25 that Joseph and Mary had relations *after* the birth of Jesus. (In these passages, reference is made to the time "*before* [Joseph and Mary] lived together" and to Joseph and Mary's not having relations "*until* she bore a son.") These passages merely assert that up to a definite point in time the marriage was not consummated, but does not speak to the issue of consummation after Jesus' birth. St. Jerome cites many scriptural passages to support this thesis, including Is. 46:4; Mt. 28:20; 1 Cor. 15:23-26; Ps. 122:2; Ps. 118:123; Gen. 35:4; Deut. 34:5-6; Gen. 8:7; 2 Sam. 6:23.

The fourth major objection is based on an inability to reconcile *post partum* virginity with Mary and Joseph's having a "true marriage." Marriage involves unconditional self-donation that may be physically expressed, but not necessarily. One may possess a right without its exercise. Consent, not consummation, is "the indispensable element that 'makes the marriage'" (Catechism, no. 1626). John Paul II makes it clear in his apostolic letter *Guardian of the Redeemer* (no. 7) that Joseph and Mary had a true marriage.

Conclusion

It is critical to understand Mary's Perpetual Virginity in light of the mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:4, 11) and in light of the unfolding of God's plan in the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4-5). The special favors granted to the Mother of God—including permitting a creature's voluntary participation in the "New Creation" to be, in a sense, necessary—are a mystery of God's loving providence rather than the inevitable result of logical deductions concerning the data of divine Revelation. The meaning of the announcement of the angel Gabriel to Mary about the virginal conception (Lk. 1:35) is well-summarized by Cardinal Ratzinger:

Our gaze is led beyond the covenant with Israel to the creation: In the Old Testament the Spirit of God is the power of creation; He it was who hovered over the waters in the beginning and shaped chaos into cosmos (Gen. 1:2); when He is sent, living beings are created (Ps. 104[103]:30). So what is to happen here to Mary is a new creation: The God who called forth being out of nothing makes a new beginning amid humanity: His Word become flesh (*Introduction to Christianity*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990, p. 206).

Mary's Perpetual Virginity, then, is not only an exhortation to imitate Mary's charity, discipleship, fidelity, continence, etc. (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 63-64), but also highlights the uniqueness of the Incarnation, of God's taking the initiative to recreate the human race through His Son, the New Adam, Who was really "born of the Virgin Mary." We can no more deny the "physicality of Mary's virginity any more than we can deny the physicality of Mary's motherhood. Mary's Perpetual Virginity points us unmistakably to the Christological mystery of the eternal Word's becoming flesh in Mary's womb, in the marriage (without commingling) of the human and the divine through God's "marvelous condescension" (cf. *Dei Verbum*, no. 13).

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