



Relationship with GOD

More than Just SUNDAY

What does the Church teach about the Perpetual Virginity of Mary?

In light of the apparitions of Our Lady of Fatima in 1917, it is helpful to understand Mary's role in God's plan to save us following the sin of Adam and Eve. The Father sent His Son as our Savior, who was born of a virgin. We know this virgin to be Mary. Why is the virginity of Mary so important?

Pope St. Martin I, at the Lateran Synod in 649 A.D., declared as an article of faith that: The blessed ever-virginal and immaculate Mary conceived, without seed, by the Holy Spirit and without loss of integrity brought Him forth, and after His birth preserved her virginity inviolate.

Thus, the Pope definitively proclaimed that Mary was always Virgin: **before, during** and **after** the birth of Jesus Christ. The Church celebrates Mary as the "ever-virgin" (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 499 hereafter CCC); and thus, let us examine the three aspects of this dogma so as to gain a clear understanding of what exactly is meant by "before," "during" and "after" the birth of Christ.

Before Christ's Birth

Mary's virginity "before" the birth of Jesus is universally accepted as truth among Christians. Mary's virginity and the miraculous conception of the Child Jesus in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit, without the cooperation of man, is strongly attested to in Scripture. St. Matthew, in his Gospel, sees in Mary a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy: "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son" (Isaiah 7:14). In the Gospel of St. Luke, the Angel Gabriel announces to Mary the conception of Jesus (Luke 1:31), and following her inquiry, the Angel informs Mary: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Luke 1:35).

The Scriptural references regarding the virginity of Mary and the conception of Jesus by the supernatural intervention of the Holy Spirit are explicit. In conjunction with the unanimous voice of the early Church Fathers and the profession of this truth in the Apostles' Creed, this aspect of Mary's perpetual virginity is the most readily perceived and acknowledged by Christians.

Despite the belief among Christians that Mary was a virgin before the birth of her Son Jesus, today it is primarily Catholics who hold to the truth that Mary remained a virgin for the rest of her life. Nevertheless, this belief is ancient. Dr. Alan Schreck, in his book *Catholic and Christian: An Explanation of Commonly Misunderstood Catholic Beliefs*, 20th Anniversary Edition (Dynamic Catholic, p. 214), lists some of the most illustrious Christians of all time who proclaimed Mary's perpetual virginity. He reminds us that even the Protestant reformers Martin Luther

and John Calvin affirmed their belief in this truth.

After Christ's Birth

The dogma of Mary's complete and perpetual virginity proclaims that Mary remained a virgin until the end of her earthly life and that she had no marital relations, and bore no other children after the birth of Jesus.

The principal objection to Mary's perpetual virginity is the Scriptural references to the "brethren of the Lord" (Mt. 12:46; Mark 3:31; Luke 8:19). Clearly, this "difficulty" proves to be primarily a linguistic one and does not create a valid Scriptural objection to Mary's perpetual virginity. Dr. Mark Miravalle, in his book *Introduction to Mary*, (Queenship Publishing, 1993, pp. 162-163), explains that the Greek word for brother, *adelphos*, is often used in the Bible to mean cousin, or near relative. There is no Hebrew word for "cousin" and thus we come to see that *adelphos* is really generic in its application to, and expression of, relations. This is obvious in the Old Testament. For instance, Genesis 13:8 refers to Abraham's cousin, Lot, as his brother, *adelphos*. As explained in the Catechism (paragraph 500) we read that in the New Testament, "James and Joseph, 'brothers of Jesus,' are the sons of another Mary...whom St. Matthew significantly calls 'the other Mary.'" James and Joseph are simply close relations of Jesus. (Mt. 13:55, 28:1).

Accurate study of the Biblical text also provides us with the understanding that the words "before" ("When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, **before** they came together, she was found to be with child," Mt. 1:18) and "until" ("Joseph took his wife, but knew her not **until** she had born a son," Mt. 1:25) state merely what has not yet taken place; they do not establish what will take place after the time indicated. There is ample Biblical data to demonstrate that the Greek and Semitic usage of these words in no sense establishes or implies that Mary and Joseph did "come together" after the birth of Christ. The emphasis here is simply that Mary was indeed a virgin at the time Jesus was born. Similarly, references to Jesus as a "first-born" do not imply that there was a second-born or third-born.

Further examination of Scriptural evidence gives us a key implicit reference to Mary's virginity after birth in her response to the Angel Gabriel: "How will this be since I know not man?" (Luke 1:34). The Biblical "know" here is a specific reference to sexual intercourse. Her question here does not express doubt that



conception is possible, but asks **how** conception will take place, since “I know not man!” Theologians help us understand the meaning and significance of this wordage in its original language. The phrase “I know not man” is expressed in the “habitual sense.” That is, it describes not only the present state, but an ongoing permanent condition. We can appreciate this “habitual sense” more clearly when we examine the modern English expression “I do not smoke.” Not only does it convey the meaning “I am not smoking now,” but we understand it as an unquestionable reference to the future as well.

Many Church Fathers understood this response, expressing not only a present but an ongoing state, to refer to a vow of perpetual virginity which Mary made prior to the angelic “Annunciation” in which she had, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, offered the complete gift of herself to God. This understanding gives much clarity to the aspect of Mary’s response which is puzzling in the context of her betrothal to Joseph. Outside of such a vow on Mary’s part, her question, “How will this be since I know not man?” makes no sense and would not have been necessary. She would quite simply have understood the forthcoming conception and child to be the fruit of the consummation of her marriage with Joseph.

A concern which usually surfaces at this point is: “Did the relationship between Mary and Joseph constitute an authentic marriage vow?” We need to consider the essence of Christian marriage. In Christian marriage, the Lord calls us to the truth and order that God intended from the beginning, namely the complete gift of self to other in Christ. The physical expression of this total gift of self is sexual intercourse. This is because, as Pope John Paul II explains, “the body expresses the person.”

The Church teaches that although almost without exception, true marriage includes marital, conjugal relations as an external sign of an interior gift of self, the validity of the marriage bond is not reducible to this physical expression, but is found in the true gift of self of husband and wife to each other. In the relationship between Mary and Joseph, even though the body did not express itself in the conjugal act, the true gift of self to each other was present. Indeed, there is nothing “cold” here, but every reason to believe they experienced a “marital bliss” expressed in spiritual intimacy and heartfelt signs of affection.

Doesn’t this in some way demean the nature of sexuality or infer that even marital intercourse, between husband and wife in covenantal relationship, is not good and meritorious or, at the very least, is somehow lesser in value? Actually, quite the opposite is true. There are two ways that we as humans, consciously or unconsciously, show respect for something. We demonstrate respect for the value or intrinsic worth with which we hold something, by either using it correctly or not using it at all. Numerous examples surface when we take a perceptive look. Our language itself tries to convey the reverence we have for God’s “untouched” creation. We speak with awe of a “virgin forest.” Great efforts are made to preserve such forests, the contents of which could be used for many good and functional purposes.

God is always calling us to good and proper use of the gifts He has given us – and make no mistake about it – the Church has always taught and continues to teach that sexual relations in marriage is one of His most awesome, precious gifts.

We live in an age and culture which has made sexual relations

an idol. The gift of sexual relations has been elevated above the Giver of this gift. In any such age, the truth and beauty of Mary’s perpetual virginity will remain incomprehensible. The most beautiful marital love possible between a man and a woman, and the physical intimacy which expresses this love, is only a tiny hint, a tiny flicker of the great flame of Love that is God and the spiritual relationship of love He desires with each of us. Every happily married, mature couple will acknowledge, not woefully, but joyfully that there is “still something missing” in their relationship, and that married love points to God’s love. The oneness and perfection of that Love will not be fully realized till Heaven. Conjugal love is a reflection of God’s eternal love for each of us; it is not the other way around!

Mary, in her God-given and God-protected role as Virgin and Mother is both the model of the Church and the preeminent example of Christian discipleship in her complete gift of self to God.

We must remember that this great mystery of the Incarnation was only going to happen once in the history of mankind. We read in *Introduction to Mary* that “...Mary’s Perpetual Virginity possesses its greatest importance because it safeguards and respects the unprecedented and incomparably sacred event of God becoming man.” (p. 49)

During Christ’s Birth

The reference to Mary’s virginity “during” the birth of Jesus Christ as expressed in the papal definition is understandably puzzling for most people. Nevertheless, this miraculous birth, which did not violate Mary’s physical integrity, is overwhelmingly taught by the early Church Fathers, the Second Vatican Council (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 57) and the Magisterium – that is the Pope and Bishops in union with the Pope. Sacred Scripture, in addition to its explicit reference to a virginal conception, gives an implicit reference to a “virgin birth” in the great prophecy of Isaiah 7:14. “Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son.”

Exactly how this miraculous birth took place, we do not know and we need not speculate. Again, the importance lies in its **significance**. Mary’s physical virginity is a sign of her moral virginity, a “*sign of her faith* unadulterated by any doubt, and of her undivided gift of herself to God’s will” (Catechism 506).

The pain experienced in childbirth is a punitive effect of Original Sin, and Mary, free from the penalty of Original Sin due to her Immaculate Conception, would therefore be free from the painful process of childbirth. Though Mary was spared the physical pain of childbirth in bringing forth Jesus, “He whom God placed as the first-born among many brethren” (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 63), she suffered tremendously at the foot of the Cross. In the words of Pope John Paul II, she was “crucified spiritually,”¹ becoming for all time a **collaborator** with Christ in the childbirth, the new birth, of the “rest of her offspring... those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus” (Rev. 12:17), that is, all Christians!

1. John Paul II, Allocution at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Alborada in Quayaquil, given on Jan. 31, 1985, reported in L’Observatore Romano Supplement of Feb. 2, 1985 and in English L’Observatore Romano, March 11, 1985, p. 7.

This bulletin insert was written by Carol Lankford, consecrated virgin and spiritual director, and is a shortened version of one of a series of six pamphlets. For access to all six pamphlets contact Ann Lankford, Director, Office for Catechesis and Evangelization, 608-791-2658