

Virginity of Mary and the Virginal Birth of Jesus

(Note: I am not presenting this as my definitive thought, not the thought of the Church, nor am I trying to argue with the Church or the Fathers. I am thinking out loud with this discussion. I am still trying to ferret out all the teaching and speculation on the matter. I am thinking out loud, not giving any final conclusions. Last updated 12-22-06.)

I was the guest today on *Searching the Word* today on [Relevant Radio](#) (Tuesday, December 19, 2006). I was asked about the Virgin Birth of Jesus. Did he have a miraculous birth—specifically, did he pass from the womb of Mary miraculously—that is by avoiding the birth canal and leaving the hymen intact, or was he was born normally through the birth canal?

Jesus' birth was miraculous from the standpoint of how he was conceived—without the involvement of a man. It is miraculous on that basis alone and does not need to include “delivery” without passing through the birth canal.

There are two issues: 1) was he born through the birth canal like a normal baby; and 2) did Mary suffer pain in childbirth.

First, my contention was that Mary gave birth to Jesus normally by opening the womb and passing through the birth canal. Good theologians have argued both sides. Many if not most of the Fathers of the Church and Schoolmen taught that he did not open the womb. The Church has never defined this detail, though the Catechism of Trent, which I will quote later seems pretty clear.

However, I said on the show that *virginity has to do with how a baby gets in the womb, not how it gets out.*

Even Scriptures seems to imply that the baby Jesus was born in the normal way like any other Jewish baby “born under the Law” (Gal 4:4)—by *opening the womb*. In Luke 2:21-23 we read:

And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. And when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every male *that opens the womb* shall be called holy to the Lord”).

Mt 1:25 says, “*she gave birth to a son*” without implying any miraculous intervention. *The same is true of Luke 2:7 where it says, “And she gave birth to her first-born son.”*

The manner in which the baby was born has no impact on virginity. However, before modern medicine, a non-intact or torn hymen was viewed as evidence of a loss of virginity. Therefore a baby opening the womb and passing through the birth canal would tear the hymen rendering the woman no longer a virgin.

Thomas Aquinas writes in his *Summa Theologica*, Question 35: Of Christ's Nativity, Article 6:

I answer that, The pains of childbirth are caused by the infant opening the passage from the womb. Now it has been said above (Q28,A2, Replies to Objections), that Christ came forth from the closed womb of His Mother, and, consequently, without opening the passage. Consequently there was no pain in that birth, as neither was there any corruption; *on the contrary*, there was much joy therein for that God-Man "was born into the world," according to Isaiah 35:1,2: "Like the lily, it shall bud forth and blossom, and shall rejoice with joy and praise."

Aquinas is not infallible, but I don't like finding myself in conflict with him. However, I still don't get why they view a birth passing through the birth canal as a violation of virginity. It must be an old medical misconception of some kind.

Aquinas makes it sound as though Christ was born by a spiritual Caesarean—he just kind of suddenly appeared outside Mary's body. The reason he gives for this is to avoid pain or corruption. But it is perfectly possible for Mary to have given birth normally, like Eve may have done if Cain and Abel had been born before the Fall—naturally and without damage or pain. And how does giving birth normally to a baby cause corruption. That one too has me baffled.

The *Catechism* quotes Vatican II, and does not say or imply that Jesus could not have passed through the birth canal.

The deepening of faith in the virginal motherhood led the Church to confess Mary's real and perpetual virginity even in the act of giving birth to the Son of God made man. In fact, Christ's birth "did not diminish his mother's virginal integrity but sanctified it." And so the liturgy of the Church celebrates Mary as *Aeiparthenos*, the "Ever-virgin."

John Paul II in his book *Theotokos* writes,

Although the definitions of the magisterium, except for those of the Lateran Council of 649, desired by Pope Martin I, do not explain the meaning of the term "virgin," it is clear that this term is used in its customary sense: the voluntary abstention from sexual acts and the preservation of bodily integrity. However, physical integrity is considered essential to the truth of faith of Jesus' virginal conception (cf. CCC 496) (*Theotokos*, pg. 115).

And again,

In a brief formula, the Church traditionally presents Mary as "virgin before, during and after giving birth," affirming, by indicating these three moments, that she never ceased to be a virgin. Of the three, the affirmation of her virginity "before giving birth" is undoubtedly the most important, because it refers to Jesus' conception and directly touches the mystery of the Incarnation. From the beginning it has been constantly present in the Church's belief.

Her virginity "during and after giving birth," although implicit in the title "Virgin" already attributed to Mary from the Church's earliest days, became the object of deep doctrinal study since some began explicitly to cast doubts on it. Pope St. Hormisdas explained that "the Son of God became Son of man, born in time in the manner of a man, opening his mother's womb to birth [cf. Lk 2:23], and through God's power, not dissolving his mother's virginity" (DS 368). The Second Vatican Council confirmed this doctrine, and stated that the firstborn Son of Mary "did not diminish his Mother's virginal integrity but sanctified it" (LG 57) (Theotokos, pg. 131).

The *Council of Trent* promulgated a catechism which states,

THE NATIVITY OF CHRIST TRANSCENDS THE ORDER OF NATURE
But as the Conception itself transcends the order of nature, so the birth of our Lord presents to our contemplation nothing but what is divine. Besides, what is admirable beyond the power of thoughts or words to express, He is born of His Mother without any diminution of her maternal virginity, just as He afterwards went forth from the sepulchre while it was closed and sealed, and entered the room in which His disciples were assembled, the doors being shut; or not to depart from every-day examples, just as the rays of the sun penetrate without breaking or injuring in the least the solid substance of glass, so after a like but more exalted manner did Jesus Christ come forth from His mother's womb without injury to her maternal virginity. This immaculate and perpetual virginity forms, therefore, the just theme of our eulogy. Such was the work of the Holy Spirit, who at the Conception and birth of the Son so favored the Virgin Mother as to impart to her fecundity while preserving inviolate her perpetual virginity.

I tend to think the examples given do not prove the point. 1) The stone was rolled away from the tomb—Jesus did not exit the tomb with the stone still in place. It was miraculous, yes, but the stone was rolled away (Jn 20:1 says the stone had been moved whereas Matthew seems unclear to me). 2) Light passing through glass is not like a physical body passing through an object. 3) When Jesus appeared in the Upper Room with the doors shut he had already received a spiritual body, but when he was born he had not the spiritual resurrected body yet.

I am not always sure what people mean by "opening the womb" or a "miraculous birth." If they mean that Jesus was born through the birth canal without doing any damage, then I have no problem with that. But if they mean that he came out without going through the birth canal—kind of like a spiritual Caesarean—then that is a different matter.

A very thoughtful and respectful reader wrote to me sharing many good quotes which caused me to revise my article. He concluded thus,

In this way does the dogmatic Council of Trent take the teaching of St. Augustin and St. Thomas Aquinas concerning the Nativity of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and authoritatively put it forth for the edification of the faithful. While it

may not be as explicit in some respects as the modern mind would like, an honest reflection of what has been said by the Magisterium should bring an end to much of the debate which currently surrounds this topic.

I agree with him that when the Church teaches something authoritatively then I must and will comply. But I am not sure the citations quoted definitively demand that the faithful must believe in the “spiritual Caesarean” position to be in obedience with the Church. Aquinas is not infallible and just because St. Augustine and others refer to childbirth without pain does not require a non-natural birth. The Council Fathers at Trent to not define or demand that one believes that the womb was never opened, though the subsequent Catechism seems pretty clear on the topic—but is the Catechism infallible? Personally I don’t know.

I tend to agree with Dr. Ludwig Ott in his respected book *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* when he says,

2. Virginité During the Birth of Jesus Mary bore her Son without any violation of her virginal integrity. (*De fide on the ground of the general promulgation of doctrine.*)

The dogma merely asserts the *fact* of the continuance of Mary's physical virginity without determining more closely how this is to be physiologically explained. In general the Fathers and the Schoolmen conceived it as non-injury to the hymen, and accordingly taught that Mary gave birth in miraculous fashion without opening of the womb and injury to the hymen, and consequently also without pains (cf. S. th. III 28, 2).

However, according to modern natural scientific knowledge, the purely physical side of virginity consists in the non-fulfilment of the sex act (" sex-act virginity ") and in the non-contact of the female egg by the male seed (" seed-act virginity ") (A. Mitterer). Thus, injury to the hymen in birth does not destroy virginity, while, on the other hand, its rupture seems to belong to complete natural motherhood. It follows from this that from the concept of virginity alone the miraculous character of the process of birth cannot be inferred, if it cannot be, and must not be derived from other facts of Revelation. Holy Writ attests Mary's active role in the act of birth (Mt. 1:25 ; Luke 2:7 : " She brought forth ") which does not seem to indicate a miraculous process.

But the Fathers, with few exceptions, vouch for the miraculous character of the birth. However, the question is whether in so doing they attest a truth of Revelation or whether they wrongly interpret a truth of Revelation, that is, Mary's virginity, from an inadequate natural scientific point of view. It seems hardly possible to demonstrate that the dignity of the Son of God or the dignity of the Mother of God demands a miraculous birth.

Second, I did not comment on whether Mary experienced pain in childbirth, but I would contend that Mary had labor while giving birth—similar to any baby, though maybe without pain.

“Opening the womb” and pain in childbirth are not synonymous, or let me say, opening the womb does not necessarily require that pain be experienced. If Cain and Abel had been born prior to the fall, would Eve had had labor? Would the uterus and the surrounding muscles have contracted to push the baby through the birth canal? Would the hymen have been torn during initial intercourse or during childbirth? I would suspect so, since that is the way God made the human body and that’s the way babies get in and out of the womb.

Actually, pain in childbirth is not universally experienced today. Some women have babies with little or no pain, quick and painless labors. It is very possible that Mary could have given birth naturally without pain—similar to many modern women, especially those who practice natural birthing.

Revelation 12:1-2 is a reference to Mary giving birth to the Christ who would rule the world with a rod of iron. It says, “*And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery.*”

Now if John, who had cared for Mary after the death and resurrection of Jesus, referred to “the Woman” giving birth in this way—knowing it is an image or reference to Mary—why would he refer to her giving birth in this way? I don’t have an answer; it is a rhetorical question.

But, since that was not the topic of discussion, I am not going into it in detail. So, these are just a few thoughts on the matter. Below are two articles for those who want to read further on this matter. The first is an article by Fr. William Saunders that can be found at the web address provided.

The second is provided by Catholics United for the Faith (CUF) which I tend to disagree with some of their interpretations of the Fathers, implying that miraculous birth or new kind of birth refers to leaving the womb in a miraculous way when miraculous birth can and probably usually refers to the miraculous conception of the baby—thus a miraculous birth.

Straight Answers: The Painless Birth of Christ

By Fr. William Saunders
HERALD Columnist

<http://www.catholicherald.com/saunders/98ws/ws980521.htm>

Ever since the HERALD published the article about the birth of Christ and whether or not Mary experienced the pains of birth, you have printed letters which discussed both sides of the issue. What is the real position on the issue of the painless birth of Christ? – A reader in Vienna

To address this issue, which indeed has caused much attention in the editorial pages of the HERALD lately, we must first focus on our outstanding of the perpetual virginity of Mary. We as Catholics firmly believe that Mary is "ever virgin." The *Catechism* asserts, "The deepening faith in the virginal motherhood led the Church to confess Mary's real and perpetual virginity even in the act of giving birth to the Son of God made man" (No. 499). Given this teaching, the perpetual virginity of Mary has traditionally been defended and examined in three parts: Mary's conception of Christ (*virginitas ante partum*); her giving birth to Christ (*virginitas in partu*); and her remaining a virgin after the birth of Christ (*virginitas post partum*). This formulation was used by many of the early Church Fathers—St. Augustine, St. Peter Chrysologus, Pope St. Leo the Great, St. Gregory Nazianzus and St. Gregory Nyssa. For example, the *Catechism* quotes St. Augustine's elaboration: Mary "remained a virgin in conceiving her son, a virgin in giving birth to Him, a virgin in carrying Him, a virgin in nursing Him at her breast, always a virgin" (No. 510).

Mary's virginity prior to the conception of Christ is quite clear from the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke where she is clearly identified as "a virgin" (cf. Lk 1:26-27, Mt 1:18). Moreover, when Archangel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would be the mother of the Messiah, she responded, "How can this be since I do not know man?" indicating her virginity.

At the other end of the spectrum is Mary's virginity after the birth of Christ. In a previous article concerning whether Jesus has blood brothers and sisters, this question was dealt with in detail. Succinctly, we as Catholics believe that Mary and Joseph did not have other children after the birth of Christ. No evidence exists either in Sacred Scripture or tradition to believe otherwise.

The troublesome part is the middle—Mary's virginity in giving birth to Christ. We remember that one of the sufferings inherited because of original sin is that of "child bearing pains:" The Lord God said to Eve, "I will intensify the pangs of your childbearing; in pain shall you bring forth children" (Genesis 3:16). Since Mary was free from original sin by her immaculate conception, she would consequently be free of "child bearing pain." In wrestling with this belief, the early Church Fathers then struggled to explain the meaning of this virginity *in partu*. The majority of Western Fathers seemed to emphasize Mary's physical integrity. For instance, Pope St. Leo the Great said, "...She (Mary) brought him forth without the loss of virginity, even as she conceived him without its loss.... (Jesus Christ was) born from the Virgin's womb because it was a miraculous birth...." They compared the birth of our Lord to Him miraculously emerging from the closed tomb or appearing suddenly in the upper room although the doors were locked. Some Fathers used the analogy of the birth of our Lord to a ray of sun shining through a

glass: just as the glass remains "unaltered; by the ray, so did Mary by the birth of our Lord. (Even Pope Pius XII in his encyclical "Mystici Corporis" (1943) asserted, "It was [Mary] who gave miraculous birth to Christ our Lord....")

On the other hand, the Eastern Fathers emphasized Mary's joy and freedom from pain in giving birth to Jesus, the Son of God. They looked upon Mary as the New Eve, free of the pain of original sin. Moreover, they did not want to lose the notion of Mary being a mother in the full sense of the term. Remember, the Gospel of St. Luke simply states, "She gave birth..." (Lk 2:7), which does not demand a miraculous birth process.

Officially, the church has upheld the perpetual virginity of Mary. Pope Siricius in 390 wrote: "This is the virgin who conceived in her womb and as a virgin bore a son." The Council of Chalcedon (451) ratified the teaching of Pope Leo I regarding that Mary is ever virgin. The Lateran Council (649) (not one of the general councils) stated: "If anyone does not, according to holy Fathers, confess truly and properly that holy Mary, ever virgin and immaculate, is Mother of God, since in this latter age she conceived in true reality without human seed from the Holy Spirit, God the Word Himself, who before the ages was begotten of God the Father, and gave birth to Him without injury, her virginity remaining equally inviolate after the birth, let him be condemned." In 1555, Pope Paul IV affirmed the virginity of Mary before, during, and after the birth of the Lord. However, the Church has not defined specifically how Mary is virgin *in partu*.

In the 1950s, great controversy arose among theologians over the interpretation of virgin *in partu*. Albert Mitterer cautioned against so emphasizing the physical quality of virginity that one lost sight of the goodness of Mary's role as mother and her giving birth to Jesus. Freedom from "child bearing pain" does not necessarily entail freedom from the act of child bearing. Dr. Ludwig Ott stated, "It seems hardly possible to demonstrate that the dignity of the Son of God or the dignity of the Mother of God demands a miraculous birth."

Fr. Karl Rahner, without delving into all of the anatomical details, focused on the spiritual reality of Mary's virginity: Mary bore the Son of God. Her childbearing must have been essentially different from other women since she was free of the effects of original sin. Therefore, her virginity, childbearing, and motherhood are together in union with the will of God.

Finally, on July 27, 1960, the Holy Office (now the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith) warned, "Several theological studies have been published in which the delicate problem of Mary's virginity *in partu* is dealt with in unbecoming terms and, what is worse, in a manner that is clearly opposed to the traditional doctrine of the Church and to the devotional sense of the faithful." Frankly, a discussion of *virginitas in partu* which focuses on anatomical minutia not only loses sight of the beautiful theology of the incarnation but also becomes embarrassing.

In all, we need to emphasize and revere both the virginity and motherhood of Mary. The "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" of the Second Vatican Council asserted that Christ's birth "did not diminish His mother's virginal integrity but sanctified it" (No. 57).

Accordingly, "in the mystery of the Church, which is itself rightly called mother and virgin, the Blessed Virgin stands out in eminent and singular fashion as exemplar both of virgin and mother" (No. 63).

Fr. Saunders is dean of the Notre Dame Graduate School of Christendom College and pastor of Queen of Apostles Parish, both in Alexandria.

Mary's Perpetual Virginit

http://www.cuf.org/Faithfacts/details_view.asp?ffID=102

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 Virginit, or any Church teaching, the most fundamental question 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 Virginit 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 Thessalonians 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 Timothy 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 Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 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 Isaiah 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 Luke 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 Isaiah 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 Ezekiel 44:2. Isaiah 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.

Matthew 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 Leviticus 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 Genesis 3:15 and the New Eve image.

St. Ambrose wrote on the eve of the Synod of Milan in 390 that the prophecy of Isaiah 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 Isaiah 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, St. Augustine and St. 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.

DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH, ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA. (in Hom. de occurso Domini.) Now this commandment of the law seems to have had its fulfilment in the incarnate God, in a very remarkable and peculiar manner. For He alone, ineffably conceived and incomprehensibly brought forth, **opened the virgin’s womb, till then unopened by marriage**, and after this birth miraculously retaining the seal of chastity.

DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH, ST. AMBROSE. For no union with man disclosed the secrets of the virgin’s womb, but the Holy Spirit infused the immaculate seed into an inviolate womb. He then who sanctified another womb in order that a prophet should be born, He it is who has opened the womb of His own mother, that the Immaculate should come forth. By the words *opening the womb*, **he speaks of birth after the usual manner**, not that the sacred abode of the virgin’s womb, which our Lord in entering sanctified, should

now be thought by His proceeding forth from it to be deprived of its virginity.

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.

Thomas Aquinas, S., & Newman, J. H. (1843). *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers, Volume 3: St. Luke* (81). Oxford: John Henry Parker.

Perhaps the most persistent objection to Mary's virginity post partum is the frequent scriptural references to Jesus' "brothers" (e.g., Matthew 13:55, Mark 3:31-35, Luke 8:20, John 2:12 and 7:3-5, Acts 1:14, Galatians 1:19 1 Corinthians 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., Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 1:26-38 and 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 Matthew 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 Isaiah 46:4; Matthew 28:20; 1 Corinthians 15:23-26; Psalms 122:2; Psalms 118:123; Genesis 35:4; Deuteronomy 34:5-6; Genesis 8:7; 2 Samuel 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, 206).

Mary's Perpetual Virginité, 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 virginité any more than we can deny the physicality of Mary's motherhood. Mary's Perpetual Virginité 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).

RECOMMENDED READING

Holy Bible

Catechism of the Catholic Church

Documents of Vatican II

To order, call Benedictus Books toll-free: (888) 316-2640. CUF members receive 10% discount.

Catholic for a Reason: Scripture and the Mystery of the Family of God; Hahn, Scott, et al.

Catholic for a Reason II: Scripture and the Mystery of the Mother of God; Hahn, Scott, et al.

Queen Mother: A Biblical Theology of Mary's Queenship; Sri, Edward

Faith Facts: Answers to Catholic Questions; Suprenant and Gray

Courageous Love: A Bible Study on Holiness for Women; Mitch, Stacy

Mission of the Messiah: On the Gospel of Luke; Gray, Timothy

Servants of the Gospel; Suprenant, Leon, ed.

A Catholic Handbook for Engaged and Newly Married Couples; Marks, Frederick

To order, call Emmaus Road Publishing toll-free: (800) 398-5470.

Related Faith Facts

- Honor Thy Mother: Honoring Mary and the Saints is Biblically Correct
- Mary, Mother of God: The First Marian Dogma
- What's a Mother To Do?: Mary's Role in Our Salvation
- Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

- Mary, Conceived Without Sin: The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception

© 2004 Catholics United for the Faith, Inc.

Last edited: 2/97