

THE EVER-VIRGINITY OF THE *Mother of God*

by Fr. John Hainsworth

Last year for the Feast of the Nativity, I gave a lecture about one of the central claims of the Christian faith: the Virgin Birth of Christ. This was all well until I used in passing the phrase "ever-virgin" with reference to the Lord's Mother. Someone asked, "Do you actually mean that Mary remained a virgin *after* Jesus' birth?" I said yes, that is what the Orthodox Church teaches. The look of surprised bemusement on the audience's faces said it all. The miracle of the Virgin Birth is one thing, but lifelong abstinence from sexuality? That's *impossible!*

The lives of monastics and ascetics around the world and throughout history attest to the fact that of course it *is* possible. Sexual purity is only one of many challenges set for these spiritual warriors, and for many, perhaps most of them, it is not the greatest. The Orthodox have no difficulty, then, considering the ever-virginity of Mary a nonnegotiable fact and its alternative unthinkable. But why should this necessarily be so? Why insist on the idea that Mary (who was married, after all) did not go on to have a "normal" married life?

A Consistent and Unbroken Tradition

The question could be inverted. Why *not* believe in her ever-virginity? The Eastern Church has witnessed to the perpetual virginity of the Theotokos steadfastly for two thousand years and shows no sign of tiring. In the West, the idea was largely undisputed until late in the Reformation; even Luther and Calvin accepted the tradition.

Indeed, to suggest (a) that the tradition about her perpetual virginity could have been introduced after apostolic times, (b) that this tradition would have gone little noticed by a Church in the throes of questioning everything about what it believed in the first millennium, (c) that such a

novel tradition should be considered inconsequential enough to pass without discussion before it became universally proclaimed, and (d) that such a tradition should have no discernible literary or geographical origin and yet be universally accepted from very early in the Church's history, is to form a very unlikely hypothesis.

Set Apart to God

To argue against Mary's perpetual virginity is to suggest something else that is greatly implausible, not to say

unthinkable: that neither Mary nor her protector, Joseph, would have deemed it inappropriate to have sexual relations after the birth of God in the flesh. Leaving aside for a moment the complete uniqueness of the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity, recall that it was the practice for devout Jews in the ancient world to refrain from sexual activity following *any* great manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

An early first-century popular rabbinical tradition (first recorded by



Philo, 20 BC–AD 50) notes that Moses “separated himself” from his wife Zipporah when he returned from his encounter with God in the burning bush. Another rabbinical tradition, concerning the choosing of the elders of Israel in Numbers 7, relates that after God had worked among them, one man exclaimed, “Woe to the wives of these men!” I cannot imagine that the fellow to the left of him replied, “What do you mean, Joe?” The meaning of the statement would have been immediately apparent.

Whether these stories relate actual events or not, they express the popular piety in Israel at the time of the birth of Christ. That culture understood virginity and abstinence not as a mere rejection of something enjoyable—to what end?—but as something naturally taken up by one whose life has been consecrated by the Lord’s Spirit to be a vessel of salvation to His people. The intervening centuries of social, religious, and philosophical conditioning have made us suspicious of virginity and chastity in a way that no one in the Lord’s time would have been.

Mary became the vessel for the Lord of Glory Himself, and bore in the flesh Him whom heaven and earth cannot contain. Would this not have been grounds to consider her life, including her body, as consecrated to God and God alone? Or is it more plausible that she would shrug it all off and get on with keeping house in the usual fashion? Consider that the poetically parallel incident of the Lord’s entry through the east gate of the Temple (in Ezekiel 43–44) prompts the call: “This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it, for the LORD God of Israel has entered by it; therefore it shall be shut” (44:2).

And then there is Joseph’s character to consider. Surely his wife’s miraculous conception and birthgiving (confirmed by the angel in dream-visions) and the sight of God incarnate in the face of the child Christ would have been enough to convince him that his marriage was set apart from the norm. Within Mary’s very body had dwelt the second Person of the Trinity.

If touching the ark of the covenant had cost Uzzah his life, and if even the scrolls containing the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets were venerated, certainly Joseph, man of God that he was, would neither have dared nor desired to approach Mary, the chosen of Israel, the throne of God, to request his “conjugal rights”!

The Lord’s “Brothers”

There are several questions based on Scripture that are often raised by those skeptical about the doctrine of ever-virginity. The first of these involves the passages which state explicitly that the Lord had “brothers.” There are nine such passages: Matthew 12:46–47 and 13:55–56; Mark 3:31–32 and 6:3; Luke 8:19–20; John 2:12 and 7:3–5; Acts 1:14; and 1 Corinthians 9:5. The Greek word used in all these passages and generally translated “brother” is *adelphos*.

The Septuagint—the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures used by the Apostles (abbreviated LXX)—includes specific words for “cousin,” notably *adelphinos* and *anepsios*, but they are rarely used. The less specific word *adelphos*, which can mean “brother,” “cousin,” “kinsman,” “fellow believer,” or “fellow countryman,” is used consistently throughout the LXX, even when cousin or kinsman is clearly the relation described (such as in Genesis 14:14, 16; 29:12; Leviticus 25:49; Jeremiah 32:8, 9, 12; Tobit 7:2; etc.). Lot, for instance, who was the nephew of Abraham (cf. Genesis 11:27–31), is called his brother in Genesis 13:8 and 11:14–16. The point is that the commonly used Greek word for a male relative, *adelphos*, can be translated “cousin” or “brother” if no specific family relation is indicated.

Is there anywhere a clear statement in the Scriptures establishing Jesus’ brothers as literally the children of Mary? In fact, there is not. *Nowhere* is Mary explicitly stated to be the mother of Jesus’ brothers. The formula for speaking of the Lord’s family is “His mother and His brothers.” In Mark the possessive, *anavtou*—“of Him,” is inserted before *both* “His mother” and

“His brothers,” making a clear distinction. In Acts 1:14, the separation is more pronounced: “Mary the mother of Jesus, and His brothers.” Some manuscripts use the conjunctive *syn*—“along with, in company with,” so that the text reads “Mary the mother of Jesus, along with His brothers.” In any case, Mary is never identified as the mother of Jesus’ brothers (nor they as her children), but only as the Mother of Jesus.

The Meaning of “Until”

Another objection to the idea of Mary’s perpetual virginity is that the Scriptures use the word “until” or “till” in Matthew 1:25: “. . . and [Joseph] did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son.”

Whereas in English the word “until” necessarily indicates change after the fact, in the ancient languages of the Bible this is simply not the case. For instance, if we read Deuteronomy 34:6, 2 Samuel 6:23, Psalm 72:7 and 110:1 (as interpreted by Jesus in Matthew 22:42–46), Matthew 11:23 and 28:20, Romans 8:22, and 1 Timothy 4:13, to reference just a few examples, we will see that in none of these passages does the word “until” indicate a necessary change. If it did, then apparently among other things we would be meant to understand that Jesus will at some point stop sitting at the right hand of the Father, and that on some unhappy date in the future He intends to abandon the Church!

The use of “until” in Matthew 1:25, then, is purely to indicate that Christ was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, not conceived by Joseph and Mary, since they did not “know” each other “until” the birth. In this context “until” is really synonymous with “before.” If on the contrary it were meant in its full contemporary English sense—that is, if it really meant that Joseph and Mary’s chaste relationship changed after the birth—then the stylistics present another big problem: the reader would have to believe that Matthew was *actually inviting contemplation* of the couple’s later sexual activity. This is doubtful to say the least.

The Meaning of "Firstborn"

Another objection might be based on the word "firstborn," *prototokos* in Greek. The problem again is that the Greek word is not identical in semantic range to the English rendering. The English "firstborn" usually (though, it must be said, not always) implies the existence of subsequent children, but with *prototokos* there is no such implication. In Hebrews 1:6, for example, the use of *prototokos* in reference to the Incarnation of the Word of God cannot mean that there is a "second-born" Word of God!

Nowhere is the term used to express merely the order of birth; instead in Romans 8:29, Colossians 1:15, 18, Hebrews 11:28 and 12:23, and Revelation 1:5, the title is applied to Jesus as the privileged and legal Heir of the Kingdom, attesting that He is truly "first in all things." To the contemporary ear, a better translation might indeed be "heir," which is similarly silent on the subject of other children and carries the same legal and poetic force that is intended by "firstborn."

"Woman, Behold Thy Son"

Also, consider the moving passage from St. John's Gospel in which our Lord commits His Mother into the care of St. John as He dies on the Cross. Why would He do so if she had other children to look after her? Jewish custom dictated that the care of a mother would fall to the second born if the firstborn died, and if the widow had no other child she would be left to take care of herself. Since she is without other children, her Son gives her into the care of the beloved disciple.

The Women at the Cross and the Identity of the Lord's Brothers

Who exactly are the "brothers of the Lord" if not fellow sons of Mary His mother? (Here, I am gratefully indebted to the writing of Fr. Lawrence Farley in *The Gospel of Mark: The Suffering Servant*, pages 85-87, Conciliar Press, 2004.) A close study of the women at the Cross in Matthew 27:55, 56 yields a plausible answer. These women were said to be:

- (1) Mary Magdalene;
- (2) the mother of the sons of Zebedee;
- (3) Mary the Mother of James and Joseph.

In the parallel passage in Mark 15:40, 41, the women are said to be:

- (1) Mary Magdalene;
- (2) Salome;
- (3) Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joses.

In John 19:25, the women are listed as:

- (1) Mary Magdalene;
- (2) Christ's Mother;
- (3) His mother's sister, Mary wife of Clopas.

For our purposes we should focus on the woman who is referred to by St.

Matthew and St. Mark is the mother of our Lord's "brothers," "James and Joses." Also, it is inconceivable that Matthew and Mark would refer to the Lord's Mother at the foot of the Cross as the mother of James and Joseph, but not mention that she is the Mother of Jesus as well!

If it is the case, as the Scriptures suggest, that Mary wife of Clopas is the same as the mother of James and Joseph, we have the following conclusion: the Theotokos had a "sister," married to Clopas, who was the mother of James and Joseph, our Lord's "brothers." Here, the question ought to immediately arise concerning the Theotokos' relationship to this Mary: What kind of "sister" is she?



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Matthew as "Mary the mother of James and Joseph," by St. Mark as "Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joses [a variant of Joseph]," and by St. John in his list as "His mother's sister, Mary wife of Clopas."

Note that in Matthew the names "James and Joseph" were mentioned before. Indeed, the way Matthew mentions "Mary mother of James and Joseph" in 27:55, 56 presupposes that he has already introduced these "James and Joseph"—as indeed he has. In Matthew 13:55, we read that our Lord's "brothers" are "James and Joseph and Simon and Judas." Similarly, in St. Mark's Gospel, "James and Joses" are mentioned as if we already know who "James and Joses" are, which in fact we do from Mark 6:3, where Christ's "brothers" are listed as "James and Joses and Judas and Simon."

It seems beyond reasonable dispute that the Mary at the Cross in St.

Hegisippus, a Jewish Christian historian who, according to Eusebius, "belonged to the first generation after the apostles" and who interviewed many Christians from that apostolic community for his history, relates that Clopas was the brother of St. Joseph, foster-father of Christ (apud. Eusb. Eccl. H. iv:22). If this is so (and Hegisippus is generally acknowledged as fully reliable), then "Mary wife of Clopas" was the Virgin Mary's "sister" in that she was her sister-in-law.

The puzzle therefore fits together. St. Joseph married the Virgin Theotokos, who gave birth to Christ, her only Child, preserving her virginity and having no other children. St. Joseph's brother, Clopas, also married a woman named Mary, who had the children James and Joseph (along with Judas and Simon, and daughters also). These children were our Lord's "brothers" (using the terminology of

Israel, which as we have seen made no distinction between brothers and cousins but referred to all as “brothers”).

St. Matthew and St. Mark, focusing on our Lord’s family (Matthew 13:53ff and Mark 6:1ff), naturally refer to Clopas’ wife Mary as “the mother of James and Joseph (Josés).” St. John, on the other hand, focuses on our Lord’s Mother (cf. John 2:1ff) and just as naturally refers to this same woman as “His mother’s sister, Mary wife of Clopas.” But it is apparent that it is one and the same woman being referred to by all. This reconstruction is the best that can be made (though others exist, they all contain serious weaknesses) given both the Scriptural and historical evidence.

Why Mary’s Ever-Virginity Is Important

Some would say that even if it can be proved, Mary’s ever-virginity is not essential to the proclamation of the Gospel, and this is true on a certain level. In its essence, the Orthodox Church proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is our message, our reason for being, the very life of our life. Teaching about Mary is really meant for the initiates, those who have already accepted the Gospel and have committed themselves to Christ and to service in His Church.

This is so because what Mary teaches us about the Incarnation of the Word of God requires that we first accept the Incarnation. Once we do, then her virginity not only after birthgiving, but also before—and indeed the character of her entire life—become in themselves a wellspring of teaching about life in Christ and the glory of God. Indeed, she said as much herself. By stating that “all generations shall call me blessed,” Mary was not vainly contemplating her own uniqueness, but proclaiming the wonder that her life was to manifest God’s glorious victory in His Christ for all time.

Mary was not a happenstance vessel of God; rather her role in our salvation was prepared from the beginning of the ages. The entire history of Israel—the patriarchs, the psalms, the prophets, the giving of the command-

ments—converged in the young woman who would answer the way all Israel should always have answered, and as we all are expected to answer now: “Behold the handmaiden of the Lord.”

But her purpose in salvation history did not end there. She was not cast aside as an article that is no longer useful. Instead her whole being and life would continue to point us without distraction to her Son. At the wedding of Cana in Galilee we hear her words: “Whatever He says to you, do it” (John 2:5). At her Son’s crucifixion, she stands fast at the foot of the Cross, this time pointing not with words but by her refusal to leave His side even in the face of what seemed an impossible nightmare. As we undertake to imitate this faithfulness in pointing always to God, we will begin to see in the same measure that Mary’s perpetual virginity is in fact her ever-ministry, the ideal example for our own ministry.

It is important to recover the proper veneration of Mary which the apostolic Church has always held, not because Mary is the great exception but, as one

Orthodox theologian has said,¹ because she is the great example. This veneration is beautifully expressed in an Orthodox hymn that poetically recounts Gabriel’s first encounter with Mary, who was about to become the Ark of the New Covenant, the throne of God, the flesh which gave flesh to the Word of God:

Awed by the beauty of your virginity
and the exceeding radiance of your
purity,
Gabriel stood amazed, and cried to
you, O Mother of God:
“What praise may I offer you
that is worthy of your beauty?
By what name shall I call you?
I am lost and bewildered,
but I shall greet you as I was
commanded:
Hail, O full of grace.” ←

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Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation

(Required by 39 USC 3685) PS Form 3526

1. Publication Title—*Again*
2. Publication Number—0885-9795
3. Filing Date—10/15/2004
4. Issue Frequency—Quarterly
5. Number of Issues Published Annually—4
6. Annual Subscription Price—\$16.00
7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication—
Conciliar Press Ministries, Inc., 10090 A Highway 9, Ben Lomond CA 95005-9217
Contact Person—Carla Zell / Telephone (831) 336-5118
9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Address of Publisher and Editor—
Publisher—Fr. Peter E. Gillquist, 6816 Sabado Tarde, Isla Vista, CA 93117
Editor—Fr. R. Thomas Zell, 419 Coldwell Ave., Modesto, CA 95354
Managing Editor—Fr. R. Thomas Zell, 419 Coldwell Ave., Modesto, CA 95354
10. Owner—Conciliar Press Ministries, Inc., P.O. Box 76, Ben Lomond CA 95005
11. Known Bondholders, Mortgages, and Other Security Holders—None
12. Tax Status—Has not changed during the preceding 12 months
13. Publication Title—*Again*
14. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below—Vol. 26#3 (3rd Quarter, 2004)
15. Extent and Nature of Circulation:

	Average # of Copies Preceding 12 Months	Actual # of Copies Nearest to Filing Date
a. Net Press Run	4500	4500
b. Paid and /or requested circulation		
(1) Paid or requested mail subscriptions (outside county, form 3541)	3450	3482
(2) Paid or requested mail subscriptions (in county, form 3541)	0	0
(3) Sales through dealers, vendors, other paid distribution, etc.	182	92
(4) Other classes mailed through the USPS	104	97
c. Total paid and / or requested circulation [sum 15 b1 to 15 b4]	3736	3671
d. Free distribution by mail		
(1) Free distribution (outside county, form 3541)	115	115
(2) Free distribution (inside county, form 3541)	0	0
(3) Free distribution (other classes, through USPS)	31	1
e. Free distribution outside of mail	137	0
f. Total free distribution [sum 15 d1, 15 d2, 15 d3 and 15 e]	283	116
g. Total distribution [sum 15 c and 15 f]	4019	3787
h. Copies not distributed	481	713
i. Total [sum 15 g and 15 h]	4500	4500
j. Percent paid and / or requested circulation [15 c divided by 15 g]	92.96%	96.9%