

The Perpetual Virginity of Mary

By Greg Witherow

Mary's perpetual virginity was defined as a dogma of the Church at the Lateran Council in A.D. 649. The dogma is not distinctly Catholic in that it is embraced by the Orthodox and was held by virtually all Protestants until the 19th century. Luther, Calvin and Zwingli, the pillars of the Reformation and adherents of sola scriptura all vehemently held to this historic teaching. While Catholic dogmas are based on both Tradition and Scripture, many wonder where Scripture speaks on this topic.

To answer this question we must turn to Luke chapter 1. By carefully reading the text it becomes evident that Mary had taken a vow of virginity prior to the Annunciation. Here we will walk slowly through the dialogue between Gabriel and Mary, taking note of what is said and the order it was said. To begin, after the initial salutation Gabriel turns his focus on announcing the Incarnation. In his message he gives Mary the following list of future events.

- She will conceive in her womb, bear a son and will name him Jesus.
- He will be great and called Son of the Most High.
- The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David.
- He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, his kingdom having no end.

In response to this Mary raises her hand (figuratively speaking) to ask a question. But before we get to the question let's do a quick inventory of what we know so far. First, we know that Mary is a young woman of marrying age, betrothed to a man named Joseph. As such, it's assumed she knew where babies came from. Second, a typical Jewish couple would hope and expect children to result. Third, we should note (and this is important) that **Gabriel has not yet announced the time frame nor indicated the method of the conception**. She has merely been told she will conceive a baby boy at some point in the future¹ ("you will conceive"). True, awesome things have been said about the boy! But up to this point there has been no suggestion of a virgin birth, nor would anybody in his or her right mind presume (let alone fathom) such a course as it had never happened before. We must keep these things in mind as we move further into the dialogue.

One last thing before we get to Mary's question. Look at the list one more time. Could you categorize any of the four items as ordinary? Or try it this way. If you had to prioritize your questions, which item would be last on your list? Isn't item number one rather mundane, especially in light of the remaining items? Hadn't conceiving and bearing a son happened at least a million times (several times over) in the history of man? Even the name Jesus (Aramaic: Jeshua, Hebrew: Joshua) was common. So when Mary raises her hand, which item on the list does she choose? She selects # 1.

¹ In Luke 2:21 it states that when Mary and Gabriel had their meeting, Mary was not with Child. Mary was not asking how she **had** conceived, "since she does not know man". Rather she asking how she **could conceive in the future**, "as she does not know man".

"How shall this happen, since I do not know man?" If Mary had simply asked, "how shall this be?", we'd likely reason she was asking about the whole list. But she tags on the addendum, "since I do not know man" - indicating it's the conception she's focused on.

It's time to hit the pause button again and do another quick inventory. A few verses earlier in the same chapter Zechariah got the smack down for asking almost the exact same question. It too was over a miraculous birth of a forthcoming son. "How shall I know this?", he asked. But he betrayed the reason for his question when he added, "For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years". The reason Zechariah asked his question was because of doubt. Gabriel's response was a rebuke, a reminder of who the archangel was and finally a punishment. In looking at Mary's response we must rule out any tinge of doubt as the reason behind the question (as she was not punished).

So why - you ask - did she ask this particular question? The Church Fathers have stated it was out of concern, not doubt that prompted her question. (Note: Concern is not sin. Our prayers are our concerns). Her question (the Fathers state) makes no sense unless she had made a previous vow of virginity, was concerned to protect it and puzzled why God was presumably asking her to break it. As confirmation of this, Gabriel's answer in its entirety centers on the status of her virginity; "The Holy Spirit will come upon you". **And it is only at this point in the conversation that Gabriel announces the virgin birth.** Gabriel meets her concern, reminding her that God hadn't forgotten. There is no punishment doled out, no slap on the hand, not even the hint of a mild rebuke. As the two friends part ways, the Church is left with the gift of the Incarnation and a Marian dogma².

Are there any examples in the Bible of "chaste" marriages? Yes. In the first book of Kings we find an aged King David, who in his old age can no longer keep warm at night. As a result, a young virgin is found by the name of Abishag and a platonic marriage is arranged. "But the king knew her not". Note: We know it was regarded as a marriage of sorts as later, one of David's sons tries to marry Abishag to leverage a claim to the throne. No nursemaid would give him such a claim. The marriage was arranged so that the younger would help the older. The same would be true (in the reverse order) of Joseph and Mary.

In summary, we see that Mary could not have asked her question out of doubt, but only out of concern. But concern about what? The only logical answer for the concern, and the unanimous view of the Fathers, is that she had previously taken vows of virginity before God. While such marriages were rare, King David himself had entered into one.

² Actually, all four Marian dogmas are rooted in this passage and the visitation Mary makes to Elizabeth. But our focus here is on the perpetual virginity of Mary

Common Objections

Objection 1: This dogma is a Catholic invention. Those who hold to Scripture alone as the final authority for our faith reject it.

Reply: As stated above, this doctrine was believed by all of Christendom, including the Reformers, until the mid-19th century. Apparently, the Reformers thought Scripture alone supported this dogma. Protestants began to reject it, possibly as a reaction to the Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception defined in 1854. All of the Eastern Orthodox affirms the dogma. Therefore by definition, Mary having born other children is a Protestant invention.

Objection 2: Scripture never explicitly states that Mary was a perpetual virgin. The entire case for Mary's perpetual virginity is one of implication.

Reply: If one relies only on Scripture (and not sacred Tradition) this is true. But in conceding this we must point out two things.

1. The argument that Mary had children is also implicit (as we will see below).
2. Other dogmas, such as the doctrine of the Trinity are derived from implicit arguments based in Scripture. Additionally, the number of Sacraments, whether they are two in number (as Protestants argue) or seven in number (as Catholics and Orthodox argue) are based on implicit arguments from Scripture. Nowhere in Scripture are we given a list. Implicit arguments are valid if they can be proved.

Objection 3: Several times in the Gospels, Christ is said to have brothers. Doesn't this prove that Mary and Joseph had children?

Reply: At no time does scripture state that the brothers of Christ were born of Mary. It's one thing to state that Christ had brothers. It's an entirely different thing to state that Mary had other children. There are therefore three possibilities who these brothers are.

1. The brothers are Joseph's children from a previous marriage. A tradition dating from the 2nd century states that Joseph was a widower that had several children from this first wife. These children would therefore be Christ's half-brothers.
2. The brothers of Christ were distant relations (cousins).
3. The brothers of Christ were children of Mary and therefore Christ's younger siblings.

Option #3 should be eliminated for a number of reasons.

1. All of Christendom rejected option #3 until the mid-19th century.
2. It would be odd that Christ would give his mother to John at the foot of the Cross if he had several other siblings to care for her. Some argue that they were not believers and therefore Christ wanted her to be cared for in the community of faith. But James (one of the apostles) was a brother of Christ and was one of the pillars of the Church.

Objection 4: Jesus is called the “firstborn” son of Mary. This proves that Mary had other children with Christ being the first.

Reply: The term “firstborn” was a legal Jewish term. The designation means a couple is required to perform rites according to the Mosaic Law. The Law states all firstborn males are to be consecrated to the Lord. Mary and Joseph perform the consecration at the Temple in Luke 2:23. If a couple has only one male child, he is still a “firstborn” in the Jewish Law. If anything, “firstborn” proves that Christ was the first male child. It does not prove that there was a second child. If the term firstborn is to **require us to believe there was a second-born**, then the term second-born **requires us to believe there was a third-born**. But nobody makes this argument and it is nonsensical.

Objection 5: But why would Mary need to remain a virgin after the birth of Christ?

Reply: As a spouse of the Holy Spirit, she was set apart for a life uniquely dedicated to Him and the fruit of that union, Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament book of Ezekiel, there is a vision that alludes to Mary’s perpetual virginity and the reason for it.

“Then He brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary which faces toward the east, but it was shut. And the Lord said to me, “**This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter by it, because the Lord God of Israel has entered by it; therefore it shall be shut.** As for the prince, because he is the prince, he may sit in it to eat bread before the Lord; he shall enter by way of the vestibule of the gateway, and go out the same way.³”

Objection 6: The Gospel of Matthew states the Joseph did not know Mary “until” Christ was born. This proves they had marital relations after Christ was born.

Reply: Matthew explicitly states that Joseph did not have relations with Mary from the time of their engagement to the birth of Christ. But Matthew does not comment on their relations after the birth of Christ. The use of the word “until” **may imply** a transition or a change in status **or it may not**. Let’s look at two examples where it does not imply a transition.

1. The phrase, “May God bless you until we meet again” does not mean to imply a wish that God will stop blessing you after we meet again.
2. Paul states in Scripture that Christ “must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet”. This does not imply that Christ will step down from his throne after all of his enemies are put under foot, as we know that Christ will reign forever.

Within the greater context of Scripture (and Tradition) it is clear that Mary did not have other children.

³ Ezekiel 44:1-3. New King James Version.

Objection 7: In 1 Corinthians 7:5 Paul states requires couples to have marital relations.

Reply: Under normal conditions a husband and wife should have regular marital relations. But Joseph and Mary were in a unique situation. For example, Joseph did not have the option of having relations with Mary in the nine months preceding the birth of Christ. Doing so would have put the virgin birth in doubt. But married couples today are not bound by a similar limitation. Just because Paul does not mention this “Mary and Joseph exception”, does anyone want to claim Joseph sinned in abstaining?

Paul states that the danger of not engaging in sexual relations is the temptation to commit adultery. Mary and Joseph had sufficient grace to participate in a perpetual fast from such activity. In their exceptional circumstance, such a fast was not a sin.