

QUESTION 28

The Virginity of the Mother of God

Next we have to consider the virginity of the Mother of God. On this topic there are four questions: (1) Was she a virgin in conceiving? (2) Was she a virgin in giving birth? (3) Did she remain a virgin after the birth? (4) Did she take a vow of virginity?

Article 1

Was the Mother of God a virgin in conceiving Christ?

It seems that the Mother of God was not a virgin in conceiving Christ (*mater Dei non fuerit virgo in concipiendo Christum*):

Objection 1: No offspring who has a father and a mother is conceived by a virgin mother. But Christ is said to have not only a mother but also a father; for Luke 2:33 says, “His father and mother marveled over the things that were being said of Him.” And later on in the same chapter (Luke 2:48) it says, “Behold, your father and I have been looking for you in sorrow.” Therefore, Christ was not conceived by a virgin mother.

Objection 2: Matthew 1:1ff. proves that Christ was the Son of Abraham and the Son of David by the fact that Joseph descended from David. But this proof seems to amount to nothing if Joseph was not the father of Christ. Therefore, it seems that the mother of Christ conceived Him from the seed (*semen*) of Joseph. And so she does not seem to have been a virgin in conceiving.

Objection 3: Galatians 4:4 says, “God sent His Son, made of a woman (*factum ex muliere*).” But in normal speech ‘*mulier*’ means a woman who has been known [carnally] by a man (*dicitur quae est viro cognita*). Therefore, Christ was not conceived by a virgin mother.

Objection 4: Things that are of the same species have the same mode of generation, since generation, like other movements, takes its species from its terminus. But Christ was of the same species as other men—this according to Philippians 2:7 (“Being made like unto men, and appearing in form as a man” (*in similitudinem hominum factus et habitu inventus ut homo*)). Therefore, since other men are generated by the sexual intercourse of male and female (*ex commixtione maris et feminae*), it seems that Christ was likewise generated in a similar manner. And so it seems that He was not conceived by a virgin mother.

Objection 5: Every natural form has its own matter which is determined for it and without which it cannot exist. But the matter of the human form seems to be the seed of a male and a female. Therefore, if the body of Christ were not conceived from the seed of a male and a female, His body would not have been human—which is absurd. Therefore, it seems that He was not conceived by a virgin mother.

But contrary to this: Isaiah 7:14 says, “Behold, a virgin shall conceive ...”

I respond: It must, without qualification, be confessed that the mother of Christ conceived as a virgin, since the contrary involves the heresy of the Ebionites and Cerinthus, who judged that Christ was a mere human being and thought that He was born of the two sexes.

There are four reasons why it is fitting for Christ to have been conceived by a virgin:

First, in order to preserve the dignity of the Father who was sending Him. For since Christ is the true and natural Son of God, it was not fitting for Him to have a father other than God, lest God’s dignity be transferred to another.

Second, it was appropriate to a property of the Son Himself who is being sent and who is in fact the Word of God. But a word is conceived without any interior corruption (*absque omni corruptione cordis*); at the very least, interior corruption is not compatible with conceiving the *perfect* Word. Therefore, since

flesh was assumed by the Word of God in such a way that it was the flesh *of* the Word of God, it was fitting that it should likewise be conceived without the mother's being corrupted.

Third, it was appropriate to the dignity of Christ's human nature, in which it was not fitting for sin to have a place and through which the sin of the world was taken away—this according to John 1:29 (“Behold, the lamb of God”—i.e., the innocent one—“who takes away the sin of the world”) For it could not have been the case that, in a nature already corrupted by sexual intercourse, the flesh would be born without the infection of original sin. Hence, in *De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia* Augustine says, “Nuptial intercourse alone was absent there”—viz., in the marriage of Mary and Joseph—“because in sinful flesh nuptial intercourse could not have been performed without any concupiscence of the flesh, which arises from sin, and He who was going to be without sin wanted to be conceived without sin.”

Fourth, because of the very purpose (*propter ipsum finem*) of Christ's incarnation, which was that men should be reborn as children of God, “not of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:13),” i.e., by the power of God. It was fitting for an exemplar of this reality to appear in the very conception of Christ. Hence, in *De Sancta Virginitate* Augustine says, “It was fitting that our Head should, by a remarkable miracle, have been born bodily of a virgin, in order to signify that His members were going to be born spiritually of a virgin Church.”

Reply to objection 1: As Bede says in *Super Lucam*, “Joseph is called the father of the Savior—not that he was the father in reality, as the Photinians claimed, but that, in order to preserve Mary's reputation, he is thought by men to be His father.” And this is why Luke says (Luke 3:23), “... being, as it was supposed, the son of Joseph.”

An alternative reply is that, as Augustine explains in *De Bono Coniugali*, Joseph is called the father of Christ “in the same way in which he is understood to be the husband of Mary, without the commingling of the flesh, by the very bond of marriage—viz., he is much more closely united to Him than if He had been adopted from the outside. Nor is the fact that Joseph did not beget Christ by sexual intercourse a reason why he should not be called His father, since he would be the father even to a son whom he had adopted from the outside and who was not procreated by his wife.”

Reply to objection 2: As Jerome explains in *Super Matthaicum*, “Even though Joseph is not the father of our Savior Lord, the order of His genealogy is traced down to Joseph.” First, because “in the Scriptures the order of the women is not customarily woven into genealogies.” Second, “Mary and Joseph were of the same tribe. Hence, by law he was bound to take her as a relative.” Again, as Augustine says in *De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia*, “The line of the genealogy had to lead down to Joseph, lest in that marriage there should be any injury to the male (and more significant) sex. For nothing of the truth was lost, since both Joseph and Mary were from the seed of David.”

Reply to objection 3: As a Gloss on the same passage explains, [the Apostle] uses ‘*mulier*’ rather than ‘*femina*’ in accord with the customary usage of the Hebrews. For the Hebrew locution [translated as] ‘*mulieres*’ is used in the same way as ‘*feminae*’ and does not mean women whose virginity has been corrupted (*usus enim Hebraeae locutionis mulieres dicit, non virginitate corrupta, sed feminas*).

Reply to objection 4: This line of reasoning has a place in the case of those entities that proceed into *esse* through the way of nature; for just as nature is determined to a single effect, so it is likewise determined to a single way of producing that effect. However, given that a divine supernatural power has infinitely many possibilities, just as it not determined to a single effect, so, too, it is not determined to a particular way of producing any given effect. And so just as, by God's power, it was able to be brought about that the first man was formed “from the slime of the earth” (Genesis 2:7), so, too, it was able to be brought about by the divine power that the body of Christ was formed without male seed from a virgin.

Reply to objection 5: According to the Philosopher in *De Generatione Animalium*, the male seed is not like the matter in the conception of an animal, but is only like the agent, whereas the female

provides the matter in conception. Hence, from the fact that the male seed was lacking in the conception of the body of Christ, it does not follow that Christ's body lacked the appropriate matter.

If, on the other hand, the male seed were the matter of the conceived fetus in animals, then it is clear that it is not a matter that persists under the same form, but a transmuted matter. And even though a natural power is able to transmute only a determinate matter into a given form, nonetheless, the divine power, which is infinite, can transmute any matter into any form whatsoever. Hence, just as it transmuted the slime of the earth into the body of Adam, so it was able to transmute matter supplied by the mother into the body of Christ, even if that matter were not sufficient for a natural conception.

Article 2

Was the mother of Christ a virgin in giving birth?

It seems that the mother of Christ was not a virgin in giving birth (*mater Christi non fuerit virgo in partu*):

Objection 1: In *Super Lucam* Ambrose says, "He who sanctified another's womb in order that it might give the birth to a prophet, He it is who opened His own mother's womb in order that He might go forth unspotted." But the opening of the womb is incompatible with virginity (*apertio vulvae virginitatem excludit*). Therefore, the mother of Christ was not a virgin in giving birth.

Objection 2: It is was not fitting for there to be anything in the mystery of Christ in light of which His body would seem to be imaginary. But being able to go through a closed passage seems to belong to an imaginary body rather than to a real body, because two bodily entities cannot exist in the same place together (*duo corpora simul esse non possunt*). Therefore, it was not fitting for the body of Christ to emerge from the closed womb of His mother. And so it was not fitting for her to be a virgin in giving birth.

Objection 3: In a homily for the octave of Easter Gregory explains that by the fact that our Lord, after His resurrection, walked in on His disciples even though the doors were closed, "He showed that His body was the same in nature but different in glory." And so passing through closed doors seems to involve His body's being glorified (*videtur ad gloriam corporis pertinere*). But Christ's body at the time of His conception was passible and not glorified (*non fuit gloriosum sed passibile*), having "the likeness of sinful flesh," as the Apostle puts it in Romans 8:3. Therefore, He did not exit through the closed womb of a virgin.

But contrary to this: In a sermon from the Council of Ephesus it says, "After birth, *nature* no longer knows a virgin. By contrast, *grace* showed her giving birth, and made her a mother, and did not harm her virginity." Therefore, the mother of Christ was a virgin even in giving birth.

I respond: It should be asserted without any doubt that the mother of Christ was a virgin even in giving birth. For the prophet not only says, "Behold, a virgin will conceive ...," but also adds, "... and bear a son" (Isaiah 7:14). And there are three reasons why this is fitting:

First, because it fits in with *a property of the one who was born*, viz., the Word of God. For a word is not only *conceived* in the heart without corruption, but also *proceeds* from the heart without corruption. Hence, in order to show that this body was going to be the body of the Word of God Himself, it was fitting that it should be born from the uncorrupted womb of the virgin. Hence, in a sermon from the Council of Ephesus it says, "One who gives birth to mere flesh ceases to be a virgin. But since she gave birth to the Word made flesh, God safeguarded her virginity, manifesting Himself through His Word. For when our word is born, it does not corrupt the mind; neither does God, the substantial Word,

destroy virginity in choosing to be born.”

Second, because it fits in with *the effect of Christ's incarnation*. For He came in order to remove our corruption. Hence, it was not fitting for Him to corrupt the virginity of His mother in being born. Hence, in a sermon on our Lord's nativity Augustine says, “It was not right that [virginal] integrity should be violated through the coming of Him who had come to heal corruption.”

Third, it was fitting that He who had commanded that one's parents be honored *should not diminish the honor of His mother* in being born.

Reply to objection 1: Ambrose says this while explaining what the Evangelist is citing from the Law, viz., “Every male child who opens the womb will be called holy to the Lord” (Exodus 13:2). As Bede points out, “This is said about a normal birth—and not to make us believe that our Lord, in coming forth, violated the abode of her sacred womb, which He had made holy by entering therein.” Therefore, the ‘opening [of the womb]’ that is spoken of here is the mere coming forth of the infant from His mother's womb, and it does not signify the opening of the closed virginal membrane (*non significat reserationem claustris pudoris virginei*).

Reply to objection 2: Christ wished to demonstrate the reality of His body in such a way that His divine nature would also be manifested at the same time. And so He mingled the wondrous with the humble. Hence, in order to show that His body is real, He is born of a woman. But in order to show His divine nature, He is born of a virgin. For “such a birth befits God (*talis partus decet Deum*),” as Ambrose puts it in a Christmas hymn.

Reply to objection 3: Some have claimed that in His birth Christ had taken on the gift of *subtlety* [of body] when he exited from the closed womb of the virgin, and that He had taken on the gift of *agility* [of body] when He walked with dry feet on the sea. But these claims do not fit in with what was determined above (q. 14). For as will be explained below when we discuss glorified bodies (Supplement, q. 82), these gifts of a glorified body come from the overflow of the glory of the soul into the body. But it was explained above (q. 13, a. 3) that (a) before His passion Christ “permitted His flesh to do and to undergo what was proper to it,” and that (b) there was no such overflow of glory from the soul to the body.

And so one should reply that all the things in question were accomplished miraculously by divine power. Hence, in *Super Ioannem* Augustine says, “Closed doors were no obstacle to the mass of a body in which the divine nature existed. For He, at whose birth His mother's virginity remained inviolate, was able to gain entry when the doors were not open.” And in a letter Dionysius says, “Christ out-performed man in doing things proper to man. This is shown by a virgin's conceiving Him supernaturally and by shifting water's bearing the weight of His earthly feet.”

Article 3

Did the mother of Christ remain a virgin after His birth?

It seems that the mother of Christ did not remain a virgin after His birth (*mater Christi non permanserit virgo post partum*):

Objection 1: Matthew 1:18 says, “Before Joseph and Mary came together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit (*inventa est in utero habens de Spiritu Sancto*).” But the evangelist would not say “before they came together,” unless he were certain about their future coming together; for no one says “before he dined” about someone who was not going to dine. Therefore, it seems that the Blessed Virgin at some time had sexual intercourse with Joseph (*quod beata virgo quandoque convenit carnali copula cum Ioseph*). And so she did not remain a virgin after the birth.

Objection 2: In the same place it is added, from the words of the angel speaking to Joseph (Matthew 1:20): “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” But a marriage is consummated by sexual intercourse (*per carnalem copulam*). Therefore, it seems that at some time sexual intercourse took place between Mary and Joseph. And so it seems that she did not remain a virgin after the birth.

Objection 3: Again, a little later in the same place it is added: “And he took unto him his wife, and he did not know her until she had brought forth her firstborn son” (Matthew 1:24-25). But the adverb ‘until’ (*donec*) normally signifies a determinate interval of time, and when this interval has been completed, something happens that had not happened up to that time. And the word ‘know’ here refers to sexual intercourse—just as it says in Genesis 4:1 that “Adam knew his wife.” Therefore, it seems that after the birth the Blessed Virgin was known by Joseph. Therefore, it seems that she did not remain a virgin after the birth.

Objection 4: ‘Firstborn’ cannot be used unless the firstborn has subsequent brethren; hence Romans 8:29 says, “Whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many children (*in multis fratribus*).” But the evangelist calls Christ “the firstborn” of Mary. Therefore, she had other children after Christ. And so it seems that the mother of Christ was not a virgin after the birth.

Objection 5: John 2:12 says, “After these things He”—viz., Christ—“went down to Capernaum, along with His mother and His brethren.” But ‘brethren’ (*fratres*) is said of those who are generated from the same parent. Therefore, it seems that the Blessed Virgin had other children after Christ.

Objection 6: Matthew 27:55-56 says, “Many women were there at a distance”—i.e., near the cross of Christ (*iuxta crucem Christi*)—“who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.” Now it seems that this Mary, who is called here “the mother of James and Joseph,” is likewise the mother of Christ. For John 19:25 says, “Mary His mother was standing near the cross of Jesus (*iuxta crucem Iesu*).” Therefore, it seems that the mother of Christ did not remain a virgin after the birth.

But contrary to this: Ezekiel 44:2 says, “This gate will be closed and it will not be opened, and no man will pass through it, because the Lord God of Israel has entered in through it.” In expounding this passage Augustine says in one of his sermons, “What does ‘This gate is closed in the house of the Lord’ mean if not that Mary will always remain intact? And what does ‘No man will pass through it’ mean if not that Joseph will not know her? And what does ‘The Lord alone will enter and leave through it’ mean if not that the Holy Spirit will impregnate her and the Lord of the angels will be born through her? And what does ‘The gate will be closed forever’ mean if not that Mary is a virgin before the birth and a virgin in the birth and a virgin after the birth (*virgo ante partum, et virgo in partu, et virgo post partum*)?”

I respond: Without any doubt at all one must detest the error of Helvidius, who presumed to claim that the mother of Christ was carnally known by Joseph after the birth [of Christ] and gave birth to other children.

For, first of all, [this error] detracts from the perfection of Christ, who, just as He is in His divine nature the only-begotten of the Father—and, as His Son, perfect in everything—so, too, it was likewise fitting for Him to be the only-begotten of His mother—her wholly perfect offspring.

Second, this error does injury to the Holy Spirit, whose sanctuary (*sacrarium*) was the virginal womb, in which He formed the flesh of Christ. Hence, it was not fitting for it to be violated in the future by sexual intercourse with a man.

Third, it detracts from the dignity and sanctity of the Mother of God, who would seem extremely ungrateful (*ingratisima*) if she were not content with such a Son and if she wished on her own to lose her virginity, which had been miraculously preserved in her, through sexual intercourse.

Fourth, it would likewise be to impute extreme presumption on the part of Joseph himself, if he

were to attempt to defile her whom, by the angel's revelation, he knew to have conceived by the Holy Spirit.

And so one should assert without qualification that just as the Mother of God had conceived as a virgin and given birth as a virgin, so, too, she remained a virgin forever after the birth.

Reply to objection 1: In *Contra Helvidium* Jerome says, "Although this preposition 'before' (*ante*) often indicates a subsequent event, it nonetheless sometimes only points to things that were previously being deliberated about (*ea tantum quae prius cogitata*). Nor is it necessary what was being deliberated about should take place, since something else might have intervened to prevent what was being deliberated about from happening. For instance, if someone says, 'Before I dined in the port, I set sail', we do not understand him to have dined in the port after he set sail; rather, we understand that he thought that he was going to dine in the port."

Similarly, the evangelist says, "Before they came together, Mary was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit," not because they came together afterwards, but because, when it seemed that they were going to come together, the conception by the Holy Spirit intervened, and for this reason they did not later come together.

Reply to objection 2: As Augustine says in *De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia*, "The Mother of God is called [Joseph's] wife from the first promise of her espousal (*coniux vocatur mater Dei ex prima desponsationis fide*), but he had not know her, nor was he going to know her, by sexual intercourse." For as Ambrose puts it in *Super Lucam*, "What is being declared is not the loss of her virginity, but a testimony to the union and to the celebration of the wedding."

Reply to objection 3: Some have claimed that this passage is to be understood as referring to [Joseph's] personal acquaintance [with Mary] (*cognitione notitiae*) and not to carnal knowledge (*non de cognitione carnis*). For instance, Chrysostom says, "Joseph did not know her until she gave birth. He did not know what dignity she had. But after she had given birth, he did know her. For through her child she had become more beautiful and more dignified than the whole world, since she had received within the narrow confines of her womb the One whom the whole world could not contain."

By contrast, others refer this passage to visual cognition (*hoc referunt ad notitiam visus*). For just as, while Moses was speaking with God, his face was glorified, "so that the children of Israel were not able to look at him steadily" (Exodus 34:29-35), so Mary, while being overshadowed by the brightness of the power of the Most High, could not be known (*cognosci non poterat*) by Joseph until she gave birth. But after the birth, she is known by Joseph (*a Ioseph agnita*) from the appearance of her face and not by the touch of lust.

By contrast, Jerome concedes that the passage should be understood to be referring to the knowledge of sexual intercourse (*de cognitione coitus*). But he says that there are two ways in which 'up to the time that' (*usque*) or 'until' (*donec*) can be understood in the Scriptures:

For sometimes it designates a fixed temporal interval, as in Galatians 3:19: "The law was given because of transgressions, until the seed to whom He had made the promise would come."

On the other hand, sometimes it signifies an unlimited time, as in Psalm 22:2: "Our eyes are fixed on the Lord our God, until He has mercy on us." One is not to understand from this that after the mercy we have prayed for comes, our eyes will be turned away from God.

And it is in this latter way of speaking that things are signified "about which we could have doubts if they had not been written down, whereas the rest is left to our understanding. Thus the evangelist says that the Mother of God was not known by her husband up to the time she gave birth (*usque ad partum*), in order that we might be given to understand that *a fortiori* she was not known after the birth."

Reply to objection 4: The custom of the divine Scriptures is to name as a 'firstborn' not only one who is followed by brothers, but also one who is born first. Otherwise, if one were not the firstborn unless he were followed by brothers, the birthright would not be due to him until others were procreated.

But this is clearly false, since according to the Law the birthright had to be redeemed within a month.

Reply to objection 5: As Jerome explains in *Super Matthaicum*, “Some take ‘the brethren of the Lord’ to be from another wife of Joseph’s. But we ourselves understand the brethren of the Lord to be not children of Joseph, but cousins of the Savior, the children of Mary, His mother’s sister. For there are four ways in which individuals are called brethren in Scripture, viz., by nature (*natura*), by tribe (*gente*), by extended family (*cognatione*), and by affection (*affectu*).”

Hence, individuals are called brethren of our Lord not according to *nature*, in the sense of being born of the same mother, but according to *extended family*, in the sense of being his relatives. On the other hand, as Jerome explains in *Contra Helvidium*, Joseph is better believed to have remained a virgin, “since it is not written that he had had another wife,” and “fornication does not befall a holy man.”

Reply to objection 6: The Mary who is called the mother of James and Joseph is not understood to be Jesus’ mother, who is usually named in the Gospel only with a second name designating her dignity (*nisi cum cognominatione huius dignitatis*), viz., “the mother of Jesus.” Instead, the Mary in question is understood to be the wife of Alphaeus, whose son is James the Lesser, who is called “the brother of the Lord” [in Galatians 1:19].

Article 4

Did the Mother of God take a vow of virginity?

It seems that the Mother of God did not take a vow of virginity (*mater Dei virginitatem non voverit*):

Objection 1: Deuteronomy 7:14 says, “No one shall be sterile among you of either sex.” But sterility follows upon virginity. Therefore, the observance of virginity was against a precept of the Old Law. But the Old Law still had standing before Christ was born. Therefore, the Blessed Virgin could not have licitly taken a vow of virginity at that time.

Objection 2: In 1 Corinthians 7:25 the Apostle says, “Concerning virgins I have no commandment of the Lord, but I give counsel.” But the perfection of the counsels had to take its beginning from Christ, who, as the Apostle says in Romans 10:4, is “the end of the Law.” Therefore, it was not at that time appropriate for the Virgin to profess a vow of virginity.

Objection 3: A Gloss of Jerome’s on 1 Timothy 5:12 says, “For those who are vowed to virginity, it is reprehensible not only to marry, but also to desire to marry.” But as was established above (q. 27, a. 4), the mother of Christ committed no reprehensible sin. Therefore, since, as Luke 1:27 reports, she had been espoused, it seems that she had not professed a vow of virginity.

But contrary to this: In *De Sancta Virginitate* Augustine says, “To the announcing angel Mary replies, ‘How can this be, since I do not know man?’ She certainly would not have replied in this way unless she had previously vowed herself to God as a virgin.”

I respond: As was established in the Second Part (*ST 2-2*, q. 88, a. 6), works of perfection are more praiseworthy if they are performed from a vow. But as is clear from the arguments made above (aa. 1-3), it was fitting for virginity to be especially prominent in the case of the Mother of God. And so it was appropriate for her virginity to be consecrated to God by a vow.

However, since, during the time of the Law, it was necessary for both women and men to apply themselves to generating offspring, because the worship of God was propagated by carnal origin in the period before the Christ was to be born of that people, the Mother of God is not believed (*mater Dei non creditur*) to have vowed virginity without qualification before she was espoused to Joseph—even though

she desired to do so and nonetheless committed her will to God's judgment on this matter. Afterwards, however, having received a spouse insofar as the customs of the time required it, she professed a vow of virginity together with him.

Reply to objection 1: Since it seemed that it was prohibited by the Law not to perform the work of spreading one's seed upon the earth, the Mother of God (*Dei genetrix*) did not vow virginity without qualification, but instead vowed it under the condition that it would be pleasing to God. But after it was made clear to her that this was acceptable to God, she vowed virginity without qualification before it was the angel's announcement.

Reply to objection 2: Just as the fullness of grace existed perfectly in Christ, and yet some beginning of it preceded in His mother, so, too, the observance of the counsels, which is effected through God's grace, began perfectly, to be sure, in Christ, but was inchoate in some way in His Virgin Mother.

Reply to objection 3: The passage from the Apostle (1 Timothy 5:12) should be understood to be talking about those who vow chastity without qualification. But the mother of God did not do this before she was espoused to Joseph. Rather, after the espousal, by their common consent, she professed a vow of virginity along with her spouse.