

MARYS PERPETUAL VIRGINITY IS BOUND WITH CONSECRATION TO GOD

(Edited by Robin for brevity)

Mary remained a virgin not because there's something wrong with marriage. Indeed, it's one of the great paradoxes of the Church that, while she exalts virginity as a higher estate than marriage, she simultaneously understands that Jesus established marriage - not virginity - as one of the seven sacraments.

Yes, you read that right: Virginity is a higher estate than marriage. Paul of Tarsus sums up the Catholic picture succinctly: "He who marries his betrothed does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better" 1 Cor 7:38. St. Paul is repeating the teaching of his Master, whose disciples once shrugged at His teaching on lifetime fidelity in marriage by saying, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry" Mt 19:10.

Those disciples were surprised when He didn't correct their wisecrack, but agreed with them, saying,

"Not all men can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it." Mt 19:10-12

The relationship between marital sex and virginity is not "bad/good," but "good/better. And the proof of it is Jesus, who lived a life of earthly virginity so He could live a life of heavenly marriage with His bride the Church. It's the classic pattern: Die to yourself and live to God, and you get back thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold more than you sacrificed Mt 13:23.

Jesus gave up the good of marriage for the greater good of the heavenly wedding banquet. The "first of His signs" was done at a wedding Jn 2:1-11. John's point is not that the sign was the first in a series of signs. He means for us to understand this sign as the archetypal sign, the sign that makes sense of all the other signs. If you want to understand what Jesus is about, John is saying, start here. And if you want to know who the real bridegroom at the real wedding is, says John the Baptist, then understand that it's Jesus, the virgin who turns out to be the bridegroom of all bridegrooms Jn 3:29.

Nuptial language pervades the gospels. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a wedding feast Mt 22:1-14. Paul tells us that not just the wedding at Cana but every marriage is an image of Christ the groom and His bride the Church Eph 5:31-32. Revelation portrays the cosmic consummation of all things as the marriage feast of the Lamb Rv 19:5-7. The ultimate love story is the story of Jesus and the Church, according to Scripture. All our earthly love stories are just dim shadows of that reality. But love stories require two lovers, not just one. And that leads to the question, "What does total consecration in holiness look like, not for Jesus, but for His bride?"

Happily, it's a question that John has already answered. We already know, the holiest thing in the old covenant was the Ark of the Covenant. And for John, as for Luke, the ark of the New Covenant is Mary, who was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, and who is the cosmic woman of the Book of Revelation, and who therefore is the icon both of the virgin daughter of Zion and of the Church.

Mary Signifies the Church's Consecration to God

John sees Mary as a sign and icon of the Church, just as the early Fathers did. All of them thought

her virginity, like Christ's, was significant, offering of her body as a "living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" is the fitting response of worship to the Lord Rom 12:1. More than anybody, Mary models the self-donating love of the disciple in imitation of Christ.

That's more than poetry. Jesus took His humanity from her. At the very level of physical appearance. But even more profoundly, she was the disciple who spent more time in the direct presence of Jesus, loving and learning from God Incarnate more than anyone else who ever lived. And she didn't begin her discipleship by crying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinner" Lk 5:8, nor with the necessity of being knocked to the ground and blinded to get her attention cf. Acts 9, but with immediate, complete, and loving submission to the will of God Lk 1:38.

Mary was the disciple who loved Jesus more deeply and lived with Him more closely than anyone, and the living sacrificial offering she made of her body was like nobody else's. **Jesus Himself was the living sacrifice of her body and the very fruit of her womb.** When the lance pierced His heart, it pierced hers, too cf. Lk 2:34-35. No other disciple of Jesus has ever offered more to God than she offered.

"But," says the Protestant doubter, "mere physical relationship doesn't save! Remember when the woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!' Jesus replied, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!'" Lk 11:27-28.

All true - which is why virginity matters as a sign not of deprivation and sexlessness but of faith. For **"Mary is a virgin because her virginity is the sign of her faith 'unadulterated by any doubt,' and of her undivided gift of herself to God's will.** It is her faith that enables her to become the mother of the Savior: **'Mary is more blessed because she embraces faith in Christ than because she conceives the flesh of Christ'"** CCC 506. Mary was not blessed because she gave birth; she gave birth because she was blessed: blessed to be chosen by God and more blessed still to have the pure faith to respond with an unreserved "yes" to God's call.

The perpetual virginity of Mary matters to the early Church because the virgin birth matters to the early Church. And the reason the virgin birth matters is because it is a fulfillment of prophecy.

Therefore **the Lord himself will give you a sign.** Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. Is 7:14

Signs signify. Early Church Fathers (they are early Church Fathers to protestants, too!) derive images and titles of Mary from the Old Testament to understand the full meaning of the sign of the virgin birth, the sign of Immanuel:

- the "Temple of God" - she is the Holy of Holies in which God dwelt Ephraim the Syrian, Jerome, Ambrose
- the "Rod of Jesse" from whom blossomed Christ Ambrose, Tertullian, Jerome
- the "Ark of the Covenant" Athanasius, Gregory the Wonder-Worker
- the "Staff of Aaron" Ephraim the Syrian
- the "Burning Bush that is Not Consumed" Gregory of Nyssa

This is the pattern at work in reading the prophet Ezekiel. And we do well to pay close attention to it to see how the early Church, following Jesus' guidance on the road to Emmaus cf. Lk 24:44-47, sees in this prophecy, as in all prophecy, that everything in the law and the prophets is ultimately about Him and His body, the Church - He is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets.

Ezekiel lived about 500 years before Christ. In his day, the 10 tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel had been scattered. It seemed Israel was doomed to be annihilated.

But then God raised up prophets like Ezekiel to promise that Israel had not been forsaken and that the Almighty would return her to her land, send her a Messiah and use Israel to bless all the nations, just as He had promised Abraham long ago Gn 12:1-3. In Ezekiel's case, this prophetic message included a lengthy vision -recorded in Ezekiel 40-48 - describing a restored temple.

The temple was rebuilt cf. **Ezra and Nehemiah**, but it didn't (and couldn't) look like the temple of Ezekiel's prophecy. Why? Because in Ezekiel's visionary temple, things like this happen:

Then he brought me back to the door of the temple; and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. Then he brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me round on the outside to the outer gate, that faces toward the east; and the water was coming out on the south side.

Going on eastward with a line in his hand, the man measured a thousand cubits, and then led me through the water; and it was ankle-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water; and it was knee-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water; and it was up to the loins. Again he measured a thousand, and it was a river that I could not pass through, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be passed through. And he said to me, "Son of man, have you seen this?"

Then he led me back along the bank of the river. As I went back, I saw upon the bank of the river very many trees on the one side and on the other. And he said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah; and when it enters the stagnant waters of the sea, the water will become fresh. And wherever the river goes every living creature which swarms will live, and there will be very many fish; for this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes. Fishermen will stand beside the sea; from En-gedi to Englaim it will be a place for the spreading of nets; its fish will be of very many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea. But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt. And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing." Ez 47:1-12

There never was (and never will be) a physical temple with a river flowing out of it. So what is Ezekiel getting at? To find out, we must pay attention to a rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth as He comes to a rebuilt temple 500 years later to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles Jn 7.

The Feast of Tabernacles Lev 23:33-43, Deut 16:13-16 commemorates Israel's living in tents in the wilderness Lev 23:43 and a thanksgiving for its permanent home in the Promised Land. In addition, it offers thanks for the temple, the successor of the Mosaic tabernacle Ex 25-31 as a permanent place of worship. **Note that both the tabernacle and the temple were home to the Ark of the Covenant until the ark vanished several centuries before Christ's birth.**

Israel wandered in the wilderness during the Exodus and people became thirsty. Answering their complaints, Moses strikes a rock and water flows Nm 20. By Jesus' day, this event was commemorated with Feast of Tabernacles: Each morning of the feast, a priest went down to the Pool of Siloam to fill a golden pitcher of water for the temple (successor of Moses's tabernacle). It was poured on the altar of holocausts amidst the singing of the "Hallel" that is, Psalms 112-117 and the joyful sound of musical instruments. This became part of the feast after the rebuilding of the temple following the Babylonian Exile – that is, after the prophecy of Ezekiel's river flowing from the temple.

At the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus announces to the crowd, “If any one thirst, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as said in scripture, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water’” Jn 7:37-38. **Jesus uses the image of living water to refer to the Holy Spirit cf. Jn 4.** Yet there’s no passage in Old Testament Scripture that says, “Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.”

He is referring to Ez 47 and following. Jesus has already told us what the true temple is when He declared, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” Jn 2:19. **John makes clear, “He spoke of the temple of his body” Jn 2:21. Jesus is declaring to all that Ezekiel’s vision is not a stone building, but a spiritual true temple, the Body of Christ. For the same reason, John says that Jesus “tabernacled” among us Jn 1:14 when He became man. Paul makes the same connection, referring both to individual Christians and to the mystical Body of Christ as the temple 1 Cor 3:16-17; Eph 2:21.**

Jesus is identifying Himself with the temple of Ezekiel’s vision. He is making clear that **He is the true temple** and His heart is the Holy of Holies. The waters of the Feast of Tabernacles, the water flowing from the rock of Moses, from the rock on which the visionary Temple of Ezekiel is founded, flows from His heart. The rock, Paul makes clear, is Christ 1 Cor 10:1-4.

In other words, **the Incarnation is being likened to God coming to dwell in His temple in majesty.** Or rather, the Old Testament moments in which God descended in majesty on the tabernacle and in the temple cf. Ex 40:34-38; 1 Kgs 8:10-11 are revealed to be prophetic foreshadows of **when God truly came to dwell in His temple: the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.**

The interesting thing, the Fathers noticed, is that **Ezekiel speaks directly to this image writing:**

He brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary, which faces east; and it was shut. And said to me, **“This gate shall remain shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it; for the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered by it; therefore it shall remain shut.” Ez 44:1-2**

The gate into the Incarnation (i.e., Mary) shall be holy to the Lord and not for any common purpose. And in token of this, the gate of the mystical temple shall be shut to all but the Lord.

The early Church Fathers(including the New Testament authors) linked the tabernacle, the temple, and the Body of Christ and the roles of Mary, the ark and the gate of the temple.

The Church’s faith in **Mary’s perpetual virginity was not *derived* from Ez 44:1-2 any more than her faith in the virgin birth was *derived* from Is 7:14.** Matthew did not sit down, stick his nose in Isaiah, read something about virgin, and then declare, “Hey! If we’re going to cook up a Messiah, we should say he’s the son of a virgin, because this random passage in Isaiah says something about a virgin.”

It is only with hindsight that Matthew connects it with the passage in Isaiah and realizes that this event (which he can only know about from the Blessed Virgin) is the prophecy of the Old Testament.

It’s exactly the same with the perpetual virginity of Mary. As with the virgin birth, **the perpetual virginity of Mary *happened*, and only afterward did the Church begin to realize that the events of her life, like the events of her Son’s, were strangely - one might even say prophetically - foreshadowed in Ez 44:1-2.**

Patristic (meaning Church Fathers) sources who affirm that Mary’s perpetual virginity was taught by the apostles include the author of the *Protoevangelium of James*, Origen, Hilary of Poitiers, Athanasius, Epiphanius of Salamis, Jerome, Didymus the Blind, Ambrose of Milan, Pope Siricius I, Augustine, Leporius, Cyril of Alexandria, Pope Leo I, and the dogmatic teaching of the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople. And they’re only the beginning.

For the entirety of Christian history until roughly the 17th century, Christians agreed with them - except for two guys:

Tertullian. A fierce North-African lawyer and defender of the faith who **lived in the late-second and early-third century.** He fell prey, as others have, who love apologetics more than they love Jesus: Tertullian got so intent on building antibodies against heresy that he contracted a spiritual autoimmune disease and started building antibodies against the Body of Christ itself. Eventually, **he abandoned Christianity for Montanism.** But along the way, Tertullian wrote some brilliant stuff.

He was familiar with *the deep end* in contradicting opponents. **He encountered the Docetists (who denied Jesus was truly human), Tertullian argued that not only was Jesus human, but his mother, being herself fully human, must have had a bushel of other kids, too!** True to form, Tertullian didn't argue this from biblical evidence (because, we saw, there isn't any), but from his own polemical needs. In fact, Tertullian's passionate opposition to Docetism also prompted him to argue that Jesus was ugly! He was an extremist with an axe to grind and a blinding need to win an argument at any cost.

Helvidius lived in the fourth century and wrote a pamphlet (lost to history) arguing most of the same things that Evangelicals argue against Mary's perpetual virginity. **How does Helvidius know Mary had other kids? He doesn't. He just cites Tertullian.**

Jerome wrote *Against Helvidius* in defense of Mary's perpetual virginity, his argument was completely non-controversial: Helvidius who was universally regarded throughout Christendom as the kook. **Jerome's view was regarded as simply normal everywhere. And that remained true right down through the Reformation, whose leading lights - such as Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and even John Wesley - also accepted Mary's perpetual virginity as clear and unarguable biblical teaching.** Far from "contradicting" Scripture, Mary's perpetual virginity is as well attested, both biblically and historically, as the dogma of the Trinity and is **universally regarded until well after the start of the Reformation) as fulfillment of Scripture.**

Giving her consent to God's word, Mary becomes the mother of Jesus. **Espousing** the divine will for salvation wholeheartedly, without a single sin to restrain her, she gave herself entirely to the person and to the work of her Son; she did so in order to serve the mystery of redemption with him and dependent on him, by God's grace

Virginity entails self-denial and, in some mysterious way, new life in God. **It is a sacrifice and, contrary to modern notions, it's the sacrifice of something supremely good, not of something "dirty."** The entire principle of sacrifice rests upon the reality that something really good - not a piece of trash - is being offered to God.

Whoever offers the sacrifice recognizes that God is the author of the very gift being offered back to Him - a gift that is (like the offerer himself) next to nothing in comparison to God. Our Father receives such gifts gladly and pours out on the worshipper abundances of grace and glory absurdly beyond the value of the sacrifice. St. Paul said we go from glory to glory 2 Cor 3:18.