

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DOGMA OF THE VIRGINITY OF OUR LADY

A importância do dogma da Virgindade de Maria

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Abstract

The mystery of the Incarnation is inseparably linked with the doctrine of Mary's virginity before, during and after the Birth of Christ. Full of grace, she embraced virginity under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, by whose sole and supernatural intervention the virginal Conception of Christ was brought about, as revealed in Scripture, confirmed by Tradition and sealed by dogmatic definition. The preservation of virginity during the birth of Christ follows in continuity with this divine plan, and the perpetual virginity of Mary is likewise founded upon her unique dignity as Mother of the Only-begotten Son of the Father. The arguments brought forward in this article present the historical framework and key figures of the polemics surrounding this Marian dogma, showing its continued importance today.

Keywords: Mary, Christ, Virginity, Motherhood, Dogma.

Resumo

O mistério da Encarnação está inseparavelmente ligado à doutrina da virgindade de Maria antes, durante e depois do nascimento de Cristo. Cheia de graça, Ela abraçou a virgindade sob a inspiração do Espírito Santo, por cuja intervenção exclusiva e sobrenatural deu-se a concepção virginal de Cristo, como revelado nas Escrituras, confirmado pela Tradição e selado por definição dogmática. A preservação da virgindade no nascimento de Cristo segue em continuidade com este plano divino e, de igual maneira, a virgindade perpétua de Maria é baseada em sua dignidade única de Mãe do Filho Unigênito do Pai. Os argumentos expostos neste artigo apresentam o quadro histórico e as figuras-chave da polêmica em função deste dogma mariano, apontando assim sua atual importância.

Palavras-chave: Maria, Cristo, Virgindade, Maternidade, Dogma.

“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”.

St. Augustine, *Sermon 186*.

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Mariology lies at the very heart of Christian theology. This theme highlights God's relation with His creatures in clear relief, and reveals the human response to God at its most perfect. In the Incarnation of the Son of God, the enduring and definitive synthesis is forged, a synthesis which the human mind of itself could not even have imagined: the Eternal enters time, the Whole lies hidden in the part, God takes on a human face. The truth communicated in Christ's Revelation is offered to every man and woman who would welcome it as the word which is the absolutely valid source of meaning for human life. In Christ, all have access to the Father, since by His Death and Resurrection Christ has bestowed the divine life which the first Adam had refused.² God comes to us in the realities we know best and can verify most easily, the people and events of our everyday life, in which we understand ourselves. And so, God's coming into the world is inseparably bound with the reality of His Mother Mary. Thus, in Christ's coming, we see most particularly and clearly what God does for humanity, in the marvels He has worked in and for the Blessed Virgin Mary. Therefore a study of Mary, Mother of God is like a microcosm or synthesis of the whole of theology, because of her intimate link with Christ in His act of creation, His Incarnation, the Redemption wrought by Him, and eschatology, which is still to be completed. The words of Mary the Mother of God, "the Almighty has done great things for me, Holy is His name" is echoed by the Church and humanity.

Within the theme of Mariology we set out to examine the importance of the truth of the virginity of Our Lady. Our Lady's Motherhood and her virginity are really part of the same mystery of the Virgin Motherhood. When considering this privilege of Our Lady, so intimately united with her Motherhood, and with Christ's Incarnation, it has been customary to distinguish between virginity of the mind or of the spirit (*virginitas mentis*), virginity of the senses (*virginitas sensus*) and virginity of the body (*virginitas corporis*). While making these distinctions, we should remember that in theology it is helpful to distinguish in order to unite, to analyse in order to synthesise. The distinction is made in order to shed light on the mystery of Mary's virginity as a whole, remembering that each aspect is important in the realist perspective which this work proposes. In particular, recent attempts to exaggerate the spiritual aspect of Mary's virginity at the expense of the physical aspect could endanger the true doctrine concerning Mary's great privilege. Virginity of the mind is the determination of Our Lady to refrain from any thought word or action

2) Cf. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, 12. See also Rm 5:12-15.

contrary to perfect chastity. Consideration of a vow of chastity made by Our Lady would come under this heading. Virginity of the senses describes Our Lady's complete freedom from disordered movements of the flesh, and is included in her freedom from concupiscence.³ Virginity of the body refers to the virginal state of Our Lady's body, which excludes all damage to or violation of the generative organs, and all experience of venereal pleasure.⁴

The bodily virginity of Our Lady is further elaborated as virginity before the Birth of Christ, during His Birth and after His Birth (*virginitas ante partum, in partu, and post partum*). The doctrine of *virginitas ante partum* teaches the absence of marital relations between Our Lady and St. Joseph up to the time of Christ's birth, and therefore the virginal conception. The *virginitas in partu* includes the non-rupture of the hymen at the moment of birth, which takes place without any opening of the membranes or damage to Our Lady's body, and without pain. This description of the *virginitas in partu* involves a miraculous Birth, during which Christ passed from His Mother's womb, as He later passed from the closed sepulchre. At the same time, it was a true Birth. The teaching concerning *virginitas post partum* excludes marital relations, and thus the generation of other children, after the Birth of Christ. Taken together these truths constitute the perpetual virginity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Often Western Patristic theology tended to focus on Mary's virginity in terms of its exemplary value, as is found in an affirmation of St. Ambrose: "Mary's life should be for you a pictorial image of virginity. Her life is like a mirror reflecting the face of chastity and the form of virtue. Therein you may find a model for your own life, showing what to improve, what to imitate, what to hold fast to".⁵ In Eastern Christendom, the stress was placed on the Christological significance of this truth as is found in St. Gregory of Nyssa: "It was fitting that He who became man to give all men incorruption should begin human life of an incorrupt Mother; for men are accustomed to call her incorrupt who is unwed".⁶

3) Cf. P. Haffner, *The Mystery of Mary* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2004), p. 93-95.

4) Cf. B. H. Merkelbach, *Mariologia* (Paris: 1939), p. 16.

5) St. Ambrose, *The Virgins 2:2:6* in *PL* 16, 208.

6) St. Gregory of Nyssa, *In diem natalem Christi* in *PG* 46, 1135-1136.

Virginity before the Birth of Christ

There exists a long-standing tradition that Our Lady had from an early age made a vow of virginity. Mary asks a question of the angel who tells her of Jesus' conception and birth: "But how can this come about, since I have no knowledge of man?" (Lk 1:34). The question clearly alludes to sexual intercourse of married persons, since "knowledge" in this context is a hallowed Semitic expression for physical love. At first sight, Mary's words would seem merely to express only her present state of virginity: Mary would affirm that she does not "know" man, that is, that she is a virgin. Nevertheless, the context in which the question is asked: "But how can this come about?" and the affirmation that follows: "since I have no knowledge of man", emphasize both Mary's present virginity and her intention to remain a virgin. Indeed, in her question, Mary did not look to the past, as if to say "since up to this time, I have not known man. If this had been the case, St. Luke would have employed the past tense (aorist: *ouk egnon*) instead of the present absolute (*ouk gignosko*), which includes the intention of not making use of matrimonial relations in the future as well. The expression she uses, with the verb in the present tense, reveals the permanence and continuity of her state. Thus Mary's query sets her situation apart radically from the biblical accounts that relate the announcement of an extraordinary birth to a childless woman. Those cases concerned married women who were naturally sterile, to whom God gave the gift of a child through their normal conjugal life (1 Sm 1:19-20), in response to their anguished prayers (cf. Gn 15:2, 30:22-23, 1 Sm 1:10; Lk 1:13). Mary receives the angel's message in a different situation. She is not a married woman with problems of sterility; by a voluntary choice she intends to remain a virgin. Therefore, her intention of virginity, the fruit of her love for the Lord, appears to be an obstacle to the motherhood announced to her.

Mary's words and intentions appear improbable to some,⁷ since in the Jewish world virginity was considered neither a value nor an ideal to be pursued. Many Old Testament writings confirm this in several well-known episodes. In the Book of Judges, for example, Jephthah's daughter who, having

7) Indeed, some scholars, while not denying the possibility of a vow under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, nevertheless deny the fact, yet still claim to maintain Catholic doctrine concerning Mary's virginity. For an example of these, see K. Rahner, "Le principe fondamentale de la théologie Mariale" in *Recherches de Sciences Religieuses* 44 (1954), p. 17, note 73. Also M. Schmaus, "Mariology" in K. Rahner (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Theology* (The Concise Sacramentum Mundi) (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 95, who hazards that "many theologians now assume that Mary resolved on a life of virginity only at the moment of the annunciation".

to face death while still young and unmarried, bewails her virginity, that is, she laments that she has been unable to marry (Jgs 11:38). Marriage, moreover, by virtue of the divine command, “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gn 1:28), is considered woman’s natural vocation which involves the joys and sufferings that go with motherhood.

Nevertheless, historically during the period in which Mary’s decision came to maturity, a certain positive attitude to virginity began to appear in some Jewish circles. For example, the Essenes, of whom many important historical testimonies have been found at Qûmran, on the shores of the Dead Sea, lived in celibacy or restricted the use of marriage because of community life and the search for greater intimacy with God.⁸ It does not seem that Mary ever knew about these Jewish religious groups which practiced the ideal of celibacy and virginity. However, the fact that John the Baptist probably lived a celibate life and that in the community of his disciples it was held in high esteem would support the supposition that Mary’s choice of virginity belonged to this new cultural and religious context. Nevertheless, the extraordinary case of the Virgin of Nazareth must not lead us into the error of tying her inner dispositions completely to the mentality of her surroundings, thereby eliminating the uniqueness of the mystery that came to pass in her. In particular, we must not forget that, from the very beginning of her life, Mary received a wondrous grace, recognized by the angel at the moment of the Annunciation. “Full of grace” (Lk 1:28), Mary was enriched with a perfection of holiness that, according to the Church’s interpretation, goes back to the very first moment of her existence: the unique privilege of the Immaculate Conception influenced the whole development of the young woman of Nazareth’s spiritual life. Thus it should be maintained that Mary was guided to the ideal of virginity by an exceptional inspiration of that same Holy Spirit who, in the course of the Church’s history, will spur many women to the way of virginal consecration. The singular presence of grace in Mary’s life leads to the conclusion that the young girl was committed to virginity. Filled with the Lord’s exceptional gifts from the beginning of her life, she was oriented to a total gift of self, body and soul, to God, in the offering of herself as a virgin.

Tradition has long held that Mary’s virginal consecration to God took place at her presentation in the temple. According to Exodus 13:2 and 13:12, all

8) Cf. S. Lyonnet, *Le récit de l’annociation et la maternité divine de la Sainte Vierge* (Rome: 1954), p. 7. Furthermore, in Egypt there was a community of women who, associated with the Essene spirituality, observed continence. These women, the *Therapeutae*, belonging to a sect described by Philo of Alexandria (*De Vita Contemplativa*, 21-90), were dedicated to contemplation and sought wisdom.

the Hebrew first-born male children had to be presented in the Temple. This law would lead pious Jewish parents to observe the same religious rite with regard to other favourite children. This inclines one to believe that Joachim and Anne presented Mary, their child, in the Temple. The tradition of Mary's vow of virginity was first expressed by St. Augustine.⁹ Some of the Fathers, like St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Germanus of Constantinople state that Joachim and Anna, faithful to a vow they had made, presented the child Mary in the Temple when she was three years old; that the child herself mounted the Temple steps, and that she made her vow of virginity on this occasion.¹⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas indicated that Mary had at least desired to make a vow of virginity before being betrothed to Joseph, and afterwards both made such a vow.¹¹ Pope John Paul II has reaffirmed the tradition of an early vow of virginity made by Our Lady.¹²

The Virginal Conception of Christ

The Gospel accounts (Mt 1:18-25; Lk 1:26-38) teach the virginal conception of Jesus as a divine work that surpasses all human understanding and possibility. The angel announced to Joseph about Mary his betrothed: "She has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit". (Mt 1:20). This is the fulfilment of the divine promise given through the prophet Isaiah: "The young woman is with child and will give birth to a son whom she will call Immanuel". This is the rendering of the Hebrew text, where the Hebrew word translated by "young woman" is *'almâh*. In the Greek Septuagint version, the Hebrew *'almâh* is rendered by "virgin", which is correct, because the immediate context of the passage is an extraordinary sign, which would not be

9) Cf. St. Augustine, *De sancta virginitate* 4 in *PL* 40, 398: "This is shown by the words which Mary spoke in answer to the Angel announcing her conception to her. She said: 'But how can this come about, since I have no knowledge of man?' Assuredly she would not say this, unless she had beforehand vowed herself unto God as a virgin". See Idem, *Sermon* 225, 2 and *Sermon* 291, 5 in *PL* 38, 1097, 1318.

10) Cf. St. Gregory of Nyssa, *In diem natalem Christi* in *PG* 46, 1140f, and St. Germanus of Constantinople in *PG* 98, 313.

11) Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q.28, a.4: "It was fitting that her virginity should be consecrated to God by vow. Nevertheless because, while the Law was in force both men and women were bound to attend to the duty of begetting, since the worship of God was spread according to carnal origin, until Christ was born of that people, the Mother of God is not believed to have taken an absolute vow of virginity, before being espoused to Joseph, although she desired to do so, yet yielding her own will to God's judgment. Afterwards, however, having taken a husband, according as the custom of the time required, together with him she took a vow of virginity".

12) Cf. Pope John Paul II, *Discourse at General Audience* (24 July 1996).

credible unless the young woman was also a virgin. The fact that Isaiah 7:14 is prophetically linked to Matthew 1:23, further reinforces the reading “virgin” for the Hebrew *‘almâh*, to give: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son” (Is 7:14).¹³

The virginal conception of Christ from Our Lady must be carefully distinguished from a freak of nature, or from a type of asexual reproduction. Thus it excludes every hypothesis of natural parthenogenesis and rejects the attempts to explain Luke’s account (Lk 1:26-38) as the development of a Jewish theme or as the derivation of a pagan mythological legend.¹⁴ It is necessary to affirm this against a purely rational explanation in terms of a natural phenomenon. Instead, Our Lady’s virginity and Motherhood involve a supernatural gift, the Supernatural Gift, her Son. In the episode of the Annunciation, the Evangelist Luke calls Mary a “virgin”, referring both to her intention to persevere in virginity, as well as to the divine plan which reconciles this intention with her miraculous motherhood. The structure of the Lucan text resists any reductive interpretation. Its coherence does not validly support any mutilation of the terms or expressions which affirm the virginal conception brought about by the Holy Spirit. It must be remembered that Our Lady was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit. The conception of her Divine Son was brought about by divine intervention. Thus the virginity of Mary is closely connected with the doctrine of Christ, God made man. Indeed where denials occur of some aspect or other of Mary’s virginity, there also follow some corresponding tendency to deny Christ’s divinity. Such denials have generally occurred in liberal Protestantism, in rationalism and in modernism.

In the first chapter of St. John’s Gospel there is also an indication of the virginal conception of Jesus, as John Paul II has remarked.¹⁵ In the early Church, the singular reading of John 1:12-13 was very common, as is conserved in the Jerusalem Bible: “But to all who did accept Him He gave power to become children of God, to all who believe in the name of Him who was born not out

13) Cf. Haffner, *The Mystery of Mary*, chapter 2, p. 39-42 and chapter 3, p. 52-53, 58.

14) Cf. Pope John Paul II, *Discourse at General Audience* (10 July 1996), 1. Natural biological parthenogenesis has been observed in many lower animals, especially insects such as aphids. In many social insects, like the honeybee and the ant, parthenogenesis gives rise to male drones, while fertilised eggs produce female workers and queens. Some larger animals, like some lizards, can reproduce through parthenogenesis. Parthenogenesis has also been artificially induced in frogs and snakes, although it quite often results in abnormal development.

15) Cf. Pope John Paul II, *Discourse at General Audience* (10 July 1996), 1: “The Church has constantly held that Mary’s virginity is a truth of faith, as she has received and reflected on the witness of the Gospels of Luke, of Matthew and probably also of John”.

of human stock or urge of the flesh or will of man but of God himself". The current reading, as proposed by the New Jerusalem Bible is: "But to those who did accept him He gave power to become children of God, to those who believed in his name who were born not from human stock or human desire or human will but from God himself". The earlier reading is to be found in St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Irenaeus, and Tertullian among others. Then, it disappeared from biblical texts, apart from one ancient Latin version, and the Greek manuscripts have the plural form. It has been proposed that the original form was singular, but was changed to plural under the influence of Gnostic heretics who wanted to give a more spiritual sense to the text, moving away from the real conception of Christ in the flesh to the spiritual conception of the faithful through baptism.¹⁶ The reading of John 1:13 in the singular is a clear affirmation of the virginal conception of Jesus. It is also significant that if the plural reading is indeed due to a Gnostic influence, then once again it can be seen that a denial of the virginal conception goes hand in hand with a denial of the Incarnation. Other scholars, accepting the plural reading of the passage maintain that since the triple negation ("not from human stock or human desire or human will"), seems to correspond so exactly to the faith of the Church concerning the virginal conception that John clearly refers to it here. He does so making the birth of Jesus the *model* for the rebirth of Christians in baptism.¹⁷

A further Scriptural indication of the virginal conception is that this situation is communicated to Joseph after it had occurred. "Her husband Joseph, being an upright man and wanting to spare her disgrace, decided to divorce her informally. He had made up his mind to do this when suddenly the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit'" (Mt 1:18-20). Joseph was not invited to give his assent prior to the conception of Mary's Son, the fruit of the supernatural intervention of the Holy Spirit and the co-operation of the mother alone. He is simply asked to accept freely his role as the Virgin's husband and his paternal mission with regard to her Child. The vision of Scripture deprives of any foundation several recent interpretations which understand the virginal conception not in a physical or biological sense, but only as symbolic or meta-

16) Cf. A. Serra, "Vergine" in S. De Fiores and S. Meo, *Nuovo dizionario di mariologia* (Milano: Paoline, 1986), p. 431.

17) Cf. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to John* (London: SPCK, 1962), p. 37.

phorical: it would designate Jesus as God's gift to humanity. The same can be said for the opinion advanced by others, that the account of the virginal conception would instead be a *theologoumenon*, that is, a way of expressing a theological doctrine, that of Jesus' divine sonship, or would be a mythological portrayal of him.¹⁸ The Gospels contain the explicit affirmation of a virginal conception of the biological order, brought about by the Holy Spirit. In the early centuries, the Church Fathers reflected on this truth and elaborated it. The faith expressed in the Gospels is thus confirmed without interruption in later tradition. The early Christian writers presuppose the assertion of a real, historical virginal conception of Jesus and are far from affirming a virginity that is only a moral quality or a vague gift of grace manifested in the child's birth.¹⁹

The fact that St. Mark's Gospel and the New Testament Letters and Epistles do not explicitly refer to Jesus' virginal conception, is no argument about this truth. Thus one cannot claim that we are merely dealing with legends or theological constructs not claiming to be history. Faith in the virginal conception of Jesus is based on historical fact, for it 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.²⁰

From the first formulations of her faith, the Church has confessed that Jesus was conceived solely by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, affirming also the corporeal aspect of this event.²¹ Early credal formulae affirmed the virginal conception of Jesus. For example, in the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, around the year 215, it is recorded that the candidates for baptism were asked: "Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was born of the Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit?"²²

Shortly after the death of St. John, St. Ignatius of Antioch (107 AD) wrote: "Mary's virginity and giving birth, and even the Lord's death escaped the notice of the prince of this world: these three mysteries worthy of procla-

18) Cf. Pope John Paul II, *Discourse at General Audience* (10 July 1996), 3.

19) Cf. Pope John Paul II, *Discourse at General Audience* (10 July 1996), 4.

20) Cf. St. Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 99, 7 in *PG* 6, 708-709; see also Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1, 32, 69 in *PG* 11, 720-721.

21) Cf. *CCC* 496.

22) Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition*, Part II.

mation were accomplished in God's silence".²³ Ignatius also remarked that according to the flesh, Our Lord Jesus Christ was born from the stock of David, "but if we look at the will and the power of God, He is the Son of God, truly born of a virgin".²⁴ St. Justin Martyr drew out the new element of the parallel between Eve and Mary, to accentuate the virginal conception. Christ "became man by the Virgin, in order that the disobedience which proceeded from the serpent might receive its destruction in the same manner in which it derived its origin. For Eve, who was a virgin and undefiled, having conceived the word of the serpent, brought forth disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary received faith and joy, when the angel Gabriel announced the good tidings to her that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her, and the power of the Highest would overshadow her".²⁵

Around the year 110, St. Irenaeus was another witness to the virginal conception. He opposed the error of Cerinthus, "who represented Jesus as having not been born of a virgin, but as being the son of Joseph and Mary according to the ordinary course of human generation, while he nevertheless was more righteous, prudent, and wise than other men".²⁶ He also wrote against the Ebionites, who were Jewish Christians, who had only partially converted to Christianity, possibly deriving from Essene groups. They did not accept Christ as the Son of God in the Trinitarian sense, and so did not accept His virginal conception. Irenaeus based his affirmation of the virginal conception upon his doctrine of recapitulation: "Since Adam himself, had his substance from untilled and as yet virgin soil, and was formed by the hand of God, that is, by the Word of God, for 'all things were made by Him,' (Jn 1:3) and the Lord took dust from the earth and formed man; so did He who is the Word, recapitulating Adam in Himself, rightly receive a birth, enabling Him to gather up Adam into Himself, from Mary, who was as yet a virgin".²⁷ With a beautiful interpretation of an Old Testament prophecy, Irenaeus indicates how Christ came to be conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit: "Daniel,

23) Cf. St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians* 19, 1 in *Sources Chrétiennes* 10 (Paris: Cerf, 1945), p. 4-65.

24) St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 1, 1 in *Sources Chrétiennes* 10 (Paris: Cerf, 1945), p. 20-121.

25) St. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 100 in *PG* 6, 708-711. See also n.43, where Justin remarks: "Now it is evident to all, that in the race of Abraham according to the flesh no one has been born of a virgin, or is said to have been born [of a virgin], save this our Christ".

26) St. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, Book 1, chapter 26, n.1 in *PG* 7, 686.

27) St. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, Book 3, chapter 21, n.10 in *PG* 7, 954-955.

foreseeing His advent, said that a stone, cut out without hands, would come into this world. For this is what ‘without hands’ means, that His coming into this world was not by the operation of human hands, that is, of those men who are accustomed to stone-cutting; that is, Joseph took no part with regard to it, but Mary alone co-operated with the pre-arranged plan. For this stone from the earth derives existence from both the power and the wisdom of God”.²⁸

A few years later, around 125, the philosopher Aristides of Athens in the earliest Christian apologetic informed the emperor Hadrian that the birth of Jesus of a virgin, without human seed or human will, is an essential part of the Christian creed, alongside the divinity of Christ.²⁹ St. Hippolytus (172-235), the disciple of St. Irenaeus, also indicated that the virginal conception of Jesus was the common faith of the early Church, by affirming that Christ “became incarnate in the Virgin’s womb by the Holy Spirit”.³⁰ Hippolytus adopted on several occasions the image of the ark of the covenant for the Virgin Mary: At that time, the Saviour appeared and showed His own body to the world, born of the Virgin, who was the ark overlaid with pure gold, with the Word within and the Holy Spirit without; so that the truth is demonstrated, and the ark made manifest”.³¹ Hippolytus is very clear that the belief of the Church is in a virginal conception of Christ: “The pious confession of the believer is that, with a view to our salvation, and in order to connect the universe with unchangeableness, the Creator of all things incorporated with Himself a rational soul and a sensible body from the all-holy Mary, ever-virgin, by an undefiled conception”.³²

Origen was possibly a disciple of Hippolytus at the beginning of the third century, and is also a witness to the faith of the Church in Our Lady’s virginity. Around the year 250, he opposed the views of Celsus, a pagan, who criticised Christianity regarding it as a myth, proposing a purely natural origin

28) St. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, Book 3, chapter 21, n.7 in PG 7, 953. See Daniel 2:34.

29) Cf. Aristides, *Apologia*, c. 7 in *Enchiridion Marianum Biblicum Patristicum* (ed. D. Casagrande) (Rome: «Cor Unum», 1974), 6.

30) St. Hippolytus, *De Benedictionibus Patriarcharum* in *Enchiridion Marianum Biblicum Patristicum*, 119.

31) St. Hippolytus, *Fragmentum in Daniele*, 6 in PG 10, 648. See also Idem, *Sermonum Fragmentum* 6, in PG 10, 866: “But the Lord was without sin, being of imperishable wood in respect of His humanity, -that is to say, being of the Virgin and the Holy Spirit, covered, as it were, within and without with the purest gold of the Word of God”. See also Idem, *Fragmenta in Proverbia* in PG 10, 625: “Christ, the wisdom and power of God the Father, has build His house, namely His nature in the flesh derived from the Virgin”.

32) St. Hippolytus, *Discourse against Beron and Helix*, Fragment 8 in PG 10, 840.

for Jesus.³³ Origen regards this position of Celsus as “street-corner abuse... unworthy of any serious attention”.³⁴ Celsus also proposed another false idea which Origen rejected: “If God had wished to send down His Spirit from Himself, what need was there to breathe it into the womb of a woman? For as one who knew already how to form men, He could also have fashioned a body for this person, without casting His own Spirit into so much pollution”. Origen retorted that Celsus made these remarks, because “he knows not the pure and virgin birth, unaccompanied by any corruption, of that body which was to minister to the salvation of men. And in this he acts like those who imagine that the sun’s rays are polluted by dung and by foul-smelling bodies, and do not remain pure amid such things”.³⁵ Above all, Origen linked the Christological faith of the Church with the virginal conception: “It should not be that, believing a truth from one point of view, one should deny it from another: for example, there are those who believe that Jesus was crucified in Judaea, at the time of Pontius Pilate, but deny that He was born of the Virgin Mary: these people believe in Him on the one hand and yet do not believe in Him on the other”.³⁶

Tertullian affirmed the virginal conception of Jesus as dogmatic truth, part of the rule of faith: “This Word is called His Son, and, under the name of God, was seen in various ways by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ”.³⁷ However, he is not so clear regarding the virginity of Our Lady during Christ’s birth and after His birth. St. Augustine deepened the meaning of the virginal conception of Jesus: “Her virginity also itself was on this account more pleasing and accepted, in that it was not that Christ being conceived in her, rescued it beforehand from a husband who would violate it, Himself to preserve it; but, before He was conceived, chose it, already ded-

33) Celsus blasphemously proposed that Jesus was the result of a union of Mary with a Roman soldier. Origen refers to this in *Contra Celsum* Book 1, chapters 28 and 32, saying that Celsus maintained that “when she was pregnant she was turned out of doors by the carpenter to whom she had been betrothed, as having been guilty of adultery, and that she bore a child to a certain soldier named Panthera”. Origen pointed out that Celsus and others blindly concocted these fables to deny His miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit.

34) Origen, *Contra Celsum*, Book 1, chapter 39 in *PG* 11, 733.

35) Origen, *Contra Celsum*, Book 6, chapter 73 in *PG* 11, 1407-1408.

36) Origen, *Commentaria in Evangelium Ioannis*, Tomus XX, 24 in *PG* 14, 641-644.

37) Tertullian, *The Prescription against Heretics*, 13 in *PL* 2, 26.

icated to God, as that from which to be born. This is shown by the words which Mary spoke in answer to the Angel announcing her conception: ‘But how can this come about, since I have no knowledge of man?’³⁸

The solemn definitions of faith by the Ecumenical Councils and the papal Magisterium followed the first brief formulae of faith and the teaching of the Fathers on the virginal conception. The Council of Chalcedon in the year 451, in its carefully formulated profession of faith and with its infallibly defined content, affirms that Christ was “begotten ... as to his humanity in the latter days, for us and for our salvation from the Mary the Virgin Mother of God”.³⁹ In the year 649, the Lateran Council made a clear declaration concerning the virginal conception: “If anyone does not, according to the Holy Fathers, confess truly and properly that the holy and ever virgin and immaculate Mary...without human seed, conceived by the Holy Spirit, God the Word Himself, who before all time was born of God the Father...let him be condemned”.⁴⁰ This council was not ecumenical, but was conducted under the authority of Pope Martin I, the teaching was given under pain of anathema, so its authority was seen as almost ecumenical. Pope Martin’s successor Agatho conveyed the impression that the decisions of the Lateran Council were definitive, infallible and binding the Faith.

In the same way, in the year 681, the third Council of Constantinople proclaimed that Jesus Christ was “begotten ... as to his humanity, by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, she who is properly and in all truth the Mother of God”.⁴¹ Other Ecumenical Councils (Constantinople II, Lateran IV and Lyon II) declared Mary “ever-virgin”, stressing her perpetual virginity.⁴² These affirmations were taken up by the Second Vatican Council, which highlighted the fact that Mary “through her faith and obedience ... gave birth on earth to the very Son of the Father, not through the knowledge of man but by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit”.⁴³ In addition to the conciliar definitions, there are the definitions of the papal Magisterium concerning the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Assumption of the Immac-

38) St. Augustine, *On Holy Virginity*, chapter 4, 4 in *PL* 40, 398.

39) Council of Chalcedon, *Definition of the Faith*.

40) Lateran Council (649), *Condemnatio errorum de Trinitate et de Christo*, canon 3 in *DS* 503.

41) Third Council of Constantinople in *DS* 555.

42) Cf. the respective definitions in *DS* 423, 801, 852.

43) Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 63.

ulate and Ever-Virgin Mother of God.⁴⁴ The description of Mary as “Holy Ever-Virgin, Immaculate” draws attention to the connection between holiness and virginity. Mary wanted a virginal life because she was motivated by the desire to give her whole heart to God. The expression used in the definition of the Assumption, “the Immaculate Ever-Virgin Mother of God”, also implies the connection between Mary’s virginity and her motherhood: two prerogatives miraculously combined in the conception of Jesus, true God and true man. Thus Mary’s virginity is intimately linked to her divine motherhood and perfect holiness. Pope Paul VI reiterated in his profession of faith the dogma that the Son of God “was incarnate of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit”.⁴⁵

St. Thomas Aquinas treated the doctrine of the virginal conception of Christ, giving, among others, three reasons why it was fitting that Christ should have been born of a virgin. First, in order to maintain the dignity of the Father Who sent Him. For since Christ is the true and natural Son of God, it was not fitting that He should have another father than God, lest the dignity belonging to God be transferred to another. Second, the virginal conception was consonant to a property of the Son Himself, Who is sent. The Son is the Word of God, and the Word is conceived without any interior corruption. Indeed, interior corruption is incompatible with perfect conception of the Word. Since therefore flesh was so assumed by the Word of God, as to be the flesh of the Word of God, it was fitting that it also should be conceived without corruption of the mother. Third, on account of the end of the Incarnation of Christ, which was that men might be born again as sons of God, “not of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13), namely of the power of God, of which fact the very conception of Christ was to appear as an exemplar.⁴⁶

The virginal conception of Jesus was not really ever held in doubt until the advent of rationalism, modernism and liberalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The rationalist critique of Catholic theology, begun in

44) Cf. Pope Pius IX, Bull *Ineffabilis Deus* in DS 2803, and Pope Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus* in DS 3903.

45) Pope Paul VI, *Profession of Faith* (30 June 1968), 11.

46) Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 28, a. 1. Another reason which St. Thomas proposed is not so strong, namely that it was not possible in a nature already corrupt, for flesh to be born from sexual intercourse without incurring the infection of original sin. This proposition seems to deny the Immaculate Conception of Mary, who was born from sexual intercourse, but was preserved from original sin.

the nineteenth century, aimed to examine doctrine from a positivist perspective. Positivism and scientism which refuse to admit the validity of forms of knowledge other than those of the positive sciences and so these thought systems relegate religious, theological, ethical and aesthetic knowledge to the realm of mere fantasy.⁴⁷ The modernists based their thought on Kantian subjectivism and upon an evolutionary concept of truth. The modernist tendency towards a subjectivist and an evolutionary concept of truth coupled with a liberal approach to biblical criticism, led to an attempt to undermine the doctrine of the divine institution and divine and supernatural aspects of the Church. Instead, since one of the fundamental principles of modernism was historical development, this system proposed a development based on purely human and social factors.⁴⁸

In similar fashion, Protestant theologians like W. Pannenberg wrote that the virginal conception of Jesus seemed to represent a diminution of Christ's humanity, since we cannot understand why He should come into this world in a manner different from other men.⁴⁹ J.A.T. Robinson, a liberal Anglican theologian, makes this point:

To say that new life was fathered and quickened in Mary by the Spirit of God, is a profound way of expressing an inner truth about Jesus....With regard to the biological details, I am prepared to keep an open mind. Nothing for me depends on them....We are not bound to think of the Virgin Birth as a physical event, in order to believe that Jesus's whole life is "of God".⁵⁰

The once-Catholic theologian H. Küng regards the generation of Jesus Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit and the virgin birth of Jesus as "legends" adopted by the early Church to justify the post Paschal title of Son of God to Jesus.⁵¹ It is clear that Küng's denial of the virginal conception as an objective truth is of a piece with his denial of the divinity of Christ. Thus, in 1979, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith declared he cannot be regarded any longer as a Catholic theologian, also because of the errors in his

47) Cf. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, 88.

48) Cf. P. Haffner, *The Mystery of Reason* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2002), p. 38-239.

49) Cf. W. Pannenberg, *The Apostle's Creed in the Light of Today's Questions* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), p. 2.

50) J. A. T. Robinson, *But That I Can't Believe* (London: Collins Fontana, 1967), p. 5.

51) Cf. H. Küng, *On Being a Christian* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), p. 500.

writings regarding the Blessed Virgin Mary.⁵² Similarly, the New Dutch Catechism tended to exclude the biological aspect of the dogma of the Incarnation, and so with much vagueness and ambiguity, leaves the question of the virginal conception open to discussion or else insists on the symbolic meaning of the narratives which concern the virginal conception of Jesus.⁵³ The Church's reply to this equivocation was that the virginal conception of Jesus, which is in conformity with the mystery of the Incarnation itself, should be taught clearly; there is no excuse for abandoning the factual truth of this dogma, retaining only a symbolic interpretation.⁵⁴ More recently, Pope John Paul II affirmed that "physical integrity is considered essential to the truth of faith of Jesus' virginal conception".⁵⁵ Moreover, he pointed out how faith in the virginal conception of Jesus was firmly rooted in various milieus of the early Church. This deprives of any foundation several recent interpretations which understand the virginal conception not in a physical or biological sense, but only as symbolic or metaphorical. The same can be said for the opinion advanced by others, that the account of the virginal conception would instead be a *theologoumenon*, that is, a way of expressing a theological doctrine, that of Jesus' divine sonship, or would be a mythological portrayal of him. Instead, Scripture and Tradition contain the explicit affirmation of a virginal conception of the biological order, brought about by the Holy Spirit.⁵⁶ The meaning of this event is accessible only to faith, which understands in it the "connection of these mysteries with one another" in the totality of Christ's mysteries, from his Incarnation to his Paschal Mystery.⁵⁷

The eyes of faith can uncover in the context of synthetic view of Revelation the mysterious reasons why God in his saving plan wanted his Son to be born of a virgin. These reasons touch both, in a pneumatological perspective on the person of Christ and his redemptive mission, and on the welcome Mary gave that mission on behalf of all men. First, Mary's virginity manifests God's absolute initiative in the Incarnation. Jesus has only God as Father.

52) Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Christi ecclesia* regarding certain aspects of the theological doctrine of Professor Hans Küng (*Declaratio de quibusdam capitibus doctrinae theologiae professoris Ioannis Küng, qui, ab integra fidei catholicae veritate deficiens, munere docendi, qua theologus catholicus, privatus declaratur*), 15 December 1979, in *AAS* 72 (1980), p. 0-92.

53) Cf. *A New Catechism: Catholic Faith for Adults* (New York: 1973), p. 4ff.

54) Cf. Papal Commission of Cardinals, *Declaration on The New Catechism* (15th October 1968), II, 3.

55) Pope John Paul II, *Discourse at General Audience* (10 July 1996), 5.

56) Cf. *ibid.*, 3.

57) Cf. CCC 498 and Vatican I, *Dei Filius*, 4 in *DS* 3016.

Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit in the Virgin Mary's womb because He is the New Adam, who inaugurates the new creation: "The first man, being made of earth, is earthly by nature; the second man is from heaven". (1 Co 15: 47). From His conception, Christ's humanity is filled with the Holy Spirit, for God "gives Him the Spirit without measure" (Jn 3:34). By his virginal conception, Jesus, the New Adam, ushers in the new birth of children adopted in the Holy Spirit through faith. From "his fullness" as the head of redeemed humanity "we have all received, grace upon grace" (Jn 1:16; cf. Col 1:18). Participation in the divine life arises "not from human stock or human desire or human will but from God Himself" (Jn 1:13). The acceptance of this life is virginal because it is entirely the Spirit's gift to man. The spousal character of the human vocation in relation to God (cf. 2 Co 11:2) is fulfilled perfectly in Mary's virginal motherhood. Mary is a virgin because her virginity is the efficacious sign of her faith untainted 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 Saviour. At the same time virgin and mother, Mary is the symbol and the most perfect realisation of the Church: "the Church indeed... by receiving the word of God in faith becomes herself a mother. By preaching and Baptism she brings forth sons, who are conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of God, to a new and immortal life. She herself is a virgin, who keeps in its entirety and purity the faith she pledged to her spouse".⁵⁸

Virginity during the Birth of Christ

A Scriptural allusion to the virginity of Our Lady during the Birth of Christ can be found in the exegesis of St. Ambrose upon the text Luke 2:22-24, the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, in reference to Ezechiel 44:2: "The Lord said to me, 'This gate will be kept shut. No one may open it or go through it, since the Lord God of Israel, has been through it. And so it must be kept shut.'" For Ambrose, this gate is the Blessed Virgin Mary, "of her it is written 'the Lord shall pass through it,' and it shall be closed after child-

58) Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, 64. See also St. Augustine *On Holy Virginity* cap. 6, 6 in *PL* 40, 399: "That one woman is both mother and virgin, not in spirit only but even in body. In spirit, she is mother, not of our Head, who is our Saviour himself-of whom all, even she herself, are rightly called children of the bridegroom-but plainly she is the mother of us who are his members, because by love she has cooperated so that the faithful, who are the members of that head, might be born in the Church. In body, indeed, she is the Mother of that very Head".

bearing, because a virgin conceived and a virgin gave birth”.⁵⁹ Ambrose also pointed out that Isaiah (Is 7:14) did not only say that a virgin would conceive, he said that a virgin would give birth as well.⁶⁰ A further prophetic allusion to the miraculous nature of the Birth of Christ, as connected to Mary’s virginity, is found in Isaiah 66:7: “Before being in labour she has given birth. Before the birth pangs came, she has been delivered of a child”. A particular passage from the Song of Songs has also been interpreted in an allegorical prefigurative way, indicated that the seals of Mary’s virginity were not destroyed during childbirth: “She is a garden enclosed, my sister, my promised bride; a garden enclosed, a sealed fountain” (Sg 4:12).⁶¹

Among the earliest Patristic witnesses to the special nature of Christ’s Birth is St. Ignatius of Antioch, writing around the year 107. The mystery of Christ’s birth must be proclaimed aloud, he remarked, alongside that of His virginal conception.⁶² An even clearer early second century testimony was offered by St. Irenaeus: “Emmanuel, born of the Virgin, exhibited the union of the Word of God with His own workmanship, declaring that the Word should become flesh, and the Son of God the Son of man, the pure One opening purely that pure womb which regenerates men unto God, and which He Himself made pure”.⁶³

Despite these and other early Patristic affirmations of Our Lady’s virginity during childbirth, all was not plain sailing for this doctrine. Tertullian, in his attempt to counter the doctrine of Docetists, Marcionites and Gnostics, who all undermined the humanity of Christ, presented the birth of Christ as simply normal, often with brutal realism: “She was a virgin, so far as her husband was concerned; she was not a virgin, so far as her childbearing was concerned”.⁶⁴

59) St. Ambrose, *Epistle 42*, n.4 in *PL* 16, 1174. See also Idem, *De institutione virginis* cap. 8, n. 52 in *PL* 16, 320. It is significant that this exegesis is mentioned in a footnote to Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, 57.

60) Cf. St. Ambrose, *Epistle 42*, n.4 in *PL* 16, 1174.

61) Cf. St. Jerome, *Adversus Iovinianum*, lib. 1, n. 31 in *PL* 23, 265.

62) Cf. St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians* 19, 1 in *Sources Chrétiennes* 10 (Paris: Cerf, 1945), p. 4-65.

63) St. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, Book 4, chapter 33, n.11 in *PG* 7, 1080. The key Latin expression is: “purus pure puram aperiens vulvam”. It seems likely that it is the adverb and not the verb that merits the stress.

64) Tertullian, *De carne Christi*, chapter 23 in *CSEL* 70, 246-247. “Et virgo, quantum a viro; non virgo, quantum a partu”. See also Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, Book 3, chapter 11 in *CSEL* 47, 394: “Birth will not be worse for Him than death....If Christ truly suffered all of this, to be born was something

In the East, it was the Cappadocian Father St. Gregory of Nyssa who first clearly highlighted Our Lady's virginity during childbirth. He started from the analogy between Eve and Mary, so that the Mother of Life begins pregnancy with joy and finished childbearing through joy.⁶⁵ He enunciated the principle that since Mary had experienced no sensual pleasure in conceiving Jesus, she also underwent no labour pains in giving birth to Him: "Her pregnancy was without coition, her childbed undefiled, her travail free from pain...His birth alone was without labour, just as His formation was without union".⁶⁶ Gregory sees in the Burning Bush (Ex 3:2) a prefiguration of Mary's virginity. Like the bush which was aflame but not consumed, Mary brought the Light to the world but was not corrupted,⁶⁷ for the Light "kept the burning bush incorrupt; the sprout of her virginity was not withered by her childbearing".⁶⁸

For some of the Fathers, the passage Luke 2:23 presented an obstacle to the doctrine of the virginity of Our Lady during birth. It runs: "Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord".⁶⁹ For Origen, it is normally intercourse that opens the womb of a woman. However, in the case of Our Lady, "the womb of the Lord's Mother was unlocked at the time of her childbearing; for before the birth of Christ no male touched in the slightest that holy womb, worthy of all esteem and veneration".⁷⁰ It is not clear in Origen what this "unlocking" at the time of Christ's Birth involved. However, Origen alludes to the tradition that after the Birth of Christ, Mary went into the temple to worship and stood in the place reserved for virgins.⁷¹ It seems that Origen understood physical virginity only in terms of marital intercourse, and therefore did not fully consider the question of what constituted virginity at

less for Him". However, Tertullian nuanced his position somewhat, allowing for the possibility of virginity in childbirth in *De virginibus velandis*, chapter 6 in *PL* 2, 898.

65) Cf. St Gregory of Nyssa, *In Cantica canticorum*, sermon 13 in *PG* 44, 1053.

66) St Gregory of Nyssa, *In Cantica canticorum*, sermon 13 in *PG* 44, 1053. See also Idem, *In Christi resurrectionem*, oratio 1 in *PG* 46, 604.

67) Cf. Idem, *In diem natalem Christi* in *PG* 46, 1136.

68) Idem, *De vita Moysis* in *PG* 44, 332.

69) In the Vulgate, the passage is "omne masculinum adaperiens vulvam sanctum Domino vocabitur". However, in some new translations like the New Jerusalem Bible, the problem is skirted because the text simply runs: "Every first-born male must be consecrated to the Lord".

70) Origen, *Homilia 10 in Lucam* in *Enchiridion Marianum Biblicum Patristicum*, 144.

71) Cf. Origen, *Commentarium in Mathaeum*, Tract 23 in *Enchiridion Marianum Biblicum Patristicum*, 135.

childbirth. It was Amphilochius of Iconium who arrived at a solution to the conundrum presented by Luke 2:23. He remarked, like Origen that it is normally by intercourse that a woman's womb is opened, but in the case of Our Lady it was the Saviour who opened her womb. However, Amphilochius then added that as regards Mary's virginity, the gates were not opened, for this is Ezekiel's "gate of the Lord", where He goes in and out and still the gate is closed (Ez 44:2). He concludes that the Incarnate Word "opened the Virgin's womb without intercourse; He came forth in an inexpressible manner".⁷² The way was thus paved for considering the Birth of Christ a true and *miraculous* Birth which preserved the integrity of His Mother.

St. John Chrysostom is unequivocal in his proclamation of the virginity of Mary in childbirth. Mary gave birth "without experiencing corruption". After her childbearing, "pure and holy" as it was, she is virgin still, a "supernatural" thing. The Son's inexpressible birth of a virgin parallels His unutterable generation from the Father. In being born of her, God "preserves her womb unchanged, and maintains her virginity unharmed" where "the seal of her virginity" is "unblemished".⁷³ In St. Ephraem's *Hymns on Blessed Mary*, Our Lady's virginity in childbearing is a constant theme. She gives birth without pain; her body abides intact; she gives of her milk without loss of virginity; she is the "closed gate" of Ezechiel; the seals of her virginity are as inviolate as the seals of Christ's sepulchre, inviolate even in death.⁷⁴ Concerning the painless nature of this birth, Ephraem wrote: "Just as the Lord made His entrance when the doors were closed, in the same way did He come forth from the Virgin's womb, because this virgin really and truly gave birth without pain".⁷⁵ Theodotus of Ancyra took a slightly different perspective regarding the relation between Christ's birth and his exit from the tomb. He said that the risen Christ opened the door of His tomb, but did not open the door of His Mother's womb when He was born.⁷⁶

72) Amphilochius of Iconium, *Oratio 2: In occursum Domini*, n. 2 in PG 39, 48.

73) St. John Chrysostom, *In natalem Christi diem* in PG 56, 387-393.

74) Cf. St. Ephraem, *Hymni de beata Maria*, 1, 2; 2, 3; 4, 7; 4, 10; 5, 1-2; 6, 2; 7, 6; 8, 3; 10, 2; 11, 4; 11, 6; 12, 1; 15, 2; 15, 5; 18, 20.

75) St. Ephraem, *Explanatio evangelii concordantis*, cap. 2, n.6.

76) Theodotus of Ancyra, *Homilia 5*, n. 1 in *Enchiridion Marianum Biblicum Patristicum*, 1196: "[... Christus] resurgens e sepulchro sepulchra aperuit; natusque e vulva vulvam non aperuit. Ex morte enim ac terrae sinu emergens monumenta aperit; nascens vero ex Virgine uterum non aperuit: sed et nascitur et Virginis sinum clausum relinquit".

Around the beginning of the Nestorian controversy in 428, Nilus of Ancyra defended Mary's virginity during childbirth against those who denied her this privilege: "In His birth Our Lord Christ opened the undefiled womb; after His birth He sealed the womb by His own wisdom, power, and wondrous activity. He did not break the seals of her virginity at all".⁷⁷ It is with the Council of Ephesus (431), and probably as a result of that Council, that the last lingering doubts on Our Lady's virginity in parturition disappear from orthodox circles. Afterwards, St. John Damascene (675-750) formulates very clearly and carefully the virginity of Mary during the birth of Christ, so as to stress also that the birth is a real one: "Just as He who was conceived kept her who conceived still a virgin, in like manner also He who was born preserved her virginity intact, only passing through her and keeping her closed. The conception, indeed, was through the sense of hearing, but the birth through the usual path by which children come.... For it was not impossible for Him to have come by this gate, without injuring her seal in any way".⁷⁸ John Damascene also made it clear that Christ's Birth was painless; "for as pleasure did not precede it, pain did not follow it".⁷⁹

In the West, doctrine on the virginity of Our Lady during the Birth of Christ flowered during the fourth century. While St. Hilary of Poitiers was very clear concerning the virginity of Mary *post partum*, he did not treat of the question of her virginity during the Birth.⁸⁰ However, around the same time, St. Zeno of Verona clearly affirmed that Mary was a virgin in her conception of Christ, a virgin in giving birth, and a virgin after His birth.⁸¹ St. Ambrose of Milan was very much part of this milieu, and had to combat the errors of a certain Jovinian. The latter, after having followed an ascetical life, launched a scathing attack on virginity. Despite the fact that he was condemned by Pope Siricius, he appealed to the secular authorities, claiming that the supporters of virginity were Manichaeans. While he did not negate the virginal conception, Jovinian denied the virginity of Mary during and after the Birth of Christ, and St. Ambrose called a Synod to counter this error.

77) Nilus of Ancyra, *Epistolae*, lib. 1, ep. 270 in *PG* 79, 181.

78) St. John Damascene, *De Fide orthodoxa*, Book 4, cap. 14 in *Enchiridion Marianum Biblicum Patristicum*, 1920.

79) *Ibid.*, in *Enchiridion Marianum Biblicum Patristicum*, 1919.

80) Cf. St. Hilary of Poitiers, *Commentary on St. Matthew*, I, 3-4 in *PL* 9, 921-922.

81) Cf. St. Zeno of Verona, *Tractatus* 8, Book 2 in *PL* 11, 414-415, where the beautiful formula is to be read: "O magnum sacramentum! Maria Virgo incorrupta concepit, post conceptionem virgo peperit, post partum virgo permansit".

This Synod maintained that the denial of Mary's virginity during the Birth of Christ undermined belief in Christ's Birth itself. Ambrose took a strong lead in advocating the virgin birth also in his writing and preaching:

This is the Virgin who conceived in the womb, this the Virgin who gave birth to a Son... For Isaiah did not say that a virgin would merely conceive; he said that a virgin would give birth as well. Now, what is that gate of the sanctuary, that outer gate looking to the East, which remains shut and no one, it says, shall pass through it save the God of Israel alone (Ez 44:2)?... This gate is blessed Mary; of her it is written that the Lord shall pass through it and it shall be closed after childbearing, because a virgin conceived and a virgin gave birth.⁸²

St. Jerome was another great defender in the West of Mary's virginity. On several occasions he clearly proclaimed the virginity of Our Lady during the birth of Christ:

Christ is a virgin, and the mother of our Virgin is herself ever a virgin; she is mother and virgin. Although the doors were shut, Jesus entered within; in the sepulchre that was Mary, which was new and hewn in hardest rock, no one was laid before or after... She is the eastern gate of whom Ezechiel speaks, always shut and full of light, which closing on itself brings forth from itself the Holy of Holies; whereby the Sun of justice ... enters in and goes out. Let them tell me how Jesus entered [the Cenacle] when the doors were shut ... and I will tell them how holy Mary is both mother and virgin, virgin after childbirth and mother before marriage.⁸³

In Jerome's eyes, Our Lord could somehow "open the womb" of Mary without violating her virginity.

The picture provided by Jerome concerning the virginity of Mary during Christ's Birth was sharpened by St. Augustine, St. Peter Chrysologus, and Pope St. Leo the Great. For Augustine, Mary is virgin before and during wedlock, virgin in her pregnancy, virgin in giving to Christ of her milk. In

82) St. Ambrose, *Epistola 42*, n. 4 in *PL 16*, 1174. See also *De institutione virginis*, cap. 8, n. 52: "... virginali fusus est partu, et genitalia virginitatis claustra non solvit" in *PL 16*, 320. Ambrose proposed the same doctrine to the people in his sermons; Cf. *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam*, lib. 2, n. 43 in *PL 15*, 1568-1569, where we read: "Nupta peperit, sed virgo concepit; nupta concepit, sed virgo generavit".

83) St. Jerome, *Epistola 49*, n. 21 in *CSEL 54*, 386. See also Idem, *Dialogus contra Pelagianos*, liber 2, n. 4 in *PL 23*, 563: "only Christ opened the closed gates of her virginal womb, and yet the gates remained unfaillingly closed".

taking birth of her, He did not steal virginity from her.⁸⁴ In brief, “she conceives and is a virgin; she gives birth and is a virgin”.⁸⁵ Peter Chrysologus sees Mary’s virginal integrity as strengthened through childbirth, which is the crown of her virginity.⁸⁶ Christ comes forth in such fashion that the virginal gate does not swing open, and so Our Lady realises in Bethlehem the garden enclosed, the sealed fountain of the Song of Songs (Sg 4:12).⁸⁷ Pope Leo the Great declares that Mary’s womb is a mother’s womb, but the birth of Jesus is a virgin birth.⁸⁸ It is the incorruption of Christ that kept intact the integrity of Mary.⁸⁹ In his Tome to Flavian in 449 which expressed the rule of faith, Leo stated that birth from a virgin is included among the truths of faith universally believed: “He was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mother, who gave Him birth without losing her virginity just as she conceived Him without losing her virginity”.⁹⁰ In 521, 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 and, through God’s power, without dissolving his mother’s virginity”.⁹¹ This tradition was finally ratified in 649 by the Lateran Council when it condemned anyone and everyone who “does not, according to the Holy Fathers, confess truly and properly, that...Mary...without loss of integrity brought Him forth”.⁹² The word *integrity*, which means the state of being untouched, denotes a physical reality or state. It rules out lesions, blood and similar things. The Greek text, which is of equal authority, has *aphthoros*, meaning without corruption.

St. Thomas Aquinas was most clear in his formulation of Mary’s virginity during the Birth of Christ. He stated her virginity was not violated in the act of giving birth. Christ’s body, which appeared to the disciples when the doors were closed, could by the same power come forth from the closed womb of

84) Cf. St. Augustine, *Sermon 188*, n. 4 in *PL 38*, 1004.

85) Idem, *Sermon 189*, n.2 in *PL 38*, 1005; Cf. Idem, *Sermon 191*, nn.3-4 in *PL 38*, 1010-1011.

86) Cf. St. Peter Chrysologus, *Sermon 142* in *PL 52*, 581 and *Sermon 175* in *PL 52*, 658.

87) Cf. St. Peter Chrysologus, *Sermon 154* in *PL 52*, 589.

88) Cf. St. Leo the Great, *Sermon 24*, cap. 1 in *PL 54*, 204.

89) Cf. Idem, *Sermon 22*, cap. 2 in *PL 54*, 196.

90) Pope St. Leo the Great, *Tome to Flavian*, cap. 2 in *DS 291*. In the Latin, one notices that both aspects of Mary’s virginity are on the same level as the other: “illum ita salva virginitate edidit, quemadmodum salva virginitate concepit”.

91) Pope St. Hormisdas, Letter *Inter ea quae*, cap. 10 in *DS 368*.

92) Lateran Council (649), *Condemnatio errorum de Trinitate et de Christo*, canon 3 in *DS 503*.

His mother. The Angelic Doctor pointed out that it was not seemly that He, who was born for the purpose of restoring what was corrupt to its pristine integrity, should destroy integrity in being born.⁹³ The Angelic Doctor stated that we must assert without any doubt whatever that the Mother of Christ was a virgin even in Christ's Birth. This virginity was very appropriate for three reasons. First, because this was in keeping with the nature of Christ's Birth, for He is the Word of God. For the word is not only conceived in the mind without corruption, but also proceeds from the mind without corruption. Therefore in order to show that body to be the body of the very Word of God, it was fitting that it should be born of a virgin incorrupt. Second, it is fitting as regards the effect of Christ's Incarnation: since He came for this purpose, that He might take away our corruption. Therefore it would have been unseemly that in His Birth He should have corrupted His Mother's virginity. Third, it was fitting that He Who commanded us to honour our father and mother should not in His Birth lessen the honour due to His Mother.⁹⁴

During the middle of the twentieth century, the physical nature of Mary's virginity during the birth of Christ was called into question. Mitterer affirmed that two traits given in tradition connected with Mary's virginity *in partu*, namely the absence of pains of childbirth and preservation of the hymen, did not belong to the essence of virginity and that lack of them implied a diminution of motherhood.⁹⁵ Similarly, Galot, sees the birth of Christ as happening in an ordinary way, like any other birth of a child. It was the complete bodily birth of a child. Jesus therefore, opened his mother's womb with all the usual blood of a birth. According to Galot, normal birth is compatible with virginity without corruption or sin. Such a birth cannot preclude virginity because it cannot be identified with a sexual act. Galot also argued for painful delivery and rupture of the hymen.⁹⁶

93) St. Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium theologiae*, Part I, chapter 225.

94) Idem, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q.28, a.2.

95) Cf. A. Mitterer, *Dogma und Biologie der Heiligen Familie* (Vienna: 1952), p. 98-130 and "Marias wahre Jungfräulichkeit und Mutterschaft in der Geburt" in *Theologische-praktische Quartalschrift* 108 (1960), 188-93. Mitterer was followed by C. E. L. Henry, "A Doctor Considers the Birth of Jesus", in *Homiletic & Pastoral Review* 54 (1953), 219-233.

96) Cf. J. Galot, *Maria la donna nell'opera di salvezza* (Roma: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1984), p. 59, and Idem, "La virginité de Marie et la naissance de Jésus" in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 82 (1960), 449-469.

In June 1960, the Holy Office drew up a decree on this matter but did not publish it officially. It was sent to a certain number of bishops and religious superiors as a *monitum* or warning:

This supreme Congregation has often observed recently, and with deep concern, that theological works are being published in which the delicate question of Mary's virginity *in partu* is treated with a deplorable crudeness of expression and, what is more serious, in flagrant contradiction to the doctrinal tradition of the Church and to the sense of respect the faithful have. Consequently in its plenary session of Wednesday, the twentieth of this month [July 1960], it seemed necessary to the eminent Fathers of the Holy Office, by reason of their serious responsibility to watch over the sacred deposit of Catholic doctrine, to see to it that for the future the publication of such dissertations on this problem be prohibited.⁹⁷

The Second Vatican Council gave further weight to the Lateran Council, repeating the word 'integrity', and referring in a note to the text of the Lateran: "This union of the Mother with the Son in the work of salvation is evident from the time of the virginal conception of Christ even to His death... also when the Mother of God brought forth her Firstborn, who did not diminish His mother's virginal integrity but sanctified it".⁹⁸ Citing once again the Lateran Council in 649, Pope John Paul II reaffirmed the doctrine of Mary's virginity during Christ's birth: "Mary was therefore a virgin before the birth of Jesus and she remained a virgin in giving birth and after the birth".⁹⁹ John Paul II also stated that "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 very mystery of the Incarnation".¹⁰⁰ By this the Pope did not wish to diminish the importance of Mary's virginity during and after the birth of Christ, but rather stressed that her virginity *in partu* and *post partum* are based on the virginal conception.

In the whole question, a delicate balance is required to preserve the true Motherhood of Mary in a real yet miraculous birth of Christ, in order to dispel

97) Several journals did publish it. It came in Italian in *Ephemerides Mariologicae* 11 (1961), p. 138 and *Marianum* 23 (1961), p. 36 and in French in *La Vie des Communautés Religieuses* (Montreal) 18 (1960), #8. R. Laurentin, in *A Short Treatise on the Virgin Mary* (Washington: AMI Press, 1991) translated the decree on p. 318-29, in the form cited above.

98) Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 57.

99) Pope John Paul II, *Discourse at General Audience*, 28 January 1987.

100) Pope John Paul II, *Discourse at General Audience*, 28 August 1996, 2.

any suspicion of Docetism. At the same time, it is necessary to avoid reducing Mary's virginity during birth to a merely symbolic issue. It seems clear that any attempt to undermine the virginity of Our Lady during Birth takes away from the unique nature of Christ's Birth, as well as paving the way for a purely spiritual concept of virginity. The notion of virginity is applied to Mary in a special sense. While in the case of other women, virginity would only be lost through intercourse, it would have been lost by Our Lady through the rupture of the hymen through an ordinary birth. Therefore the virginity of Mary would exclude the rupture of the hymen and also exclude pain in childbirth, which is a consequence of original sin.

Virginity after the Birth of Christ

A third phase of Mary's virginity concerns her life after Bethlehem, and the Church's doctrine here indicates that Mary did not have conjugal relations after the birth of Jesus, she did not have any children besides Jesus. Against this doctrine the objection is sometimes raised that the Bible mentions brothers and sisters of Jesus (cf. Mk 3:31-35; 6:3; 1 Cor 9:5; Gal 1:19). The Church has always understood these passages as not referring to other children of the Virgin Mary. In fact, James and Joseph, "brothers of Jesus", are the sons of another Mary, a disciple of Christ, whom St. Matthew significantly calls "the other Mary" (Mt 13:55; 28:1; cf. Mt 27:56). Those referred to as the brothers of Jesus are his blood relations at the levels of cousin, according to the ancient Semitic way of thinking as also found in the Old Testament.¹⁰¹ If Mary had other children, it becomes difficult to explain why Jesus is emphatically called 'Son of Mary' (Mk 6:3) noting especially there is no mention of Joseph? In the same manner, Mary is never referred to as Mother of the mother of the brethren of Jesus. If Mary had other children, then Jesus, as He was dying on the Cross would not have entrusted Mary to the care of St. John.

The Gospels call James the "brother" of Jesus, and other New Testament books say he later led the Jerusalem church. Many Protestants traditionally read the New Testament as meaning Mary gave birth to Jesus as a virgin and then had James, three other sons and at least two daughters with Joseph. In accord with Church Fathers writing after the New Testament era, the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics teach Mary's perpetual virgin-

101) Cf. Haffner, *The Mystery of Mary*, chapter 3, p. 51, 54-55 above where this has already been discussed. See also Cf. Gn 13:8; 14:16; 29:15.

ity, which means she and Joseph never had marital relations. Some Orthodox think Joseph had James by his first wife, and after she died he married Mary, whose only child was the virgin-born Jesus. Thus, James was Jesus' half-brother. The Catholic position is that James was merely Jesus' close relative, perhaps the son of Joseph's brother Clopas or a cousin on Mary's side.

St. Luke's Gospel states that Mary "gave birth to a Son, her first-born" (Lk 2:7). In biblical Greek the expression for first-born *πρωτότοκος* in no way implies that the Virgin Mary subsequently had other children, but rather stresses the dignity and rights of the Child. This expression first-born is used in a way which parallels what is found in the Letter to the Hebrews: "when he brings the First-born into the world, he says: Let all the angels of God pay him homage" (Heb 1:6). The expression is predicated of the Word being the *only* Son of the Father and of Jesus Christ being the *only* Son of His Mother Mary. A further difficulty in the proposal that Jesus had blood brothers would be that there would be people who could claim very close blood ties with Him, and this would undermine that the Kingdom is not based on such ties but on hearing the Word of God and keeping it (cf. Lk 11:28). For anyone who does the will of Christ's Father in Heaven is His brother and sister and mother (cf. Mt 12:50).

Western Christianity was faced the question only gradually. Some very few fathers were problematic in their view of the question. For example, Tertullian regards the Mother of Jesus as mother of other children as well after the Birth of Christ.¹⁰² St. Hilary of Poitiers marked an important watershed in rejecting the errors of those who held that Mary had marital relations with Joseph after Jesus' birth; for Hilary these are "irreligious individuals, utterly divorced from spiritual teaching". He himself is aware that, whenever Scripture speaks of Mary and Joseph in the same breath, Mary "is called Mother of Christ, because that is what she was; not 'wife of Joseph,' because she was not". For Hilary, the brothers of Jesus were children of Joseph by a former marriage; were that not so, Jesus would not have been compelled to entrust His Mother to John from the cross.¹⁰³ Hilary's language is so strong that we are tempted to see in his adversaries recognised heretics; but the conclusion is not apodictic. Hilary thus had a deep conviction concerning the perpetual virginity of Mary that is rooted in her dignity as Mother of the Saviour. In

102) Cf. Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, Lib. 3, cap. 1 in *CSEL* 47, 393; *Ibid.*, Lib. 4, cap. 19 in *CSEL* 47, 482-483; Idem, *De carne Christi*, cap. 7 in *CSEL* 70, 208-212.

103) Cf. St. Hilary, *Commentarius in Matthaum*, cap. 1, nn. 3-4 in *PL* 9, 921-922.

the face of error, Zeno of Verona offered an important formula, which was already an expression of Mary's perpetual virginity: "O marvellous mystery! Mary conceived as virgin incorrupt; after conception she gave birth as a virgin; after childbirth she remained a virgin".¹⁰⁴

During the decade between 383 and 392 it became necessary to defend further the doctrine of Mary's virginity *post partum*. The key antagonists in this struggle were primarily Helvidius and Bonosus. Helvidius did not make the tactical blunder of affirming that virginity is inferior to marriage and he did not appear to attack the Virgin Mary. He simply asserted that marriage and virginity are equal in honour, that Mary is doubly admirable for having been, in turn, virgin and mother of a family: virgin until the birth of Jesus, then mother of the brothers and sisters of Jesus spoken of in Scripture. St. Jerome defended the Faith, and in the year 383 in his work *Adversus Helvidium* developed the thesis that virginity is superior to marriage; his key proof being that Mary would never have dreamed of relations with any man, no matter who.¹⁰⁵ As witnesses to this doctrine, Jerome cited the Fathers Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Justin. For Jerome, the brothers of Lord's brethren are children not of Mary but of her sister. He concludes in reply to Helvidius:

But as we do not deny what is written, so we do reject what is not written. We believe that God was born of the Virgin, because we read it. That Mary was married after she brought forth, we do not believe, because we do not read it. Nor do we say this to condemn marriage, for virginity itself is the fruit of marriage; but because when we are dealing with saints we must not judge rashly. If we adopt possibility as the standard of judgement, we might maintain that Joseph had several wives because Abraham had, and so had Jacob, and that the Lord's brethren were the issue of those wives, an invention which some hold with a rashness which springs from audacity not from piety. You say that Mary did not remain a virgin. I claim still more; I claim that Joseph himself was a virgin for Mary's sake, so that from a virgin wedlock a virgin Son might be born.¹⁰⁶

The other adversary, Bonosus, Bishop of Naissus (the modern Nish in Yugoslavia), proposed around the year 390 that Mary had had more than

104) Zeno, *Tractatus*, lib. 2, tr. 8, 2 in *PL* 11, 414-415; Cf. *Tractatus*, lib. 1, tr. 5, 3 in *PL* 11, 303.

105) St. Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium* in *PL* 23, 193-216.

106) St. Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, n. 19 in *PL* 23, 213; Cf. *ibid.*, n. 17 in *PL* 23, 211. The brothers of Jesus are described as "fratres propinquitate, non natura".

one child.¹⁰⁷ St. Ambrose replied to this error. Adopting several Old Testament symbols of Mary's perpetual virginity like the "closed gate" of Ezekiel, the "enclosed garden" and "sealed fountain" of the Song of Songs, he explained the New Testament texts misinterpreted by Bonosus (Mt 1:18-25).¹⁰⁸ The brothers of Jesus are not children of Mary; they may have been Joseph's. In any case, the term "brother" need not be interpreted in the literal modern sense of the word.¹⁰⁹ Bonosus was condemned by his fellow bishops of Illyricum, and this condemnation was approved in a celebrated letter whose author may be Pope Siricius but is more probably Ambrose himself.¹¹⁰ The text runs: "Your Reverence was perfectly justified in rebuking him [i.e. Bonosus] on the score of Mary's children, and you had good reason to be horrified at the thought that another birth might issue from the same virginal womb from which Christ was born according to the flesh. For the Lord Jesus would never have chosen to be born of a virgin if He had ever judged that she would be so incontinent as to contaminate with the seed of human intercourse the birth-place of the Lord's body, that court of the Eternal King".¹¹¹

The condemnation of Bonosus consolidated the proclamation of the truth of Mary's virginity after Christ's Birth. St. Augustine often repeats the basic truth that Our Lady "conceived as a virgin, she gave birth as a virgin, she remained a virgin".¹¹² The same truth is also echoed by such western Fathers as St. Peter Chrysologus and St. Leo the Great. For St. Peter Chrysologus, Mary was a virgin who conceived, a virgin who gave birth and she remained a virgin.¹¹³ Pope St. Leo the Great wrote: "For when God was born in the flesh, God Himself was the Father, as the archangel witnessed to the Blessed Virgin Mary...The origin is different but the nature like: not by intercourse with man

107) St. Ambrose gives an account of the errors of Bonosus who was not alone in denying the perpetuity of Mary's virginity. See St. Ambrose, *De institutione virginis*, cap. 5, n. 35 in *PL* 16, 328.

108) Cf. St. Ambrose, *De institutione virginis*, cap. 5, n. 36 ff. in *PL* 16, 329 ff.

109) Cf. *Ibid.*, cap. 6, n. 43 in *PL* 16, 331. St. Ambrose also argues from the fact that Christ entrusted Mary to John on Calvary in *De institutione virginis*, cap. 7, nn. 46-48 in *PL* 16, 332-333.

110) *De Bonoso* in *PL* 16, 1222-1224; also in *PL* 13, 1176-1178, as Pope Siricius, *Epistola 9, Ad Anysium Thessalonicensem aliosque Illyrici episcopos*. The relevant note in *PL* 16 refuses to choose from among the authors suggested while the monitum in *PL* 13 ascribes the letter to Siricius. F. Homes Dudden believes that "the style and the matter indicate Ambrosian authorship". See *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose* (Oxford, 1935), Vol. 2, p. 402, note 4.

111) *De Bonoso*, n. 3 in *PL* 16, 1223-1224; 13, 1177.

112) St. Augustine, *Sermon 190*, n. 2 in *PL* 38, 1008; see also *Sermon 196*, n. 1 in *PL* 38, 1019: "Virgo concepit, miramini; virgo peperit, plus miramini; post partum, virgo permansit".

113) Cf. St. Peter Chrysologus, *Sermon 97* in *PL* 52, 521: "Virgo concepit, virgo parturit, virgo permanet".

but by the power of God was it brought about: for a Virgin conceived, a Virgin gave birth, and a Virgin she remained”.¹¹⁴ The definitive pronouncement of the Lateran Council in the year 649 came in the wake of the declarations of many Fathers: “If anyone does not, according to the Holy Fathers, confess truly and properly that the holy and ever virgin and immaculate Mary...after His birth preserved her virginity inviolate, let him be condemned”.¹¹⁵

In the Christian East, there was an early tradition that St. Joseph is a widower, with children by his former wife, and too advanced in years to have conjugal relations. This idea can be found in a fragment from Clement of Alexandria: the Jude who wrote the Catholic Epistle was “a brother of Joseph’s children”, and so “the brother of James”.¹¹⁶ Also in the Alexandrian school, Origen firmly rejected the notion that Mary should have had any other children: “no one whose mind on Mary is sound would claim that she had any child save Jesus”.¹¹⁷ Origen had this to say about the “brothers of Jesus”:

Some say that the brothers of Jesus are children of Joseph by a former wife, who had lived with him before Mary. They are motivated by a tradition of the so-called Gospel according to Peter, or the Book of James. Now, those who say this wish to preserve the dignity of Mary in virginity to the end, that the body chosen to minister to the Word...might not know intercourse after the Holy Spirit had come upon her and the power from on high had overshadowed her. And I think it reasonable that Jesus was, in regard of men, the first-fruits of the purity that resides in chastity, and Mary in regard of women; for piety forbids us to ascribe to someone else besides her the first-fruits of virginity.¹¹⁸

The fundamental inspiration for the conviction of Origen and many contemporary Christians that Mary remained a virgin to the end was theological: a firmly rooted faith that by the Incarnation the body of Our Lady had been irrevocably consecrated to the Holy Spirit and to the Word. Further evidence for this was that St. Basil rejected a discourse of the famous Arian,

114) Pope St. Leo the Great, *Sermon* 22, cap. 2 in *PL*, 54, 195: “divina potestate subnixum est, quod virgo conceperit, quod virgo pepererit, et virgo permanserit”.

115) Lateran Council (649), *Condemnatio errorum de Trinitate et de Christo*, canon 3 in *DS* 503.

116) Clement of Alexandria, *Adumbrationes in epistolam Iudae* in *PG* 9, 731.

117) Origen, *Commentaria in Evangelium Ioannis*, Tomus 1, Praefatio, n. 6 in *Enchiridion Marianum Biblicum Patristicum*, 151.

118) Origen, *Commentaria in Evangelium secundum Matthaeum*, Tomus 10, 17 in *Enchiridion Marianum Biblicum Patristicum*, 132.

Eunomius, in which he declared that Joseph and Mary had marital relations after the birth of Jesus. St. Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia rebutted the thesis of Eunomius, in a Christological key, saying that “lovers of Christ refuse to lend ear to the idea that the Mother of God ever ceased to be a virgin”.¹¹⁹ Similarly, Ephraem counteracted the error of those “who dare to say that Mary was Joseph’s wife after the Saviour’s birth”. His answer resembles that of Origen: “How could this be, that she who was the home where the Spirit dwelt, she whom God’s power overshadowed, should become wife of mortal man? ... As she conceived in purity, so did she abide in sanctity”.¹²⁰ The very fact that Jesus gave Mary to John on Calvary proves that the “brothers” were not her children.¹²¹

An important step came in the East with St. Epiphanius and his profession that Mary was ever virgin. In 374, he records the heresy of the Antidicomarianites that Mary had intercourse with Joseph after the birth of Jesus.¹²² In 377, he replies by reproducing a letter addressed some years before to Christians in Arabia. The letter castigates the opinion as novelty, audacity, madness and totally ungodly. Mary has always been known as Virgin and this is her name of honour. The brothers of Jesus were children of Joseph by a former marriage. Jesus was Mary’s only Child, and Epiphanius insists that she was “ever virgin”.¹²³ About 390, St. John Chrysostom taught in Antioch that Mary remained virgin her whole life long. He presents her virginity after Bethlehem as a deduction from Scripture, whereas the virginal conception is a truth taught explicitly therein.¹²⁴ Later, in the seventh century, St. John Damascene affirmed: “The ever virgin One thus remains even after the birth still a virgin, having never at any time up till death consorted with a man... For could it be possible that she, who had borne God and from experience of the subsequent events had come to know the miracle, should receive the embrace of a man”.¹²⁵ The expression “ever virgin” or *aeiparthenos* in Greek

119) St. Basil, *Homilia in sanctam Christi generationem*, n. 5 in PG 31, 1468.

120) St. Ephraem, *Explanatio evangelii concordantis*, cap. 2 in *Enchiridion Marianum Biblicum Patristicum*, 295.

121) Cf. *ibid.*

122) St. Epiphanius, *Ancoratus*, n. 13.

123) Cf. St. Epiphanius, *Panarion*, haeresis 78, nn. 5-24 and Idem, *Ancoratus*, n.119.

124) St. John Chrysostom, *Homilia 5 in Matthaem*, n. 3 in PG 57, 58

125) St. John Damascene, *De Fide orthodoxa*, Book 4, cap. 14 in *Enchiridion Marianum Biblicum Patristicum*, 1920.

became the standard expression in the Church, signifying the total consecration of Mary in body and soul during her whole existence to the Holy Trinity.

Various statements of the Magisterium indicated that the perpetual virginity of Mary was part and parcel of the Faith. The local Council of the Lateran in the year 649 defined:

If anyone does not, according to the Holy Fathers, confess truly and properly that the holy and ever virgin and immaculate Mary is really and truly the Mother of God, inasmuch as she, in the fullness of time, and without human seed, conceived by the Holy Spirit, God the Word Himself, who before all time was born of God the Father, and without loss of integrity brought Him forth, and after His birth preserved her virginity inviolate, let him be condemned.¹²⁶

In the year 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council professed that Jesus Christ was “conceived from Mary ever Virgin with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit”.¹²⁷ In the year 1555, Paul IV condemned various heresies of the Unitarians and Socianians and in this context affirmed that Our Lady maintained intact her virginity “before the birth, during the birth and perpetually after the birth”.¹²⁸

St. Thomas Aquinas supplied four beautiful theological reasons why, without any hesitation, we must abhor the error that Christ’s Mother, after His Birth, was carnally known by Joseph, and bore other children. These reasons place the virginity of Our Lady after Christ’s Birth in a Christological perspective. For, in the first place, the error is derogatory to Christ’s perfection: for as He is in His Godhead the Only-Begotten of the Father, being thus His Son in every respect perfect, so it was becoming that He should be the Only-begotten son of His Mother, as being her perfect offspring. Second, this error is an insult to the Holy Spirit, whose “shrine” was the virginal womb, in which He had formed the flesh of Christ: it was unbecoming that this womb should be desecrated by intercourse with man. Third, this error derogatory to the dignity and holiness of God’s Mother: for thus she would seem to be most ungrateful, were she not content with such a Son; and were she, of her own accord, by carnal intercourse to forfeit that virginity which had been miraculously preserved in her. Fourth, it would be tantamount to an imputation of

126) Lateran Council (649), *Condemnatio errorum de Trinitate et de Christo*, canon 3 in DS 503.

127) Lateran IV, Chapter I on the Catholic Faith in DS 801.

128) Pope Paul V, Constitution *Cum quorundam hominum* in DS 1880.

extreme presumption in Joseph, to assume that he attempted to violate her whom by the angel's revelation he knew to have conceived by the Holy Spirit. St. Thomas concludes that the Mother of God, as she was a virgin in conceiving Him and a virgin in giving Him birth, did she remain a virgin ever afterwards.¹²⁹ The perpetual virginity of Mary is an expression above all of her intimate discipleship with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The consequences of a renewed affirmation of and a devotion to Our Lady's perpetual virginity would be an antidote to the errors and abuses concerning sexuality in the world today, a renewal of Holy Church and the restoration of the Catholic religion. Therefore, in order that this doctrine of the Faith be more fully appreciated, it is opportune that there should be instituted in the Universal Church a Feast of the Perpetual Virginity of Our Lady, to be celebrated each year on 15 December, the Octave of the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception.

129) Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q.28, a.3.