

"Born of the Virgin Mary..."

Why do Catholics say that Mary was always a virgin?

By Bishop Victor Galeone

Actually, it's not just Catholics who believe Mary was a virgin throughout her life. So does the Orthodox Church. And the Protestant reformers Luther and Calvin held the same belief. To understand why, let's go to Luke's gospel (1:26-38) where the Angel Gabriel tells Mary that she's going to have a baby. Her reaction was, "How can that happen since I don't know man?"

In Scripture, "to know man" is a euphemism for having sexual relations. Mary's question is somewhat strange, since we learned in verse 27 that she's engaged to be married to Joseph. Didn't they plan to consummate the marriage after their wedding?

To learn the answer, suppose that I offer you a beer (or a cigarette) and you reply, "Sorry, I don't drink/smoke." When do you plan to start? With your present mindset, never. Doesn't Mary's question fall into the same category? Did she ever plan to have marital relations?

The early church fathers concluded that Mary and Joseph had made a private vow to live as brother and sister after the wedding. (We know from the historian Josephus that members of the Essene Community, who lived around the time of Jesus, were celibate.) When Gabriel explained that she was to conceive through the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary gave her consent. And she remained a virgin for the rest of her life.

What about Jesus' brothers and sisters named in Mark 6:3?

In Hebrew, the word for brother ('AK) can mean blood brother, half-brother, stepbrother, uncle, nephew or cousin. The context must indicate the relationship. For example, Genesis 12:5 states that Lot is "the son of Abraham's brother," that is, his nephew. But in the next chapter, Abraham says to Lot, "Let us not quarrel, for we are brothers. " Besides, if Jesus had other siblings, why did he entrust Mary to the care of John while he was dying on the cross? Such an action would have been unthinkable if Mary had other children to care for her. So Jesus' siblings mentioned in Mark were probably his cousins.

But Matthew 1:25 says that Joseph had no relations with Mary until she gave birth to her son. Doesn't the "until" imply they had relations afterwards?

Not really. We're dealing with another Hebrew idiom. In English, what is said before until is usually not true afterwards: "I didn't drink until I was 21." But there are exceptions: "Behave yourselves until I get back." Does that mean the kids can tear the house apart once mother returns? Hebrew, however, stresses only what occurs before the until clause. What is said there may or may not be true afterwards. For example, 2 Samuel 6:23 states: "Michal had no children until the day she died." Are we to assume Michal bore children in the grave? So too, Matthew 1:25 is the Hebrew way of stressing that Joseph had no role in Jesus' conception.

What about Luke 2:7 which says, "She gave birth to her firstborn son." If he's the first , there must have been others after him.

Firstborn (*bekor*) in Hebrew was a technical term, conferring special legal status on the firstborn son. As St. Jerome explained in the fourth century: " Firstborn doesn't mean there were any later -born. It merely excludes any previous -born." Archeology has confirmed St. Jerome's statement. In 1922 a tombstone was unearthed in Egypt of a Jewish bride who had died in 5 B.C., with the inscription: "Fate has ended my life in the birth pangs of my firstborn son."

Why is there no mention of Jesus' virgin birth outside of the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke?

While there are no explicit references, there are some implicit ones. For example, in citing someone's human ancestry, St. Paul usually refers to the father alone, or in some cases, to both father and mother. The only exception occurs in Galatians 4:4. "Now in the fullness of time, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the Law..." Precisely when Paul reaches the end of Salvation History ("in the fullness of time"), he mentions only the mother of the promised Messiah - who is not linked to any human father. When the Messiah appears in our midst, he has only one Father (" God sent his Son"), and only one mother ("born of a woman ").

Also, Joseph, Mary's husband, is never mentioned in Mark's gospel. This is especially striking in the passage where Matthew and Luke have, "Isn't this the son of the carpenter (Mt)/Joseph (Lk)?" Instead, Mark has: "Isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary?"

Let us conclude this reflection with the opening lines of Wordsworth's sonnet, "The Virgin."

"Mother! whose virgin bosom was uncrossed
With the least shade of thought to sin allied;
Woman! Above all women glorified,
Our tainted nature's solitary boast..."