

## **VIRGINITY OF MARY**

Motherhood and virginity are inseparable in Mary. From the Apostles' Creed onwards the Church confesses her faith in Jesus Christ "born of the Virgin Mary".

-We place Mary's virginity in the wider context of the communion of God with his creatures: the Church sees in the virginal conception of Jesus through Mary the origin of our salvation: it is not the result of human efforts or potentialities, but God's exclusive gift through the Holy Spirit, beyond human possibilities, received I human freedom.

-In Mary's virginity we contemplate the creature's openness to God's word and grace, our total dependence on him and the fullness of response. So Mary becomes the model of the Church also as Virgin: the Church likewise gives life to the believers not through her own resources, but constantly receiving God's word through the Holy Spirit and clinging to him in single-minded consecration.

### **I. Virginity in the History of Religions**

In many cultures, virginity has religious significance. It is not merely a physical condition of young men or women who have not yet had sexual relations but expresses a purity which makes them more suitable for special religious functions. It implies self-control which is vital for spiritual growth.

-Virginity is frequently connected with mother-goddesses. It represents two apparently contradictory qualities: it first is fertility as yet untapped, in its original integrity. The Greek Artemis is virgin and at the same time goddess of fertility.

-The maid becomes a woman, Hera the Roman goddess is virgin, spouse and wife. Artemis is virgin and mother (Van Leeuw).

-Athene, the tutelary goddess of Athens, is the symbol of the personality, which is independent, self-derived and self-contained. Her virginity meant that she could consort with men as an equal and engage in masculine pursuits of war. But there is a coldness about her. Athene barely remembers that the city too, is dependent on nature and sexuality.

### **II. Christian Meaning of Virginity**

#### **a) Biblical Understanding**

Virginity has no place in the Old Testament. Virginity was equivalent with sterility.

In the NT, the meaning of virginity emerging is foreshadowed by the mysterious economy of sterile woman whom he makes fertile, God wishes to point out that the bearers of promise have not been raised up by normal procedure of fruitfulness, but by his powerful intervention.

-The ancestors of Jesus during the patriarchal period were sterile: Sarai, Rebecca, Rachel. Also, Samuel's mother, Hanna, and Elisabeth.

-If in the prophetic literature Israel is called "virgin", it is not meant as a title of glory but as an expression of the total dependence and reliance on Yahweh.

-Thus, the meaning of virginity in the OT is entirely different from that of the surrounding world: it is not presented as potential fertility, untapped fruitfulness; left to herself the virgin is powerless and sterile, but God can and will redeem her sterility with his power and love. It is a state of helplessness and total dependence on God.

-In the NT the meaning of virginity must be seen in this biblical context. It has nothing to do with ascetical continence or a negative attitude towards the body and sexual relations. "The goodness and value of sexual relations in marriage have never been in doubt as far as the Bible is concerned (Leon Dufour).

-Jesus himself speaks of those who remain unmarried for the sake of the kingdom (Mt 19:12) and of the possible conflicts between family ties and discipleship. In the NT virginity means the orientation of the whole person to this ultimate goal beyond the natural bonds of family.

-In continuity with the symbolism of Yahweh's union with Israel, virginity in the NT is first attributed to the Church. As Israel was sanctified through her union with Yahweh, so is the Church through union with Jesus: "Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25).

-This single-minded loyalty—virginity—is threatened by the allurements of a different (2 Cor 11:31): they should not be deceived as Eve was deceived by the serpent.

-So "It is they who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes" (Rev 14:4f). Virgins here mean not unmarried people, but those who have not been seduced by idolatry symbolized by adultery. In the text, virgins are those who follow the Lamb faithfully.

## **b) Virginité in Christian Tradition**

-In the patristic tradition virginity is understood primarily as a life of total commitment to God. Ambrose compares virgins to angels not because they are free from bodily desires but "because they are united to the Lord of angels". Virginity is how she is betrothed to God, a harlot one who makes gods".

-Thus, virginity is primarily adherence to God; bodily integrity is cherished as a sign of the virginal mind.

-In Justin's interpretation Eve ceases to be virgin not by her relation to man but by listening to the serpent: "For Eve, virgin and undefiled, conceived the word of the serpent and bore disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary received faith and joy when the angel Gabriel announced to her glad tidings that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her.

-The Magisterium of the Church sees the core of virginity in the total adherence to God: "This is the primary meaning of virginity, to strive only for the divine and to turn mind and soul to it; to desire to please God in all things, to be intent on him, to consecrate to him fully body and soul."

## **III. Mary's Virginité**

The biblical account and the theological understanding of Mary's virginity must be placed in a wider context: first of Mary's vocation, centered totally on Jesus Christ and, secondly, of the biblical understanding of virginity as total dependence on and faithful adherence to the Word of God.

-From the earliest creeds onwards, the Church confesses that Jesus is born of the Virgin Mary. She is called "ever virgin" already in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Council of Constantinople (553).

**=The conception of Jesus "without human seed, from the Holy Spirit" (virginité before Jesus' birth),**

**=She "gave birth to him with out corruption" (virginité in the birth),**

**= "Her virginity remained equally inviolate after the birth" (virginité after the birth).**

### **a) The Virginal Conception of Jesus**

"Jesus Christ, our Lord, who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated (horisthentos) Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead (Rm 1:3f). Jesus' coming, his power to fulfill the course of history in God's kingdom is seen as the work of the Holy Spirit.

-His origin is not from human generation; he is God's gift through the power of the Holy Spirit. On account of this origin from God "the child will be called Son of the Most High" (Lk 1:25).

-Also, Matthew's account of Jesus' origin contains the messianic mission. The child conceived by the Holy Spirit is to be called Jesus, Savior from sin (Mt 1:20f).

-Neither evangelist knew the other's infancy narratives, and the fact that a virginal conception through the Holy Spirit is one of the few points on which they agree means that this tradition antedated both accounts.

-Matthew adds nothing to the fact that Mary remained virgin. As he knows of the virginal origin of Jesus, he needs a special mandate given to Joseph to take Mary as his lawful wife so that, in Jewish understanding, Joseph would be legally Jesus' father linking him to David.

-Luke is concerned with Mary. The encounter with the angel in Nazareth is the central event in Mary's life.

-Mary's reservation in the dialogue with Gabriel that she cannot be mother as she has no husband, has often since Augustine been interpreted as indicating a vow of virginity by which she had bound herself. This interpretation is NOT suggested by the text. Such a vow would hardly be understandable in the Jewish social and cultural context of the village setting of Nazareth.

### **b) Modern Controversies About the Virginal Conception of Jesus**

The virginal conception of Jesus, narrated in the infancy accounts of Matthew and Luke, is unanimously taught in tradition: it is contained in the Creeds, is part of the formula of Chalcedon and repeated in later Councils. The doctrine was hardly challenged. This unanimity no longer exists today.

-The biblical accounts of Jesus' virginal conception are questioned on the following grounds: 1) The silence or ignorance of the early Christian documents: Paul knows of Jesus "born of a woman" but in no way indicates her virginal conception, and neither Mark nor John. 2) From early times there were different traditions about the origin of Jesus: The Ebionites, Jewish followers of Jesus, considered him a son of Joseph. Rumors persisted among the Jews that Jesus was Mary's illegitimate child. 3) Once Jesus was seen as Messiah and Son of God in the post-Easter theology of the community, his divine origin was projected back to his virginal conception. 4) The historical character of the infancy stories is doubtful; they do not belong to the original Christian message. 5) The origin of the accounts can be found in the widespread stories of virginal births in the Mediterranean mythologies from which they infiltrated into the gospels. 6) It is difficult to understand a genuine human development of Jesus and a true mother-child relationship of Mary towards Jesus, if from the beginning Jesus is the miraculously conceived child. 7) The doctrine has never been challenged seriously and analyzed scholarly till today.

1. The early Christian message in Paul and Mark comprised Jesus' public life. So, the infancy accounts have no place in it. However, it is remarkable that in Mark's Gospel Jesus is called the son of Mary (Mk 6:3). Normally sons are called in relationship to their father. Concerning John's Gospel, the reading of 1:13 remains controversial. A strong case can be made for reading it as referring to Jesus' virginal origin.

2. In general the Ebionites take a negative stand with regard to supernatural elements in Jesus' life.

3. & 4. The infancy narratives are admittedly not historical reports; their historical value differs from that of the bulk of the Gospels. As the two infancy accounts were composed independently of one another, these common features—among them the virginal origin of Jesus—point to a common source, not a theological but a historical tradition which, however, is not accessible to us. The intention of the authors to present the virginal conception as a fact, not a theological postulate, is generally acknowledged.

5. It would be difficult to understand how Jews, totally opposed to pagan mythologies, would explain the origin of the Messiah through a borrowed myth. Is 7:14 cannot be considered a source. The Hebrew original "almah" means a marriageable girl.

6) The virginal conception does not make Jesus less human. As to the genuine human growth of Jesus and his natural relationship to Mary, spiritual theology would tell us that mystical closeness to God does not interfere with human life and relationship.

7) The Church has taught the virginal conception of Jesus through the centuries and celebrates it in the liturgy.

-Does faith in Mary's virginity necessarily include the acceptance of her physiological virginity? In answering this question, we propose the following approach:

=With tools of historic research, it is impossible to reach the actual fact of Mary's virginal conception.

=The entire mystery of God's love and saving presence in our midst through Jesus Christ leads us beyond the closed cycles of scientific laws into the realm of God's love and freedom coming to us beyond human possibilities.

=If our understanding of Mary leaves out the body, Mariology becomes abstract. God speaks a fully human language: the Word became flesh.

=Even if Jesus' earthly life originated in an ordinary process of procreation, he is not less the gift of the Father, Savior, beginning of the new creation.

### **c) Mary's Virginity in the Birth of Jesus**

-**Ambrose's** application: "Which is this gate but Mary? Closed because virgin. Thus, the gate is Mary through which Christ entered the world in virginal birth when he was delivered and did not violate the enclosure of the virginal womb".

-**Augustine** uses another metaphor: "Jesus' coming to the disciples through closed doors: "The same who later brought the body of Jesus through close doors, brought the infant forth from the inviolate womb of the mother".

-Later it was also argued that Mary, on account of her freedom from original sin, was spared the pangs of childbirth which are the consequence of Eve's sin" (Gen 3;16).

+The unanimity of this tradition was shaken by modern authors with their more realistic approach to the sources: there is no biblical basis for the tradition of a miraculous birth. Positively it was argued that the mother's active part in giving birth is a constituent element of true motherhood. Today we feel inclined to follow serious research and not to postulate a miracle which is not attested by the Bible.

### **d) Mary's Virginity after the Birth of Jesus**

The Bible does not speak about Mary's virginity after Jesus' birth. We cannot postulate a vow of virginity implied in her response to the angel.

-Such expressions as: Joseph "knew her not until she had born a son..." (Mt 1:25) do not imply that afterwards she lived with Joseph. IN biblical language the "until" is only an emphasis on Mary's virginal conception of Jesus.

+We may find an indirect indication that Mary had no other children of her own in Jn 19:26. Before dying Jesus entrusts his mother to John; he would have entrusted her to her won son if there had been any!

-From the third century onwards Mary's continued virginity is universally taught. Also, the early Reformers accepted it.

+We are aware that in this process the mystery of Mary's virginity is in danger of degenerating into problems of biology and physiology. It is difficult to draw a line between revealed truth, pious reflection and unwarranted exaggerations. Christian faith should not be diverted from the divine mystery to frivolous curiosity.

#### **IV. The Church, Virgin and Mother**

-Mary is the model of the Church also as virgin. The saving mission of the Church has its origin in God's love. Through openness to God's word, responsive involvement, exclusive reliance on God, the Church follows Mary in her virginity.

-In the OT the symbolism of the virginal bride was developed in Israel's relation to Yahweh. The NT adopts the metaphor for the Church's relation to Jesus Christ.

-Vat II, The Church, the new Jerusalem, is "the spotless spouse of the spotless Lamb" whom Christ: "loved and for whom he delivered himself so that he might sanctify her whom he unites to himself by an unbreakable alliance and whom he constantly nourishes and cherishes...Christ loves the Church as his bride."

-**Cyprian** uses the metaphor to emphasize the need to adhere to the Church: "the bride of Christ cannot be defiled, she is inviolate and chaste...She keeps us for God, she seals for the kingdom the sons she has born. Whoever is separated from the Church and joined to the adulteress is separated from the promises of the Church.

-**Augustine:** The Church, like Mary, enjoys inviolate integrity and uncorrupted fecundity. What Mary merited physically the Church guarded spiritually with the difference that Mary brought forth one child while the Church has many children destined to be gathered into one body by One.

-**Vat II**, "The Church herself is virgin who keeps whole and pure the fidelity she has pledged to her spouse. Imitating the mother of her Lord and by the power of the Holy Spirit she preserves with virginal purity an integral faith, a firm hope and a sincere charity."

+The analogy Mary-Church is a balance to the institutional and organizational image of the Church. The virgin-spouse metaphor emphasizes the attitude of contemplative love, the need to be fed by the word of God and to keep the union with God as the ultimate goal of human life. In the Church the virginal adherence to God becomes a triple sign: "A sign of consecration as being set aside for the exclusive service of God; a sign of poverty as one who is called to accept only God's fullness; and a sign of the novelty of the kingdom which is coming to overturn the laws of natural creation" (M. Thurian).