

Homily for the 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 4, 2021

Mary, Ever Virgin

I have spoken before on the issue of Jesus' "brothers and sisters" but I think it deserves further exploration. It is a dogma of the Catholic Church that Blessed Mary remained a virgin before, during, and after the birth of Christ: that she is Ever Virgin (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 510).

However, many modern Christians think this teaching is contrary to explicit Scripture passages, such as the Gospel passage we read today (Mark 6:3), where Jesus' "brothers" are named and his "sisters" mentioned. It seems a no-brainer that Mary had other children. So why believe otherwise?

Well, because Mary's perpetual virginity has been a truth constantly and consistently held by the historic Christian faith – by Catholic but also Orthodox and Coptic churches – as well as by key Protestant figures like Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, Thomas Cranmer, Jeremy Taylor, and John Wesley.

The first time that it became an issue in the early Church was about 300 years after-the-fact, in the 4th century, when a person named Helvidius interpreted Jesus' "brothers and sisters" as other biological children to Mary.

The greatest biblical scholar of the day, St. Jerome, at first refused to even dignify Helvidius' claim with a response, calling it a "*novel, wicked, and a daring affront to the faith of the whole world.*" Notice St. Jerome considered it both "novel" (i.e., unheard of) and an "affront" (i.e., an insult) to the universal faith. He did not consider it just a difference of opinion on an unresolved or unimportant matter.

His disciples eventually convinced St. Jerome to write a refutation which he entitled, "The Perpetual Virginity of Mary." In it he says that the 2nd century writers Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus all held the same view as him.

Mary's perpetual virginity is not contrary to Scripture properly understood. This is one of those situations where Scripture without Tradition does not give a clear picture.

In biblical Hebrew and Aramaic (the common language of Palestinian Jews in Jesus' day) there was no word for "cousin" or "step-brother/step-sister." When such basic relational terms as "cousin" or "step-brother" do not exist in a language it is because what they *designated* was not considered important to that culture.

In ancient Israel, as still in much of the Middle East today, the nuclear family was not the norm. The extended family was. Kinsmen and even tribesmen were treated as part of "the family." In such a culture the terms "brother" and "sister" could refer to an immediate blood relation or more distant kin.

For example, in Genesis, Lot is called Abram's "brother" but he was actually his nephew (Gen 14:12, 16). Laban called Jacob his "brother" (Gen 29:15) but Jacob was his nephew (Gen 29:10).

So, the "brothers and sisters" of Jesus mentioned in the Gospels could either be cousins of Jesus (as is commonly held in the Western Church) or children of Joseph by a previous marriage – step-siblings – Joseph then being a widower (as is commonly held in the Eastern Church).^{*} But both agree, they are not Mary's biological children.

In point of fact, two of the four "brothers" of Jesus named in Mark 6:3 (James & Joses) are possibly mentioned in Mark 15:40 as sons of another Mary, the wife of Clopas. And this Mary, the wife of Clopas, we are told in John 19:25, is Jesus' mother's sister. Blessed Mary's sister.

Now, I don't think this is a case of "Daryl and his other brother Daryl." Obviously the two Mary's are related but not biological sisters. And the same has always been held of Jesus' "brothers and sisters." Hints of this can be found in the Gospels:

In Luke's Gospel (2:41-51) we have a description of the episode of Joseph and Mary taking Jesus to the Temple when He was twelve years-old. Everyone agrees that He was the first child of Mary, so if there were up to five or more siblings, why is there no hint of them at all in this account?

More significantly, when Jesus was dying on the cross in John 19:26-27 we hear Him committing His mother to the care of the apostle John.

Jesus certainly would not have done this if He had biological brothers who would be culture-bound to take care of their mother.

Finally, if Mary had not herself intended to remain a virgin, even after marrying Joseph, then it makes an important text in Luke's Gospel quite problematic. When the angel Gabriel appeared to her and announced she would conceive and bear a son, Mary asks the rather odd question, *"How shall this happen since I know not man?"* (Lk. 1:30-34).

Now we can legitimately assume that Mary was neither slow-witted nor naive. She was betrothed. Under ordinary circumstances their marriage would be consummated and children tend to naturally follow! Mary's question only makes sense if there was some impediment to her ever sexually knowing a man. A personal vow of virginity would be such an impediment.

This would also explain why Mary was not reprimanded for her question while Zechariah had just been punished for his (Lk. 1:18-20). Zechariah questioned how he and his wife could have a son at their advanced age? The Bible had previous examples of God miraculously allowing barren older wives to conceive (e.g., Sarah). Zechariah thus doubted what God had already previously demonstrated.

Mary on the other hand was a virgin. If she was going to remain a virgin then there was no scriptural precedent to fall back on for understanding. So rather than punish her question Gabriel answers it, since her question showed not doubt on her part but confusion.

Now one might ask, why is the Perpetual Virginity of Mary important? I would answer because of the importance of Mary's unique role in God's plan of salvation. Amongst all the billions of human beings who have ever lived, Mary alone was chosen by God to give the Second Person of the Holy Trinity His humanity; she became the mother of God incarnate.

Using Old Testament prototypes Mary can thus be understood as the personification of the Virgin-Daughter Zion (compare Zeph. 3:14-17 & Lk. 1:28-33) who represents the faithful remnant of Israel in whom God fulfilled all that He had promised. She is the "woman" referred to in Genesis 3:14-15 with whom the serpent is at enmity, and with "her seed." Mary is the Ark of the New Covenant (compare Ex 40:34 & Lk. 1:35; 2 Sam 6:9-15 & Lk. 1:43-44,56-57) containing within her sacred womb not symbols of God's presence – as in the original ark – but the actual presence of God Himself in Jesus Christ.

Mary is the "woman" who stood at the foot of the cross (the tree of life) and was given by Christ to be Mother of all His beloved disciples (Jn. 20:26-27); that is our mother. She is the prototype of the pure and spotless Church, the virgin Bride (see 2 Cor. 11:2, Eph. 5:27, Rev. 19:7), who is washed clean in the Blood of the Lamb.

As the poet William Wordsworth so eloquently put it, Mary is "our tainted nature's solitary boast."

* The well-known Protestant linguistic reference book, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* [by W. E. Vine], defines “*adelphos*” (the Greek equivalent to the English word “brother” and the word used in Mark 6:3 and elsewhere in the Gospels to refer to Jesus’ “brothers”) as follows:

Adelphos: denotes a brother, or near kinsman; in the plural, a community based on identity of origin or life. It is used of:

1. male children of the same parents . . .
2. male descendants of the same parents, Acts 7:23, 26; Hebrews 7:5; . . .
4. people of the same nationality, Acts 3:17, 22; Romans 9:3 . . .
5. any man, a neighbour, Luke 10:29; Matthew 5:22, 7:3;
6. persons united by a common interest, Matthew 5:47;
7. persons united by a common calling, Revelation 22:9;
8. mankind, Matthew 25:40; Hebrews 2:17;
9. the disciples, and so, by implication, all believers, Matthew 28:10; John 20:17;
10. believers, apart from sex, Matthew 23:8; Acts 1:15; Romans 1:13; 1 Thessalonians 1:4; Revelation 19:10 (the word sisters is used of believers, only in 1 Timothy 5:2) . . .

[Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Vol. 1, 154-155.]

It is evident, therefore, from the range of possible definitions of “*adelphos*,” that Jesus’ “brothers” need not necessarily be siblings of Jesus on linguistic grounds.