

With the upcoming solemnity of Mary, Mother of God it is perhaps a good time to say a few things about our Holy Mother, starting with the 4 Marian dogmas. A dogma is something revealed by God and proclaimed definitively through the teaching authority the Church, which our Lord Himself bestowed on His church. Thus, it is known with certainty, beyond any doubt or question, that these things about our Mother are true.

One is that she is the Mother of God. The title, reflecting the reality, of Mary as Mother of God was already in use in the early Church. In the early 400's, however, there was Bishop by the name of Nestorius who had been teaching falsely that Mary is not the Mother of God; he would refer to her only as the Mother of Christ. This was opposed especially by St Cyril of Alexandria. A council was held in the city of Ephesus where the heresy of Nestorius was condemned and Mary was solemnly proclaimed Theotokos – God-bearer, the Mother of God. This title is not just an honorary one for Mary. It goes also to the identity of Jesus as both fully God and fully man, united in a single person. The title of Mary as Mother of God does not mean that God was created in the womb of Mary or that God had a beginning or any other such thing. When a mother gives birth to a child, you don't say that she only gave birth to (is only the mother of) the child's body, not his soul, even though it was God who created the soul. That makes no sense because the body and soul form one person. The mother gave birth to one person. And so reflecting the reality that baby Joey is one person, you say that the mother gave birth to Joey; you don't say: she only gave birth to Joey's body. Did his soul come later??!! Of course not. Likewise, Jesus was a single person with 2 natures from the moment of His conception – Divine and human – and thus the one person that Mary gave birth to (Jesus) was/is God and thus Mary *must* be called the Mother of God. If that's not true, then we're not redeemed. Sin caused an infinite gap or debt between man and God and only an infinite being can pay an infinite debt. If Jesus is not one person, then His sacrifice does not have infinite value. We can see here, perhaps most of all, why it was so important for our Lord to create an infallible teaching authority for those who seek Him. Had Nestorius prevailed, with a "teaching" that seemed oh so reasonable, what God had revealed and set in stone would have been lost, even the reality of our redemption.

Before moving on, this title of Mother is a reminder of the words of our Lord on the Cross: woman, behold your son; son, behold your mother. From the beginning the Church has understood that our Lord was entrusting all the faithful to the care of His Mother, making her our Mother as well. As Mother, she seeks to make us brothers and sisters of her Son – she leads us to Him, obtaining from Him whatever is needed for that purpose.

While the reality of Mary as Mother of God does go to the identity of Jesus, at the same time, it is a title of distinction and importance for Mary, and it is related to other truths about her to be taken up now. The next definitive, revealed truth about Mary that the Church solemnly proclaimed is her perpetual virginity – virgin before, during, and after the birth of our Lord. Mary always did the will of God. So why did God will the perpetual virginity of Mary? The importance of Mary's virginity prior to the birth of our Lord is obvious – it goes to the identity of Jesus – no human man is His Father, He is God, begotten by God. But why her virginity after his birth? Given the emphasis it has received down through the centuries, it cannot be just a trivial fact. Doesn't this tell me something about how to live, how to think, act, and be, whether married or celibate?

St Thomas Aquinas takes up that question and states simply that it was fitting that nothing else enter the womb of Mary. As per usual, Aquinas is exceedingly compact! What he's saying is that the womb of Mary is sacred, set aside for God alone. One of the things that God is teaching us with Mary's perpetual virginity is that we need to have sacred things, things set aside for God alone. Remember that God does not need us to be fulfilled; He desires to be with us but He does not need us. Thus, whatever He tells us or does towards us is for *our* good, including having sacred things. It is for our good, it is part of our worship of God. As these "smaller" acts of worship are laid aside, God Himself is laid aside more and more. Because of the presence of Jesus in the Tabernacle, the church building itself is a very sacred place, especially the sanctuary. Yet how casually Catholic churches, including sanctuaries, are treated today. Don't complain about churches being empty or parishes being closed or people falling away. For a half a century now Catholics themselves have been telling everyone, with their actions, with a lack of reverent silence in the church, by treating even the sanctuary casually, that:

There's Nothing Special Here. Posting a sign that said so would be less effective than this casual treatment of our Lord in His own house. How sad it is to see our Lord treated so casually, thought of so little.

There are many who rail against the perpetual virginity of Mary. Undoubtedly that is partly because of the homage that modern man wants to pay to the god of sex. Such an example of chastity stands as too stark of a reminder of the virtue of chastity, like a glaring light in the face. But part of it too, is likely because modern man, including those who call themselves Christian, do not want the sacred. They will have no one, including the Son of God Himself, telling them how to worship God. They are, after all, gods unto themselves. Mary once again stands for the Kingdom of Humility; those who rail against the truth for the Kingdom of Pride.

There is more that Mary's perpetual virginity reminds us of and teaches us. In the Old Testament, sin is often referred to as harlotry. Idolatry especially is referred to as prostitution. But all sin has an element of idolatry because sin is a turning away from God. From personal introspection, we can perhaps see that in moments of sin, we prostituted ourselves in front of this or that worldly allurements. Sin is a breaking (or at least damaging) of the right relation with God; it is a breach in the union, in the union of wills, it is a breach with God. Sin, then, is indeed harlotry and virginity, its opposite, is the pure, unadulterated union with God and His will. With spiritual virginity, we find enduring intimacy, joy, happiness, peace, strength, confidence – all of the attributes which bring us fulfillment, contentment, and satisfaction. We find them in spiritual virginity because it is tantamount to right relation with God. Mary's physical virginity, then, is also a symbol of the greater spiritual virginity, the joys of which can be sought by all. St. Augustine also emphasizes spiritual virginity and ties it to spiritual "kinship" with Christ. Here too we can understand why the perpetual virginity of Mary provokes such an embittered reaction from the Kingdom of Pride – spiritual virginity (indeed genuine love) means putting the will of God, His commands, before my own desires. This cannot be in the Kingdom of Pride.

This spiritual virginity, and thus Mary's perpetual virginity, is reflected in the exclusivity of marriage as well. There are two senses in which the word exclusive can be understood. Exclusive could mean a "folding in" on one's self. If a married couple "loved" each other and nobody else, for example, that would be exclusive in this sense and would be detrimental. However, exclusive can also mean something more like: unique. In this sense, the husband and wife love each other in a *particular* way that is not meant to be shared with any other. This does not mean that they will not love anybody else but it *does* mean that this *particular* love relationship, this particular form of love, this particular love, will be between them and them only. In the same way, each person has an exclusive (unique) relationship with God which is shared by no other human being, and never will be. God's relationship with any particular individual, including saints, is absolutely unique and unrepeatable. Spiritual virginity is faithfulness to that relationship. Marriage is perhaps a dim view or form of that relationship here on earth, as is virginity consecrated to God. Both, however, demand faithfulness to their partner. Mary's perpetual virginity reflects all of these beautiful realities. Why the hatred of it?

Many Church Fathers, including the earliest Fathers like Ignatius of Antioch, spoke of Mary's perpetual virginity. Here is a quote from St. Jerome, Father and Doctor of the Church, who was well known for, let's say, not mincing words. St. Jerome was asked to refute the heretic Helvidius who denied the perpetual virginity of Mary. He said in his reply: "I was requested by certain of the brethren not long ago to reply to a pamphlet written by one Helvidius. I have deferred doing so, not because it is a difficult matter to maintain the truth and refute an ignorant boor who has scarce known the first glimmer of learning, but because I was afraid my reply might make him appear worth defeating," a quote simply too good to pass up!

The first two Marian dogmas – Mary is the Mother of God and Mary's perpetual virginity – both tie in very well with her Immaculate Conception. Mary's Immaculate Conception refers to her being conceived, in the womb of her mother (St. Ann), without the stain of original sin, and was perfectly free of even the slightest personal sin throughout her whole life. Mary had no stain of sin from the moment of conception. The truths about Mary all fit together to form a single whole. Would we expect anything else for God's tabernacle (Mary, the Mother of God)? Could true, consecrated, perpetual, spiritual virginity mean anything else? We will have to finish this topic of the great truths (dogmas) about our Mother another time. *God bless you and Happy New Year, Fr. Kuhn.*