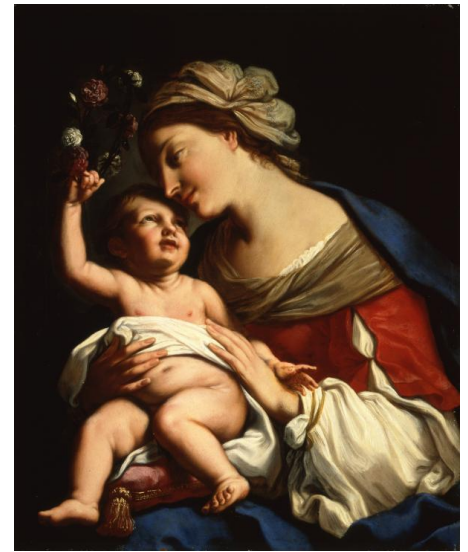


Mary: The Bible & the Mother of God – Class 5

- I. Jesus's celibacy reflects the fact that his mission is beyond this world (Luke 20:34-35)
- II. Mary's response: "How shall this be since I do not know man?" (Lk 1:34)
 - A. Response only makes sense if she doesn't intend to have marital relations with Joseph
 - B. Vows of abstinence for married women (Numbers 30:6-8)
 - C. Some first-century Essenes practiced abstinence in marriage
- III. "But knew her not until she had borne a son" (Matthew 1:25)
 - A. Greek word "until" does not imply a change in the situation
 - a. The Greek *heos* does not imply that Joseph and Mary had marital relations following Jesus' birth. This conjunction is often used (translated "to" or "till") to indicate a select period of time, without implying change in the future (2 Sam 6:23; Jn 9:18; 1 Tim 4:13). Here Matthew emphasizes only that Joseph had no involvement in Mary's pregnancy before Jesus' birth.
 - B. Matthew is making it clear that Jesus is not Joseph's son
- IV. The brothers of Jesus (Mark 6:3)
 - A. Greek can mean relatives / cousins; the meaning is determined by context
 - B. 1 Chronicles 23:21-22
 - C. Sons of a different Mary (see Mark 15:37)
- V. Mary's Perpetual Virginity
 - A. Jesus entrusts his mother to John because he has no brothers to take care of Mary
 - B. Mary's perpetual virginity was universally held from the earliest times
 - C. CCC, 499-500



Vows of Abstinence

Vows are not to be taken lightly. They are not simple statements of intention or ideas of what we would like to do or think we might do—they are solemn declarations of what we absolutely will or will not do. We consider vows to be binding. If we act contrary to a vow, we are not simply changing our mind—we are breaking a solemn promise. A vow can tell us a great deal about the person who makes it.

If Mary did indeed make a vow of virginity before her marriage to Joseph, as many commentators on the Annunciation have suggested throughout the last 2,000 years, that tells us a great deal about Mary's heart and intentions. But for many modern people, Christians and sceptics alike, the idea of a first-century Jewish girl getting married without the intent to consummate her marriage seems very strange. Yes, we have consecrated celibacy and virginity in various contexts today, but many of us don't expect to find that in the ancient world.

Consecrated virginity has existed in the Church in some form from the very beginning (see Matthew 10:12 and 1 Corinthians 7:1-9; Jesus and Saint Paul themselves are examples), but it was not a Christian invention. The Mosaic Law made provisions for both men and women to consecrate themselves to God in various ways, including temporary and long-term abstinence from marital relations.

Long-term vows of abstinence, even within marriage, were regulated by the laws given in Numbers 30. And at various times God commanded abstinence as preparation for particular purposes or events.

Periodic abstinence was an important part of the liturgical life of ancient Israel, and that some people—both men and women—would dedicate themselves to God in a particular way by taking a vow of abstinence. However, the laws in Numbers were given more than a millennium before Mary was betrothed to Joseph, and we know that first-century Jewish life and society were different in many ways from the first generations after the Exodus. So what evidence can we find for the practice of consecrated virginity in the first century?

There's no mention of vows of virginity in the Gospels, but we do find widespread celibacy and even abstinence within marriage in the Essene communities, which are well-documented by several ancient Jewish and Roman historians. The Essenes were a Jewish sect existing from the second century BC to the first century AD. They lived in communities throughout Palestine, and their best-known community was at Qumran on the Dead Sea.

The Damascus Document, part of the first-century Jewish writings known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, is a kind of rule of life for the Essene community. It contains a description of the community and general moral exhortations along with specific laws to govern the social relations within the community. Among those laws are descriptions of when and how a married couple would abstain from marital relations. This document shows that abstinence within marriage—specifically for religious reasons—was not unheard of among Jews in the first century.

That Mary made a vow of virginity prior to her marriage makes sense within her first-century Jewish context. But what bearing does this have on our lives today as Christians?

In modern Western society, celibacy and abstinence are often thought of only in the negative, that is, in terms of what they are not—celibacy is not being married, and abstinence is not having sexual relations. But the Church understands these in the positive sense as forms of the virtue of chastity.

The Catechism defines chastity as "the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being" as well as giving oneself as a gift in a way that "leads him who practices it to become a witness to his neighbor of God's fidelity and loving kindness" (CCC, 2337, 2346). All the baptized are called to live out this virtue. Those who are unmarried practice chastity by abstaining from sexual relations (also called continence), and those who are married practice chastity by fidelity to their spouse.

Mary's Response to the Archangel Gabriel

Our modern culture tries very hard to deny that marriage and having children are intrinsically linked. But first-century Jewish society clearly recognized this connection. Any young woman about to enter into marriage would almost certainly expect that having children was a likely part of her near future.

The Old Testament is full of comparisons between fertile and barren women. Consider the following passages: Genesis 16:1-6, Genesis 29:31-30:24, and 1 Samuel 1:1-8. What do these stories tell you about Jewish attitudes toward fertility and infertility?

Considering the great blessing that children were in Jewish society, we might reasonably expect that if a betrothed woman received an angelic message that she was soon to be a mother, she would respond with joy or relief—or at the very least, she would not be surprised.

But when Mary receives Gabriel's message, she responds almost exactly in the opposite way that we would expect. Although having children is a completely natural, beautiful, and expected result of getting married, and Mary is currently betrothed, she wonders how this will be possible for her.

The only logical reason for Mary to be surprised at the announcement of her impending motherhood is that she never expected to have children. And the only reason she would be so sure of not having children would be if she had taken a vow of virginity and therefore knew she would not consummate her marriage with Joseph. As Dr. Pitre explained in the teaching, scholars have understood this response to indicate a vow of virginity from the earliest days of the Church. This was the interpretation of the Church Fathers, and today not only Catholic but also Protestant scholars agree that this is the interpretation that makes the most sense.

[Mary was] a virgin who was consecrated to God, as is indicated by words with which Mary responded to the angel ... : 'How shall this be done, because I know not man?' And she certainly would not have responded in such a way if she had not already made a vow of virginity. —St. Augustine

It is always a good thing to be able to make sense out of surprising or confusing passages of Scripture. Mary's response to the Angel Gabriel's announcement indicates a previously made vow of virginity, and we have seen the precedent for such vows both in the Old Testament and in Mary's own day. But understanding Mary's response leads us to more than just a conclusion about an historical fact, however important. It illuminates a beautiful truth about God's plan for this woman who would become the mother of the Incarnate Word, and in doing so it offers us a model to follow in our lives, no matter what our vocation might be.

We cannot know Mary's exact reasons for making her vow, but obviously becoming the virgin mother of the divine Messiah was not what she had in mind. Nevertheless, as soon as she hears the angel's message, she says yes to God's plan—as surprising as it is. It is as if God is telling Mary, "You could not see it before, but it is for this great purpose that I moved you to make that vow." And Mary, in her humility, obedience, and above all her deep love for God, is willing to give herself completely to this new, bigger picture.

From this brief exchange—some of the only words of Mary recorded in Scripture—we learn perhaps the most important thing we could about her. Mary loves God wholeheartedly and single-mindedly. She epitomizes the beatitude "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). The Catechism explains this beatitude as referring to "those who have attuned their intellects and wills to the demands of God's holiness" specifically in the areas of charity, chastity, and love of truth (CCC, 2518). When we do this, as Mary clearly does, we are promised we shall see God face to face in Heaven, and even now we become able to "see according to God" (CCC, 2519). Mary's pure love for God enables her to see according to God and to his plan—and to assent to it.

Mary made both her vow of virginity and her fiat ("Let it be done to me according to your word") out of docility to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in her heart.