

THE EVER VIRGINITY OF THE MOTHER OF GOD

By Fr John Hainsworth

I. SOME INITIAL COMMENTS

A question often asked of the Orthodox is why they believe that Mary remained a virgin even after she gave birth to Jesus. In other words, why call Mary the *Ever-Virgin* Theotokos (Mother of God)?

A consistent and unbroken tradition

The question however should in the first instance be inverted. Why not believe in her ever-virginity? The Church's witness to this fact went largely un-disputed and assumed until late in the reformation in the West, and in the East until now, and even Luther and Calvin accepted the tradition. Indeed, to suggest

- that the tradition about her perpetual virginity should have been introduced later,
- that this tradition would have gone little noticed by a Church in the throes of questioning everything about what it believed in the first millennia,
- that such a novel tradition should be considered inconsequential enough to pass without discussion before it became universally proclaimed,
- and that such a tradition should have no discernable literary or geographical origin and yet be universally accepted as fact from very early in the Church's history,

is to suggest a very unlikely hypothesis.

How could Mary have been otherwise?

To argue against the Mary's perpetual virginity is to suggest another highly unlikely hypothesis, namely that both Joseph and Mary felt that it was appropriate to have sexual relations after the birth of the Son of God. This is highly unlikely, not because sexual relations are considered bad within marriage or because Christianity was considered the liberation from bodily things, but because no pious Jew of the first century would consider sex to be an option after so great a manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

An early first century popular rabbinical tradition concerning Moses and the burning bush (first recorded by Philo – 20BC – 50AD) claims that he 'separated himself' from Ziporrah his wife when he returned. Another rabbinical tradition concerns the choosing of the elders of Israel in Numbers 7 and relates how after God worked among them, one was reported to have said, "Woe to the wives of these men". Whether these rabbinic stories reflect actual events or not, they nevertheless express the piety popular in Israel at the time of the birth of Christ, a piety which understood virginity and abstinence not as a mere negation of something enjoyable, but as part of the joyful path of one whose life has been consecrated by the Lord's Spirit to be a vessel of salvation to His people. Several

centuries of social, religious, and philosophical modernity have made us suspicious of virginity and chastity in a way that no one in the Lord's time would have been, and it is predictable that objections should be raised about Mary's virginity in step with the rise of the Enlightenment and the Modern world.

In Mary's case, becoming the vessel for the Lord of Glory Himself, and carrying to term in the flesh Him whom heaven and earth cannot contain, surely would have been grounds to consider her life, including her body, as fully consecrated to God and sexual relations as unthinkable. Even in the comparatively minor (and strikingly parallel) incident of the Lord's entry through the East gate of the Temple in Ezekiel 43-44, prompts the call: "This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it, for the LORD God of Israel has entered by it; therefore it shall be shut" (44:2).

With respect to Joseph, surely a Virgin birth, several miraculous dreams, and gazing upon God incarnate in the face of Jesus Christ would have been enough to convince him of the magnitude of the Holy Spirit's presence and work in his life and marriage. If Uzzah could not touch the Ark even to save it from falling, if the High Priest could only enter the Holy of Holies once a year, if even the scrolls containing the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets were venerated, then surely Joseph, man of God that he was, would not have dreamed of approaching Mary, the chosen of Israel, to have sex with her.

For many, however, no argument is made beyond the fact such a tradition belongs to the Catholic tradition of the West (and Orthodox tradition of the East) and therefore is suspect along with its source. For others, protestations against the tradition are based upon the witness of the Scriptures, and it is this witness which is the primary focus of what follows.

II. SEVERAL PRINCIPLE OBJECTIONS

Scripture states that the Lord had "brothers"

The first question usually concerns the passages of Scripture which state explicitly that the Lord had 'brothers'. There are nine of these passages, and they are given below:

Matthew 12:46-47 While He was still speaking to the multitudes, behold, His mother and brothers were standing outside, seeking to speak to Him. And someone said to Him, "Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside seeking to speak to You."

Mark 3: 31-32 And His mother and His brothers arrived, and standing outside they sent *word* to Him, and called Him. And a multitude was sitting around Him, and they said to Him, "Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are outside looking for You."

Luke 8: 19-20 And His mother and brothers came to Him, and they were unable to get to Him because of the crowd. And it was reported to Him, "Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, wishing to see You."

John 2: 12 After this He went down to Capernaum, He and His mother, and His brothers, and His disciples; and there they stayed a few days.

John 7: 3 - 5 His brothers therefore said to Him, "Depart from here, and go into Judea, that Your disciples also may behold Your works which You are doing. "For no one does anything in secret, when he himself seeks to be *known* publicly. If You do these things, show Yourself to the world." For not even His brothers were believing in Him.

Acts 1: 14 These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with *the* women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

1 Corinthians 9: 5 Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles, and the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas?

Matthew 13: 55-56 "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then *did* this man *get* all these things?"

Mark 6:3 "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James, and Joses, and Judas, and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?" And they took offense at Him.

The use of the word 'brothers' by the Evangelists does not, of course, prove or disprove either side to this debate. If the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures used by the Apostles – abbreviated LXX) have special words for "cousin", notably *adelphinos* and *anepsios*, they are rarely used (not at all in some versions of the LXX), whereas the word *adelphos*, which can mean 'brother', 'cousin', 'kinsperson', 'fellow believer', 'fellow countrymen', is used consistently throughout the LXX, even when cousin or kinsman is clearly the relation (such as in Gen. 14:14, 16; 29:12; Lev. 25:49; Jer 32:8; Jer 32:9; Jer 32:12; Tob 7:2; etc.). Lot, for instance, who was the nephew of Abraham (cf. Gen 11:27-31) is called his brother in Gen 13:8 and 11:14-16. The point is that the commonly used Greek word for a male family relation, *adelphos*, can be translated 'cousin' *or* 'brother', if no specific family relation is indicated.

But is there a specific family relation indicated? In other words, is there a clear statement in the Scriptures linking the Lord's brothers as children of the Lord's mother, making them full brothers and not just cousins or other near relations? In fact, there is not. Nowhere is Mary explicitly stated to be the mother of His brothers. "His mother and His brothers" seems to be the formula (in Mark the possessive, *anavtoul-* 'of Him', is inserted

before *both* His mother and His brothers, indicating a clear differentiation). In Acts 1:14, the separation is even more pronounced, where we read the disciples who were gathered included “Mary the mother of Jesus, and His brothers”. Here the Greek does not allow a maternal association of the Mother of Jesus and the His brothers, but seems rather to force the comma to reflect the emphasis, and in some manuscripts includes the conjunctive, *syn* – ‘along with’, in company with’, so that the text reads “Mary the mother of Jesus, along with His brothers.” In any case, as Mary is never identified as the mother of Jesus’ brothers (nor they as her children), but only as the Mother of Jesus, no evidence can be drawn from the passages listed above.

One of the main places where we might expect to find explicit mention of Mary’s other children is in the temple incident recorded by Luke. Here, the Lord accompanies His parents on their yearly journey to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. Note, however, that when His parents realize that He is not with them in the caravan, they are said to have looked for Him “among their relatives and acquaintances” (2:44), not among their ‘children’ and acquaintances. If Mary did have four more sons and several daughters (many of whom would have to have been born by the time the Lord was twelve years old), the word ‘children’ would have been more appropriate. Certainly there were other children in the caravan for the oversight and the subsequent search to make sense, but they were relatives, as the Scripture states, and most likely included at least James and Joses.

Matthew 1:25 – Scripture says Joseph knew her not “until” she gave birth

Another objection to Mary’s continued chastity following the birth of the Messiah concerns the use of the words “until” in Matthew 1:25 and “firstborn” in Luke 2:7. In the case of the word “until”, a reliable case can hardly be made. To begin with, why Joseph would see fit to keep her a virgin just until she gave birth and not afterwards as well (when the full revelation of just WHO she bore in the flesh was made manifest to him), seems inexplicable. However, should one persist in arguing this point, the word “until” denotes, unlike in English, no fixed limit. Fr William Most, in a short article, “Brothers and Sisters of Jesus” points out that

most ancient words have a broad span of possible meanings. Sometimes the word for until leaves room for a change after the time point indicated. However not nearly always. In Dt. 34:6 Moses was buried, "and to this day no one knows where the grave is." That was true in the day of the writer of Dt- it is still true even today. In Psalm 110:1, as interpreted by Jesus Himself (Mt.22-42-46), "The Lord said to my [David's] Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'" Of course, Jesus was not to stop being at the right hand of the Father at any point. So the word until here does not mean a change of status. Psalm 72:7, a messianic Psalm, says that in his days "peace will abound until the moon is no more." Again, the power of the Messiah is not to stop when the moon no longer gives its light (Mt.24:29). In 2 Samuel 6:23 that David's wife Michal had no son until the day of her death." Of course, she did not have one after that! In Mt. 11:23 Our Lord says that if the miracles done in Capernaum had been done

in Sodom, "it would have lasted until the present day." Had it lasted, Jesus did not intend to destroy it in His time. In Mt 28:20 Jesus promised to be with His Church, His followers until the end of the world - nor would He desert them in eternity. In Romans 8:22 St. Paul says that all creation groans, waiting for the revelation of the sons of God until Paul's day. Nor did it stop then, that will continue until the restoration at the end. In 1 Timothy 4:13 the Apostle tells Timothy to devote himself to reading, exhortation and teaching "until I come." He did not mean Timothy should stop such things when Paul did come.--and there are more, but these should be more than enough to show that not always does until in OT and NT, mean a change of things is to come at the point referred to.

Luke 2:7 – Jesus is called “firstborn”

With regards to any objections that might be raised with the word, “firstborn” (Greek, *prototokos*), it should be pointed out from the outset that this is more of a technical term than a way to number one’s children. Indeed, the use of the word does not mean or demand that there was a “Second-born”. In Hebrews 1:6, for instance, it is impossible that the application of ‘first-born’ (*prototokos*) in reference to the Incarnation of the Word of God could imply that there would be a ‘second-born’ Word of God, effectively another incarnation of another Son of God. More to the point, ‘Firstborn’ denotes an ‘heir’, and is a title of privilege and responsibility with legal and social ramifications, and it is used as such in this passage, just as throughout the New Testament. Nowhere is the term used to express merely the order of birth; instead in Romans 8:29, Colossians 1:15, Colossians 1:18, Hebrews 11:28, Hebrews 12:23, and Revelation 1:5, the title is applied to Jesus as the privileged and legal heir of the Kingdom and the Church as reflected and ratified in the fact that He is truly first in all things.

Clearly there exists no Scriptural testimony to Mary’s having borne more children after Jesus. There does exist, however, enough Scriptural information to sketch out a probable relationship between the Lord and His brothers, and it is here that we will now turn.

III. WHAT THE SCRIPTURES DO TELL ABOUT THE LORD’S FAMILY

The perpetual virginity of our Lord’s mother (her virginity after Christ’s Birth) is not only established in Tradition and confirmed by early Church history, but it is also witnessed to by Holy Scripture.

“Woman, behold thy Son”

In the first instance, consider the moving passage from St John’s Gospel in which our Lord commits His Mother into the care of St. John as He dies on the Cross, and not into the care of one of His “brothers” (Jn 19:26-7). This action is simply inexplicable if Mary had other children (and the more so if one of them, James, would soon see the resurrected Christ and even go on to be Bishop of Jerusalem - 1 Cor. 15:7, Acts 12:17, 15:13ff). Jewish custom dictated that the care of the mother would fall to the second born if the first born dies, and if the widow had no other child she would be left to her own defenses.

Not having other children, Mary is given into the care of the Beloved Disciple by her only Son.

The Women at the Cross & the Identity of the Brothers of the Lord¹

However, we can gain more insight into the relationships within the Lord's family by a careful examination of the identity of the Women at the Cross.

In **Mt 27:55-56** the women at the Cross were said to be:

- 1) Mary Magdalene;
- 2) the mother of the sons of Zebedee;
- 3) Mary the Mother of James and Joseph.

In the parallel passage in **Mk 15:40-41**, the women are said to be

- 1) Mary Magdalene;
- 2) Salome;
- 3) Mary the mother of James the less (Greek – mikros) and of Joses.

In **Jn 19:25**, the women are listed as

- 1) Mary Magdalene;
- 2) Christ's mother;
- 3) His mother's sister, Mary wife of Clopas. *(This listing presupposes that St John means "His Mother's sister, that is Mary wife of Clopas" so that "His Mother's sister" and "Mary wife of Clopas" are the same person and not two different people. This reading seems certain, for St John would surely not mention "His Mother's sister" without giving her a name; nor would he mention the otherwise unknown "Mary wife of Clopas" without saying why this person was listed. Thus it is well-nigh certain that "His Mother's sister, Mary wife of Clopas" is a description of one person, not two.)*

For our purposes we should focus on the woman who is referred to by St Matthew as "Mary the mother of James and Joseph", by St Mark as "Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses [a variant of Joseph]", and by St John in his list as "His Mother's sister, Mary wife of Clopas". Note that in Matthew the names "James and Joseph" were mentioned before. Indeed, the way Matthew mentions "Mary mother of James and Joseph" in 27: 55-56 presupposes that he has already introduced this "James and Joseph" – as indeed he has. In Mt 13:55, we read that our Lord's "brothers" are "James and Joseph and Simon and Judas". Similarly, in St Mark's Gospel, "James and Joses" are mentioned as if we know who "James and Joses" are, which in fact we do from Mk 6:3, where Christ's "brothers" are listed as "James and Joses and Judas and Simon". It seems beyond reasonable dispute that the Mary at the Cross in St Matthew and St Mark is the mother of our Lord's "brothers", "James and Joses". Also, it is inconceivable that

¹ I am gratefully indebted to Fr Lawrence Farley's article, 'The Women at the Cross'.

Matthew and Mark would refer to the Lord's Mother at the foot of the Cross as the mother of James and Joseph, but not mention that she is the Mother of Jesus as well, or just as the Mother of Jesus, as John does!

If it is the case, as the Scriptures suggest, that Mary wife of Clopas is the same as the mother of James and Joseph, we have the following conclusion: the Theotokos had a "sister", married to Clopas, who was the mother of "James and Joseph", our Lord's "brothers". Here, the question ought to immediately arise concerning the Theotokos' relationship to Mary; what kind of "sister" is she? Hegisippus, a Jewish Christian historian who, according to Eusebius, "belonged to the first generation after the apostles" and who interviewed many Christians from that apostolic community for his history, relates that Clopas was the brother of St Joseph, foster-father of Christ (apud. Eusb. Eccl. H. iv:22) If this is so (and Hegisippus spoke to the original witnesses and is acknowledged as a fully reliable and orthodox Church writer), then "Mary wife of Clopas" was the Virgin Mary's "sister" in that she was her sister-in-law.

The puzzle therefore fits together completely. St Joseph married the Virgin Theotokos, who gave birth to Christ, her only Son, preserving her virginity and having no other children. St Joseph's brother, Clopas, also married a woman named Mary who had the children "James and Joseph" (along with Judas and Simon, and daughters also). These children were our Lord's "brothers" (using the terminology of Israel, which made no distinction between brothers and cousins but referred to all as "brothers"). St Matthew and St Mark, focusing on our Lord's family (Mt 13:53ff and Mk 6:1ff) naturally refer to Clopas' wife Mary as "the mother of James and Joseph (Joses)". St John, on the other hand, focuses on our Lord's Mother (cf. JN 2:1ff) and just as naturally refers to this same woman as "His Mother's sister, Mary wife of Clopas". But it is apparent that it is one and the same woman being referred to by all.

The point is this: our Lord's "brothers" are evidently not the children of the Virgin Mary. Against this, no argument that is reasonable as well as Scriptural can be made; protestations arising from reformational antiquity are simply unnecessary. The second point, that the Lord's brothers are from His mother's sister-in-law, Mary of Clopas, is the best solution given the Scriptural and historical evidence. Other theories exist, of course. There is the Apocryphal theory (it is derived mainly from the Protoevangelium of James and from the Death of Joseph and is passingly mentioned by Origen, Epiphanius, and a couple of other Greek Fathers, as well as Hilary, Ambrose, and Gregory of Tours. The claim is that the brothers are the step-brothers of Jesus of a previous marriage on Joseph's side. This has the advantage that it distinguishes between Mary of Clopas and Mary, the Mother of Jesus, but it also has the fatal disadvantages that we would then have to identify Joseph with Halpahi (Cleophas) and explain how it is that Mary of Clopas (his first wife) is still alive during the Crucifixion, standing alongside Mary the Mother of Jesus no less. Another theory, namely of Jerome and a few other Latin Fathers, is that the brothers are first cousins of Jesus on Mary's side. There are several serious objections to be made of this theory, one of which is that this gives Mary a sister also named Mary, which is highly unlikely. For these reasons (and for more) the only fully supportable family tree left is that which we have outlined above.

III. WHY MARY'S EVER-VIRGINITY IS IMPORTANT?

Initially, we suppose, because it is the truth. However, the fact that this tradition is true or that her ever-virginity is a part (however small or large) of the full Apostolic Faith, part of what makes the Orthodox orthodox, hardly seems to matter in this bottom-line world. But we can not pick and choose our Christianity – the orthodoxy of our faith depends upon the totality of our faith being upheld and proclaimed. To be sure, many divisions from the church have and do state that Mary had children after Jesus, but in most cases such a belief is assumed without investigation and arises from a Protestant reaction to alleged Catholic excesses in general, but in all cases such a belief is espoused by churches which have been formed sixteen centuries after the foundation of the Church by Christ and always with a theological emphasis or bias which *de facto* excludes such a church from representing the fullness of the orthodox faith. A church in which men pick and choose what to believe, however inspired the choices, cannot be said to be the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church for which the apostles blood was spilled, in which the Scriptures were written and handed down and by which the creed was written and defended. This is of course an argument for Orthodoxy in general, but as has been noted, Mary's ever-virginity is a part of the larger Orthodox tradition and cannot be summarily discarded without weakening the integrity of the whole.

Even so, many would say that Mary's ever-virginity is not essential to the proclamation of the Gospel, and, to some extent, this is true. Essentially, the Orthodox Church proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is our message, our reason for being, the very life of our life. Teaching about Mary is meant for the initiates, those who have accepted the Gospel and have committed themselves to Christ and to service in His Church. This is so because what Mary teaches us about the Incarnation of the Word of God requires that we first accept the Incarnation. Once we do, then not only her virginity after birth, but also before, and indeed the character of her entire life become in themselves an inexhaustive and matchless teaching about life in Christ and the Glory of God. Indeed, she said as much herself. By stating that "All generations shall call me blessed," Mary was not so much singling herself out for special veneration – this was not a moment of vanity – but was saying that by virtue of what God has done through her life she would become a witness and occasion for praise of God's glorious victory in His Christ.

What we learn from Mary's virginity after the birth of Messiah is manifold. Initially, we learn that life in Christ is perfectly fulfilling in itself. Mary did not have to have a sexually active life, or more children, to be totally satisfied, completely fulfilled. Families, careers, money, reputation, success and even failure of any kind, are not necessary for a truly joyful and complete life on earth. Christ came to give life and that more abundantly, and said that believing in Him would bring from our innermost being "a well of water springing up to eternal life" (Jn 4:14). In as much as we give birth to Christ in our own life, and follow Him even to the Cross ourselves, we will understand why Mary did not need to have more children, or success, or certainly a good reputation – we will understand and share in Mary's matchless joy. We will see that her perpetual virginity is just an expression of her perpetual joy – her ever-virginity is her ever-fulness, her ever-fulfillment.

On a more abstract, theological level, we learn that Mary was not a happenstance vessel of God, but that her role in our salvation was prepared from the beginning of the ages, that she was a fore-ordained vessel of God, born for a single purpose. Her virginity after Jesus emphasizes this uniqueness. The whole history of Israel, the patriarchs, the psalms, the prophets, the giving of the commandments, all reached to form the woman who would answer in exactly the way all Israel should have always answered, as we all are expected to answer now, “Behold the handmaiden of the Lord...” But having done so, and having flowered from her perfect stalk the Christ, the bloom of our salvation, she did not become useless, her purpose fulfilled and discarded. Rather, her purpose in salvation history would only continue and increase in that her whole being and life would point us without distraction to her Son. At the wedding of Cana in Galilee, thirty or so years after her Son’s birth, she would express it wonderfully, “Whatever He says to you, do it” (Jn 2:5); at her Son’s crucifixion, she would embody it in standing with John at the foot of the Cross. Icons of Mary in the Orthodox Church almost invariably present her with her Son as a child in her arms: He is blessing us, she is pointing to Him. Again, as we undertake to embody this purpose of always pointing to God through our life and deeds, we will begin to see in the same measure that her perpetual virginity is an expression of her perpetual purpose – her ever-virginity is in fact her ever-ministry, the ideal example of our own.

Examples of what Mary, and specifically her ever-virginity, teaches us about the glory of God and about life in Christ could be outlined *ad infinitum*. The purpose here has been just to show that this tradition of the Church is not without proof, scriptural or logical, and it is certainly not without benefit to the Orthodox Christian. Recent Christian history has consistently over-looked Mary and her role in history (perhaps because some have over-extended her role too), and it is important to recover the proper veneration of Mary which the apostolic Church has always held, not because Mary is the great exception but, as one Orthodox theologian has said, because she is the great example. Such veneration, and the reasons for it, is wonderfully expressed in an Orthodox hymn which poetically recounts Gabriel’s first encounter with Mary, who was about to become the ark of the new Covenant, the throne of God, the flesh which gave flesh to the Word of God:

Awed by the beauty of your virginity
and the exceeding radiance of your purity,
Gabriel stood amazed, and cried to you,
‘O Mother of God’, by what name shall I call you?
I am lost and bewildered,
but I shall greet you as I was commanded:
Rejoice, you that are full of grace.’