

## Marian Studies

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Volume 58 *The Virginity of Mary*

Article 9

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2007

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### Recommended Citation

Trouvé, Marianne (2007) "The Virginity of Mary and Joseph in Light of the Theology of the Body," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 58, Article 9. Available at: [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian\\_studies/vol58/iss1/9](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol58/iss1/9)

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THE VIRGINITY OF MARY AND JOSEPH IN LIGHT  
OF THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY

*Sr. Marianne Trouvé, F.S.P.\**

*1. If Mary and Joseph had a real marriage, why was it virginal?*

If we maintain that Mary and Joseph had a real marriage, why did they not have sexual relations, since that is of the essence of marriage? What meaning does their virginal marriage have? The themes that John Paul II developed in his theology of the body can shed much light on this question.

*2. The concept of the "gift" captures the essence of the Theology of the Body.*

At the heart of the message of the Theology of the Body, we find the concept of "the gift." In the introduction to his new translation of John Paul's talk, Michael Waldstein quotes Pascal Ide and says, "one can condense the whole argument of TOB [Theology of the Body] in the statement, 'Gift expresses the essential truth of the human body.'"<sup>1</sup> Waldstein then quotes St. Therese of Lisieux, "To love is to give everything and to give oneself," and he further states, "Her axiom can serve as a guiding star for the voyage through TOB."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 124.

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 124.

*3. What does John Paul II mean by the “gift”?*

In brief, God himself is the ultimate Gift, found in the life of the Trinity. In the communion of love among the three Persons, there is a Gift that surpasses our understanding. God created the human race as an expression of that love that pours itself out in gift. Freely receiving God’s love, each human person is in turn called to make a gift of self in love to others.

*4. The “gift” has a spousal meaning.*

This giving and receiving of one’s self creates a communion of persons. There are many ways in which we can show love through our bodies, but the most significant expression of this gift of self is found in married love, in the “one flesh” union by which spouses totally give of themselves to the other. At this level, the “sincere gift of self” takes on a spousal meaning. As John Paul says, “One can understand this ‘spousal’ meaning of the human body only in the context of the person. The body has a ‘spousal’ meaning because the human person, as the Council says, is a creature that God willed for his own sake and that, at the same time, cannot fully find himself except through the gift of self.”<sup>3</sup>

*5. Spousal love is not inferior.*

By framing the matter in this way, John Paul II banishes any idea that sex is somehow less good than celibacy. So the reason that Mary and Joseph did not engage in marital relations is definitely not because sexual union is somehow inferior or to be looked down upon. Not at all. John Paul wants to remove any traces of a Manichaean attitude that would look down on the body with contempt and disdain.

*6. We “receive” the gift.*

One further point here is that the concept of the gift is opposed to the concept of grasping for oneself. Since life and

<sup>3</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 189 (TOB15:5), citing *Gaudium et Spes*, 24:3.

all good things come to us as gifts of God, our essential posture is one of receiving those gifts. Of course, as free and responsible persons we should take the initiative and work for things. But that is always to be done within the framework of God's law and plan for our lives. Once we step outside that and start to "grasp" for ourselves by taking things outside of moral constraints, we are "grasping."

### *7. Mary and Joseph had a real marriage.*

In *Guardian of the Redeemer* Pope John Paul II says that Mary and Joseph had a real marriage. It was not just a pious fiction in order to somehow legitimize Jesus. He writes, "And while it is important for the Church to profess the virginal conception of Jesus, it is no less important to uphold Mary's marriage to Joseph, because juridicially Joseph's fatherhood depends on it." Then he quotes St. Augustine: "In Christ's parents all the goods of marriage were realized—offspring, fidelity, the sacrament: the *offspring* being the Lord Jesus himself; *fidelity* since there was no adultery; the *sacrament*, since there was no divorce."<sup>4</sup>

### *8. Why was it virginal?*

Yet for Mary and Joseph, this expression of love did not include the "one flesh" union. Pope John Paul clearly maintains that Mary and Joseph had a virginal relationship. And that virginal relationship entailed a fully spousal gift of self. What is the significance of this? John Paul's thoughts about continence for the sake of the kingdom can shed light on this question.

### *9. Marriage and continence shed light on each other.*

In the Theology of the Body catechesis, John Paul II dedicates an entire section to speaking on the mystery of continence for the sake of the kingdom. The two realities of continence and

<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, "Guardian of the Redeemer = Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptoris Custos* . . . on the Person and Mission of Saint Joseph in the Life of Christ and of the Church" (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1989), no. 7.

marriage shed light on each other. He speaks of marriage as a “primordial sacrament” and also as the “sacrament of creation.” Marriage continues the work of creation through the gift of children. Spouses become co-creators with God when children are born through their loving union. Marriage is also tied up with the salvific work of God, for the children born of it are called to eternal life.

*10. The “great mystery” of Ephesians 5 refers to both marriage and continence.*

In Ephesians 5, St. Paul speaks of marriage as a “great mystery,” adding, “I mean in relation to Christ and to the Church.” The “great mystery” refers to God’s eternal plan of redemption in Christ. The Father sends the Son into the world in order to redeem it and lead us to union with the Trinity. God poured his love out entirely for humanity through Christ’s death on the cross. This total and complete self-giving love is the extreme expression of God’s love for us and is the paradigm of spousal love, of giving one’s life for one’s spouse. The purpose of Christ’s death was to lead us to eternal life, when we will enjoy the fullness of union with him. The marital union on earth is a symbol of the union that we will have with God in heaven. In eternal life, marriage and sexual union will give way to this totally beatifying union with God in love, and through him with all the other persons united to him. The text of Ephesians 5:22-25 “is equally valid both for the theology of marriage and for the theology of continence ‘for the kingdom,’ the theology of virginity or celibacy.”<sup>5</sup>

*11. Continence for the sake of the kingdom is a charismatic sign of eternal life.*

On earth, however, there are some whom God calls to sacrifice marriage and embrace continence for the sake of the

<sup>5</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 435 (TOB 79:7).

kingdom of heaven. This is not because marriage is thought of as less good; we can only sacrifice something if it is good. It would be meaningless to speak of sacrificing something that is not a good, that is burdensome for us.

The purpose of foregoing marriage for the sake of the kingdom is to witness here on earth to the promise of eternal life. Continence anticipates that time when God will be “all in all.” Continence has an eschatological quality.

### *12. Continence has a spousal meaning.*

The meaning of continence flows from the spousal nature of the person. When God calls someone to this vocation, he calls them precisely as persons who, as male or female, are called to make a “sincere gift of themselves” in a spousal way. This gift is realized differently in continence than in marriage. “Man (male and female) is able to choose the personal gift of self to another person in the conjugal covenant, in which they become ‘one flesh,’ and he is also able to *renounce freely* such a gift of self to another person, in order that by choosing continence ‘for the kingdom of Heaven’ he may give himself totally to Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

### *13. In their marriage, Mary and Joseph lived out both aspects of this spousal love.*

In sum, the nature of the one as well as the other love is “spousal,” that is, expressed through the complete gift of self. The one as well as the other love tends to express that spousal meaning of the body, which has been inscribed “from the beginning” in the personal structure of man and woman.<sup>7</sup>

Mary and Joseph were called to both aspects of spousal love because of their unique role in the Incarnation.

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 439 (TOB 80:6).

<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 431 (TOB 78:4).

*14. Mary and Joseph lived out the "fruitfulness of the Spirit."*

Only Mary and Joseph, who lived the mystery of his birth, became the first witnesses of a fruitfulness different from that of the flesh, that is, the fruitfulness of the Spirit. "What is begotten in her comes from the Holy Spirit" (Mt. 1:20).<sup>8</sup>

*The marriage of Mary with Joseph* (in which the Church honors Joseph as Mary's spouse and Mary as his spouse) *conceals within itself*, at the same time, the *mystery* of the perfect communion of persons, of Man and Woman in the conjugal covenant and at the same time the mystery of this *singular "contenance for the kingdom of heaven"*: a continence that served the most perfect "*fruitfulness of the Holy Spirit*" in the history of salvation. Indeed, it was in some way the absolute fullness of that spiritual fullness, because precisely in the Nazarene conditions of Mary's and Joseph's covenant in marriage and continence, the gift of the incarnation of the Eternal Word was realized: the Son of God, consubstantial with the Father, was conceived and born as a Man from the Virgin Mary. The grace of hypostatic union is connected, I would say, precisely with this absolute fullness of supernatural fruitfulness, fruitfulness in the Holy Spirit, shared by a human creature, Mary, in the order of "contenance for the kingdom of heaven." Mary's divine motherhood is also in some way a superabundant revelation of that fruitfulness in the Holy Spirit, to which man submits his spirit when he freely chooses continence "in the body," specifically continence "for the kingdom of heaven."<sup>9</sup>

*15. Mary and Joseph were "guardians of the mystery of the Incarnation."*

Mary and Joseph had a virginal marriage because it was connected with the grace of the hypostatic union. The "fruitfulness of the Spirit" gave them a Gift which no human being could have ever dreamed of: the Son of God Incarnate. When we consider the awe, the wonder and the mystery with which they must have received that Gift, how could they have wanted anything more?

<sup>8</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 420 (TOB 75:2).

<sup>9</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 421 (TOB 75:3).

The Holy Spirit, who had come upon Mary, must have given her deep insight into the mystery that both she and Joseph were joined in guarding, and moved them to understand and live out their spousal love in a virginal way.

*16. The gift of self holds the mystery of the perfect communion of persons.*

Mary and Joseph knew that they had received the greatest Gift God could ever give: his own beloved Son. Their vocation was to treasure that Gift and love and care for Jesus in an exclusive way. So through grace they knew that God did not intend for them to have other children. They would live together in a virginal marriage because to desire other children after Jesus would almost be like saying the greatest Gift was not enough. Mary as Virgin and Mother was filled with that spousal love that flows from making a “sincere gift of self” to others in love.

*The marriage of Mary with Joseph* (in which the Church honors Joseph as Mary’s spouse and Mary as his spouse) *conceals within itself*, at the same time, *the mystery* of the perfect communion of persons, of Man and Woman in the conjugal covenant and at the same time the mystery of this *singular “continenence for the kingdom of heaven”*: a continence that served the most perfect *“fruitfulness of the Holy Spirit”* in the history of salvation.<sup>10</sup>

This presentation has only briefly touched on the themes that John Paul II developed in his *Theology of the Body* talks. Much more could be said. The Church will be drawing riches from this goldmine for years to come.

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### Resources

(Available from Pauline Books & Media: [www.pauline.org](http://www.pauline.org))

John Paul II, Pope. *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*. Newly translated by Michael Waldstein. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 421 (TOB 75:3).



Anthony, Percy. *Theology of the Body Made Simple: Discover John Paul II's Radical Teaching on Sex, Love and the Meaning of Life*. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006.

West, Christopher. *Theology of the Body Explained: A Commentary on John Paul II's Man and Woman He Created Them*. Rev. ed. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2007.

*Note:* Papal documents, such as *Guardian of the Redeemer*, are available on the Vatican website ([www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)).