

**“Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel.”
(Is 7:14)**

✠ Lecture I: St. Mary’s Perpetual Virginity & Immaculate Conception ✠

✠ St. Mary’s Perpetual Virginity:

When the Word of God was Incarnate, He was not particular about the kind of place where He would be cradled or the clothes He would wear or the food He would eat; but He was definitely very particular about the woman who was to be His mother. Thus, St. Mary’s virginity is not a matter of her own private life, but rather a biblical reality, which belongs with our faith in Lord Jesus Christ. The Tradition of the Church holds that St. Mary remained a virgin all her life; before the pregnancy, during childbirth, and until she departed. The above-mentioned prophecy refers to St. Mary directly and literally. It accurately describes her state as being virgin and betrothed at the same time. For the Hebrew term used for “virgin” is “*almah*” and not “*betulah*” nor “*issa*”. The word *almah* means a virgin maiden who may be betrothed, while *betulah* means a virgin who is not betrothed and finally the word *issa* means a married lady.

➔ It is noteworthy that the word *almah* is used in the prophecy to mean the continuation of the state of virginity and for this reason it has been translated “**the** virgin” and not “**a** virgin”.

Another Prophet confirms St. Mary’s perpetual virginity as he says, “The Lord said to me: This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no man shall pass through it, because the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered by it, therefore it shall be shut.” (**Ezek 44:2,3**) This sealed gate is symbol of Virgin Mary’s perpetual virginity, for the Lord entered her womb and its seals were never broken and no other passed through it i.e. Virgin Mary did not give birth to anyone else.

✠ The Perpetual Virginity as a Symbol of Our Salvation:

The inability of a virgin to conceive without human seed represents our poverty and inability to save ourselves and to bring into being One who can save us. God comes to us, born of a virgin not because of our human efforts and merits, but rather as a Divine grace bestowed on us. Now, if St. Mary ceased to be a virgin then this symbolism would be voided for it would imply that we become able to save ourselves. However, Virgin Mary’s perpetual virginity does not mean that we are to be passive in our spiritual life, for God did not force Himself in her womb nor did she conceive Him unwillingly, but she rather played an active role being obedient and accepting.

✠ St. Mary’s Story:

According to the Tradition of the Church, St. Mary was born to elderly parents: St. Joachim and St. Anna. At the age of three, she was presented to the Temple; this Marian feast of her presentation to the Temple is celebrated on the third of the Coptic month Keiahk. At the age of twelve, the priests assembled to discuss what they had to do with St. Mary, as she should leave the temple. They called twelve men from the tribe of Judah and deposited their staffs in the Temple. On the next day, the high priest Abiathar gave each one his staff. As St. Joseph stretched his hand to receive his staff, immediately a dove, went forth from its top fluttering a long time among the pinnacles of the Temple before flying towards heaven. Everybody congratulated the old man saying, “You became blessed in your old age, father Joseph, in that God has shown you fit to receive Mary.” St. Joseph declined at first because of his old age but then obeyed when the priests threatened him with the wrath of God.

According to the Jewish tradition, the nuptial consists of two steps: betrothal and marriage proper. After certain financial arrangements, the couples were betrothed to one another. This betrothal was in every respect equivalent to present day marriage but without any sexual relationship. The betrothed virgin was called the man’s wife and she would become a widow if her betrothed died claiming the financial settlement accorded to a wife when widowed. In case of infidelity she was liable to the same punishment as an adulterous wife and like a wife she could not be dismissed without a bill of divorce.

If the betrothed woman had not been previously married, she usually waited a year before the second step, the marriage proper, was undertaken. Now we can understand why Virgin Mary was called St. Joseph's wife (Mt 1:20) even though they were only betrothed and not married.

→ Someone might ask if there was an agreement between Virgin Mary and St. Joseph to live in virginity even after the second step of marriage was taken. St. Augustine confirms this in his comments on St. Mary's question to the Angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" (Lk 1:34) saying: 'Surely she would not say that unless she had previously vowed her virginity to God and intended to keep it.'

✧ Objections & Refutations:

Protestants oppose the idea of the perpetual virginity of St. Mary. They use the same argument of a heretic who lived in the fourth century called Helvidius. St. Jerome refuted his claims and defended the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of St. Mary. In what follows, we shall, by the grace of God, present Helvidius' objections and their refutation.

→ **Objection # 1:** Lord Jesus was called "her firstborn Son" (Mt 1:25; Lk 2:7) therefore; she must have had other children.

Refutation: It is the custom of Holy Scripture to designate with the title "firstborn" not the one who subsequently has brothers or sisters, but the one who is born first:

- "Consecrate to Me all the firstborn, whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast; it is Mine." (Ex 13:2)

Therefore, Our Lord was brought to Jerusalem forty days after His birth according to the Law. Thus every only child is a firstborn but not every firstborn is an only child.

→ **Objection # 2:** It is written that St. Joseph "did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn" (Mt 1:25) this must imply that he knew her after the Lord's birth.

Refutation: The word 'till or until' by no means necessarily implies that St. Joseph knew her after the birth of Lord Jesus Christ. For the word 'till' does not in any way imply the opposite of what is mentioned before it; this word in Holy Scriptures means eternally. For example:

- "The Lord said to my Lord. Sit at my right hand till I make Your enemies Your footstool" (Ps 110:1) Could it be that this means that our Saviour Lord Jesus Christ won't sit at the right hand of the Father and reign with Him unto the ages of ages? We well know that "of His Kingdom there shall be no end" (Lk 1:33)

- "Then he sent out a raven, which kept going to and fro until the waters had dried up ..." (Gen 8:7) Does this mean that the raven returned at one point to the ark? But we know that the raven never returned.

- "Michal the daughter of Saul had no children to [till / until] the day of her death." (2 Sam 6:23) Does this mean that she gave birth to children after her death, since it says "*unto* her death"?

- "I am with you always, even to [unto] the end of the age." (Mt 28:20) Does this mean that the Lord will depart from us at the end of the world?

Therefore, in Holy Scriptures, the word "till / until / unto" conveys the meaning of eternity. Thus, the Lord will be eternally with His apostles and those who have kept His commandments, and He will always be on the right hand of the Father sharing His Eternal Reign. Thus, the raven will never return to the ark, and Michal, after her death, will never acquire children. And in this way exactly, the just and God-fearing Joseph never knew she that was a virgin – a virgin before the Divine Birth, during the Divine Pregnancy, and after the Divine Birth – the most holy and most pure Virgin Mary.

→ **Objection # 3:** It is written, "Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit." (Mt 1:18) thus they must have come together afterwards.

Refutation: The purpose of the Holy Gospel is to highlight the fact of the Virginal Birth of Lord Jesus Christ and this is why St. Matthew underscores the fact that Virgin Mary conceived without human seed but in no way this implies that St. Mary and St. Joseph came together after the birth of the Lord.

→ **Objection # 4:** Many verses mention “the brothers” of the Lord (**Mt 12:46; 13:54-56; Mk 6:1-3; Jn 2:12; Acts 1:14; Gal 1:18,19**) Who are these brothers?

Refutation: The term “brothers” is used in Holy Scripture for:

- a) Blood brotherhood
- b) Common nationality → “Even His brothers did not believe in Him.” (**Jn 7:5**)
- c) Close relatives
- d) Friendship

In the case of the Lord’s brothers, the third meaning applies. For example Lot was called Abraham’s brother even though he was his nephew (**Gen 11:31; 14:14**) - Boaz spoke of his relative Elimelech as his “brother” (**Ruth 4:3**) – Joab called Amasa, his first cousin (**2 Sam 17:25**), “brother” (**2 Sam 20:9**). Thus according to St. Jerome, the brothers of the Lord were the sons of St. Mary the wife of Alphaeus, Virgin Mary’s sister. (**Jn 19:25**)

There is, however, a second view for the meaning of the word “brothers” of the Lord. This view states that these “brothers” are sons of St. Joseph from a previous marriage. Some Coptic, Syrian and Greek documents followed the same idea. Nevertheless, some theologians, including H.H. Pope Shenouda III, reject this view for the following reasons:

1. If these brothers of Lord Jesus Christ were in fact older than Him, having been born of an earlier marriage of St. Joseph, then why are they not mentioned in the Lord’s Infancy narrative, especially the escape to Egypt?
2. The impression left by the Holy Gospel of St. Luke concerning the story of Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple (**Lk 2:41-52**) is that even twelve years after the Lord’s Birth, the Holy Family consisted of three persons only.
3. St. Matthew refers to Lord Jesus Christ as the heir of St. Joseph, the son of David, but if He had other older brothers (sons of St. Joseph) then Lord Jesus would not have been his heir.
4. If Lord Jesus Christ had older brothers, He would have left His mother in their home and would not have trusted her to St. John.
5. How could it be that these “brothers” are from St. Joseph’s former wife who died when it is mentioned that Mary the mother of James and Joses was present during the crucifixion and burial of the Lord (**Mk 15:47**)?

Q: Why do we call St. Mary “ever-virgin” when Lord Jesus Himself calls her “woman”, which means that she was married and not a virgin?

A: First of all, we need to point out that the word “woman” used by Lord Jesus Christ is noted by Liddle & Scott (Abridged Edition, p. 147) as being, ‘a term of respect, mistress, lady ...’ This is very obvious when our Lord, on the cross, addresses Virgin Mary saying, “Woman, behold your son.” (**Jn 19:12**) for even while suffering He did not forget to care for her and when He called her “woman” in no way did He say it as a sign of disrespect, but only in the sense of gender. That is exactly how the angels spoke to St. Mary Magdalene at the tomb, “Woman, why are you weeping?” (**Jn 20:13**) – Secondly, when God created Eve from the side of Adam, and led her to him and he named her woman, was Eve thus married just because Adam called her woman? Likewise, wasn’t Eve a virgin? Thus, Eve was created virgin by God, and God along with Adam, called this virgin “woman” for she had a female, and not a male, nature, showing thus the feminine gender. In no way is it understood that God and Adam called her who was received from the side of Adam (and was still a virgin) a woman with the meaning of married woman. Therefore, Holy Scripture does not call the Mother of God woman and thereby mean married woman, as some Protestants believe, but with the word woman reveals only the female gender of the Ever-Virgin Mary, while simultaneously, in a hidden or concealed manner, saying that she is “the woman” (**Gen 3:15**) whose seed (Lord Jesus Christ) will bruise the head of the serpent and through her shall come the salvation of mankind.

(Adapted from ‘*The Truth of our Faith*’ by Elder Cleopa of Romania)

✠ St. Mary's Immaculate Conception:

Some Church fathers do not believe Virgin Mary to be without faults, such as St. Irenaus, Origen, St. John Chrysostom. However, these opinions do not represent the widespread Mariological Tradition of the early Church. We believe that St. Mary's holiness is unique and surpasses heavenly creatures; she passed all her life in holiness as the true Ark of the Covenant, which was made of incorruptible wood laid with Gold from inside and outside. The Orthodox Church, whose love towards St. Mary is deep-rooted, considers her more holy than all the heavenly creatures, whilst a natural member of the human race. We do not set her apart from the human race by assuming that she was born without original sin (immaculate conception), as if she was born of no human seed. Thus, the Church makes a distinction between St. Mary's life before and after the moment of Divine Incarnation.

→ St. Mary herself declared her need of salvation when she said, “my spirit has rejoiced in God **my Savior.**”
(Lk 1:47)

This Orthodox concept preserved our Church from any exaggeration or confusion between Lord Jesus Christ and His blessed mother; no worship is offered to her, but only veneration and praise. In other words, in the Orthodox Church there is an accurate line that divides Lord Jesus Christ from His blessed mother; the only one who was Immaculately Conceived is our Lord Jesus Christ.

* This lecture is adapted from ‘*Comparative Theology*’ by H.H. Pope Shenouda III and ‘*St. Mary in the Orthodox Concept*’ by Fr. Tadros Malaty.