

Mary's Perpetual Virginity Clearly Confirmed in Scripture & Jewish Tradition

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SAINT LUKE'S GOSPEL ACCOUNT of the encounter between the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary contains a remarkable dialogue that confirms the dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity, a virginity that she insisted upon before assenting to Gabriel's request that she become the Mother of God. If Luke's account ([Luke 1: 26-35](#)) is read closely in conjunction with ancient Jewish laws pertaining to vows and along with Jewish marital customs, it contains all the information necessary to conclude that Mary had taken a vow of perpetual virginity and that Joseph had accepted her vow. According to the "Law of Vows" recorded in the Jewish Torah, [Book of Numbers](#),

A) *"If a woman vow any thing, and bind herself by an oath, **being in her father's house**, and but yet a girl in age: if her father knew the vow that she hath promised, and the oath wherewith she hath bound her soul, and held his peace, she shall be bound by the vow: Whatsoever she promised and swore, she shall fulfil in deed."*

B) *"If she have a husband, and shall vow any thing, and **the word once going out of her mouth shall bind her soul by an oath**: The day that her husband shall hear it, and not gainsay it, she shall be bound to the vow, and shall give whatsoever she promised. But if as soon as he heareth he gainsay it, and make her promises and the words wherewith she had bound her soul of no effect: the Lord will forgive her" ([Numbers 30:](#)*

[3-6](#)).

In addition, Jewish matrimonial laws-customs-traditions consisted of two marital phases necessary for the contracting and consummation of a valid marriage ([kiddushin](#) and [nisu'in](#)). According to the [Jewish Encyclopedia](#):

*“The term “betrothal” in Jewish law must **not** be understood in its modern sense; that is, the agreement of a man and a woman to marry, by which the parties are not, however, **definitely bound**, but which may be broken or dissolved without formal divorce.”*

In Jewish Law, once the proposal had been made and accepted, the relationship was binding; that is, marriage had already been entered into *albeit* not yet fully consummated. This was so strongly the case that Jewish law required a divorce to nullify the first stage (kiddushin) of a marital relationship. Thus, Joseph, who was “betrothed” or “espoused” to Mary, was forced to divorce or to “put her away”, even though they had not yet begun to live together (*nisu'in*):

*“Now the generation of Christ was in this wise. When as his mother Mary was **espoused** to Joseph, (but) **before they came together** (kiddushin), she was found with child, of the Holy Ghost. Whereupon Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing publicly to expose her, was minded **to put her away privately**” ([Matt 1:18](#)).*

The [Jewish Encyclopedia](#) explains betrothal this way:

*“When the agreement had been entered into, it was definite and binding upon both groom and bride, who were considered as man and wife in all legal and religious aspects, **except that of actual cohabitation.**”*

*“The (Jewish) root ארש (“to betroth”), from which the Talmudic abstract ארוסין (“betrothal”) is derived, must be taken in this sense; i.e., to contract an actual though incomplete marriage. In two of the passages in which it (betroth) occurs (in the scriptures) the betrothed woman is directly designated as “wife” ([II Sam. iii. 14](#), “my wife whom I have betrothed” (“erasti”), and [Deut. xxii. 24](#), where the betrothed is designated as “the wife of his neighbor”). In strict accordance with this sense **the rabbinical law declares that the betrothal is equivalent to an actual marriage and only to be dissolved by a formal divorce.***

Putting the “*Law of Vows*” recorded in Book of Numbers together with the laws/customs regulating Jewish marriage, and the Gospel account given by St. Luke, it is clear that *not* only was Mary a consecrated virgin, but that she had taken a vow of perpetual virginity. St. Luke was very careful to make this fact abundantly clear from his account of the *Angelic Visitation* in which he reveals that when the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, **she was already “betrothed” (married) to Joseph. What does that mean?** It means, consequently, that according to Jewish Law well known to Luke, and to Joseph and the Virgin Mary, as well as the Jewish audience first reading the Gospel account of Jesus’ birth, it means that (according to Numbers Article (B) above) Joseph must have been aware of Mary’s vow of virginity and consented to it, for **Luke tells us that Mary was a “virgin” at the time she was “betrothed” to Joseph!**

This scriptural fact helps to explain why Mary was confused at the angel’s message. Luke tells us that Mary was “*troubled at his (Gabriel’s) saying, and thought with herself what manner of salutation this should be.*” How could she, a consecrated virgin, have a child? Thus, in this state of troubled confusion, she asks, “[How shall this be done,](#) (how can this be?) [because I know not man?](#)” How can a virgin have a child?

How can this be, I know not man nor shall I know man even though I am married to one.

A Note on Virginity and the Consecrated Life

Before proceeding, it is relevant to note that the Old Testament indicates the existence of virgins who served God within the Temple precincts of Jerusalem. In the Second Book of Maccabees the following is recorded:

*“And the women, girded with haircloth about their breasts, came together in the streets. And **the virgins also that were shut up**, came forth, some to Onias, and some to the walls, and others looked out of the windows. And all holding up their hands towards heaven, made supplication” ([2 Maccabees 3: 19-20](#)).*

In Catholic tradition virgins that are “shut up” are called cloistered such as the Carmelite nuns who do not have regular contact with the outside world but live a life of solitude, contemplative prayer and service. Thus, these “shut up” Temple Virgins seem to have constituted a special class of virgins who presumably lived and served in the Temple of YHWH in Jerusalem.

According to [Taylor Marshall](#)“

“There is further testimony of temple virgins in the traditions of the Jews. In the Mishnah, it is recorded that there were 82 consecrated virgins who wove the veil of the Temple” (Mishna Shekalim 8, 5-6)

More mystically, according to the Patristic Fathers as recorded by [Kereszty Roch](#), “*Jesus Christ: Fundamentals of Christology*”,

“The patristic argument for the perpetual virginity of Mary is ... based on the understanding of virginity as a total consecration to God in pure faith and undivided love. They interpret Lk 1:34 as expressing the firm intention (or vow) of Mary to dedicate herself to God as a virgin; such a dedication must be total and irrevocable. They also see in the womb of Mary the New Ark of God overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, the New Temple forever sanctified by God’s presence. No man may enter that sanctuary since God has made it his own.”

Wow!

Ezekiel, moreover, was given a vision of the future Temple in Jerusalem, a mystical temple containing an equally mystical “East Gate”:

*“Then he brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary, which faces east; and it was shut. And he said to me, **“This gate shall remain shut; it shall not be opened and no one shall enter by it; for the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered by it; therefore it shall remain shut”** ([Ezekiel 44:1](#)).*

Several Fathers of the Church saw the East Gate as a mystical allusion to the Virgin Mary – She is the virginal East Gate through whom **only the Lord**, Himself, could enter. **This mystical gate was to “remain shut”, that is, virginal**, never to open to any man. Significantly, in Mary’s apparitions, esp. at Fatima, she is always seen ascending to the east, to her place, toward the East Gate. It is through Mary alone that our Lord entered the world. She is the Ark of the Covenant containing the Holy of Holies, the incarnate Son of God. It is through her, and her alone, that the Lord entered humanity and took on human flesh as the “blessed fruit of her womb”.

Thus, St. Jerome was able to write that Christ alone, as the

firstborn could open the mystical doors of her virginal womb ([The “firstborn” were not given the title because there was a “second-born.” They were called “firstborn” at birth. Jesus being “firstborn” does not require that more siblings be born after him](#)):

Christ, as the firstborn, opened the virgin’s womb [Exodus 13:2](#). (However) The heretics refused to acknowledge the (this) mystery, which was prefigured by the Eastern door of the Temple [Ezekiel 44:2](#), which closed again when once the High Priest had gone through it”([Against the Pelagians Book II](#)).

Thus, according to [Canon 604](#) of the Holy Roman Catholic Church, there are such servants of God known as consecrated virgins, virgins who imitate the Virgin Mary by living a type of consecrated life:

*[Canon §1](#). Similar to these forms of [consecrated life](#) is the order of virgins, who, committed to the holy plan of following Christ more closely, are consecrated to God by the diocesan bishop according to the approved liturgical rite, **are betrothed mystically to Christ**, the Son of God, and are dedicated to the service of the Church.*

Return to Mary’s Perpetual Virginit

The above scriptural facts and historical points of sacred tradition pertaining to virginity, betrothal, and the consecrated life help to explain why Mary was confused at the Angel Gabriel’s message. Luke tells us that Mary was “troubled at his (Gabriel’s) saying, and thought with herself what manner of salutation this should be.” How could she, a consecrated virgin, have a child? Thus, In this state of troubled confusion, she asked, [“How shall this be done,](#) (how

can this be?) *because I know not man?* “ How can a virgin have a child? How can this be, I know not man nor shall I know man even though I am married to one.

Interestingly, Luke informs us that both Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, and the Virgin Mary were visited by the Archangel Gabriel, both were presented with a message involving the birth of a son (Son). Both responded with the same question, (How can this be?). Zacharias, however, was punished for asking this question while the Virgin Mary was blessed. How can this be?

The Virgin Mary trusted God and thus believed what Gabriel was conveying to her. Her question was simply one of how exactly this miracle was going to take place since she was a vowed perpetual virgin. Her question was *not* one of doubt or disbelief or incredulity. Her question was an innocent reflection on how God was going to accomplish this miracle as indicated by the fact that **once the Angel told her that her virginity was to remain inviolate, she assented to his request: “Be it done unto me...”**

Zacharias, on the other hand, was presented with a substantially much less difficult announcement. When the Angel Gabriel told him he would have a son, his only apparent impediment was a *physical one*: old age; whereas Mary suffered from a moral and spiritual impediment involving a solemn vow to God, a vow so solemn that even her husband consented to it, as indicated by her perplexity. Mary, graced by God, reverently tested Gabriel. Zacharias, however did not trust God; he had trouble believing that a son could be born to him and Elizabeth in their old age; he had so much trouble believing that he dared to ridicule an archangel by implying that the good tidings that Gabriel was announcing were somehow untrue (something that even the Archangel Michael would *not* do when contesting with Satan over the body of Moses):

“When Michael the archangel, disputing with the devil,

*contended about the body of Moses, he durst **not** bring against him the judgment of railing speech, but (simply) said: The Lord rebuke thee” ([1 Jude 9](#)).*

Consequently, Zacharias was punished for his disbelief, for his incredulity before a princely messenger of God, a messenger certainly deserving of more respect than Satan to whom even Michael showed respect for his fallen but angelic dignity.

“And behold, thou shalt be dumb, and shalt not be able to speak until the day wherein these things shall come to pass, because thou hast not believed my words, which shall be fulfilled in their time” ([Luke 1:20](#)).

Because Mary was a consecrated virgin, she was honestly confused; her confusion over the matter led her to question the Angel Gabriel, led her to reverently protest his request that she become the Mother of the Messiah, especially if that meant that she had to violate or relinquish her vow of virginity to God. Thus, the Virgin Mary found herself in a quandary, a confusing situation that required her to test or “try” the spirit addressing her:

“Dearly beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits if they be of God” ([1 John 4:1](#))

Was Gabriel from God or a diabolical messenger? Would God ask her to break her solemn vow, would God reject her virginity? Was this a ploy to get her to engage in sexual intercourse with St. Joseph? These are the type of implicit questions she reverently places before Gabriel and it is *not* until the angel clarified exactly what he meant by his message that she knew he is from God. It is not until this point that she, the handmaid of the Lord, was willing to consent. **Her confusion and reverent protest make it clear that Her vow of virginity**

was still operative and that Joseph had assented to it as well.

More importantly, her question (how can this be?) would be meaningless if she had *not* taken a vow of virginity and shared it with Joseph. Clearly, she and Joseph were “betrothed” (in the first stage of marriage) and would soon be living together. Her question clearly indicates that she and Joseph had agreed to live in virginity; otherwise she would NOT have had a need to ask such a question. **The question makes no sense unless Mary was a virgin and planned to remain one. If she and Joseph were to consummate their marriage by a unitive and procreative marital act, she would not have had to ask the question.** She would *not* have been confused. Mary knew what Her virginity entailed; she knew how babies are made.

Mary, however, had taken a vow of virginity and in so doing had entered into a spiritual and nuptial relationship with God; she had given her virginity to Him. He in return accepted her vow and they (Mary and YHWH) were thus united in a sacral bond as when a “*consecrated virgin*” gives her virginity to God and thereby enters into a nuptial relationship often attested to by the putting on a wedding ring to indicate consecration and virginal-espousal.



Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades placing wedding ring on Consecrated Virgin at Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Fort Wayne, Indiana

Thus, because of her virginity, Mary was not only confused by the angel's request, she also uttered a mild form of protest: "How can this be" or "I do not think I can do this" since I have given my virginity to God and He has accepted? Aware that God does not change His mind and aware of the perpetual nature of her virginal vow, she was naturally confused. Would an angel of God ask her to relinquish her vow, a solemn nuptial vow of virginity by which she was related to Him in an especial nuptial manner? So she asked, "How can this be?" Has God changed His mind? or perhaps to Gabriel: are you truly from God or somewhere else?

When Gabriel elucidated his message, it became clear that instead of being asked to violate her vow, Mary was being invited to consummate it, to offer her virginity to Him, to open the mystical East Gate through whom *only He* could

spiritually enter by overshadowing her with His glory. When it was clear that God, not Joseph, was to be the operative spiritual cause of her mystical conception, she consented.

This is worth repeating: It was NOT until the Archangel Gabriel assured her that she could keep her vow, assured her that God had *not* changed His mind, and that she could remain a virgin, it was *not* until this surety was given, that the Virgin Mary gave her *fiat*, gave her consent. Presumably, if Gabriel had revealed to her that the child to be born would be St. Joseph's, she would *not* have given her consent, would *not* have replied "yes" but rather, "no": "***non fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum***".

The Archangel Gabriel, however, revealed to her the miraculous nature of the Messiah's birth. He was to be formed in her virginal womb by a divine act of God, the God to whom she had consecrated her virginity. Once this was clear in her mind, and *not* a moment before, she immediately gave her consent: "*fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*": "Let it be done unto me according to thy word."

Thus, God's request through Gabriel provided Mary with the opportunity to fulfill her vow, to say yes to the Lord as she was consecrated to do as His handmaid. But before consenting, she asked the Angel Gabriel to clarify his message. Once he assured her that her vow of virginity was to remain inviolate, that she was to give virgin birth while married to Joseph, only then did she consent. **Her consent was conditional upon the ability to remain a virgin**, a condition that Joseph was aware of and had consented to according to the Torah, according to Jewish marriage customs, and to the Gospel of St. Luke who derived his data directly from the Virgin Mary herself.