

Marian Studies

Volume 31 *Proceedings of the Thirty-First
National Convention of the Mariological Society
of America held in New York, NY*

Article 12

1980

The Theology of the Virginity In Partu and its Consequences for the Church's Teaching on Chastity

William B. Smith

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Smith, William B. (1980) "The Theology of the Virginity In Partu and its Consequences for the Church's Teaching on Chastity," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 31, Article 12.

Available at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol31/iss1/12

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Marian Library Publications at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marian Studies by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

**THE THEOLOGY OF THE VIRGINITY
IN PARTU
AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR THE
CHURCH'S TEACHING ON CHASTITY**

Any moral theologian who wishes to draw consequences for his science from the doctrine of the *virginitas in partu* of Our Lady is automatically faced with the question of the meaning of that doctrine itself. What exactly is meant by the *virginitas in partu*, and how does one enter into a clarification of the doctrine without risking a certain impropriety in speech when talking thus about the Mother of God? I shall try to answer the first of those questions briefly, in such a manner as to obviate possible improprieties.

I understand the *virginitas in partu* to mean total physical integrity, in the traditional and biological sense which those words—total physical integrity—possess. Probably the earliest explicit testimony to that understanding of physical integrity comes to us from the so-called *Protoevangelium of James*, one of the several apocryphal gospels of the first centuries. Dated from the second part of the second century, the testimony contained therein, as to the physical integrity of Mary in and after child-bearing, is, of course, not authoritative. The Gelasian Decree rejected the work. Nonetheless, there is no one who would claim *a priori* that an apocryphal work can contain no truth. And that is all that need be claimed for the *Protoevangelium*; namely, that it records the conviction of some part of the early communities which called themselves Christian that the Mother of the Lord remained physically intact after the process of birth. That belief, as you all know better than I, was not universal. Tertullian was an outstanding nay-sayer.

Despite the somewhat dubious nature of the first truly-clear,

written evidence to the doctrine, the doctrine itself came in time to receive defenders, including Saints Ephraem, Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine. Each in his own way used various analogies and examples to explain and defend the doctrine—probably the most famous of which being Augustine's parallel between the post-resurrectional appearances (the doors being closed) and the virginal birth.¹

The Magisterium took up the notion explicitly when, following the Council of Chalcedon,² the Lateran Synod of 649 taught:

... she truly and in a special manner conceived God the Word Himself, who was born of the Father before all ages, and gave birth to Him without experiencing corruption (*et incorruptibiliter eum genuisse*), her virginity remaining inviolable and permanently intact after His birth. . . .³

The Constitution, *Cum quorundam hominum*, of Paul IV in 1555, spoke in the same fashion: "... *perstitisse semper in virginitatis integritate, ante partum scilicet, in partu et perpetuo post partum.*"⁴

The Church in her official prayers still recognizes that physical integrity, as the *Roman Breviary* or *Liturgy of the Hours* demonstrates in the very prayers and hymns we recite during Christmas time. Thus:

1) Antiphon at None: "*Maria dixit: Qualis est ista salutatio? Quia conturbata est anima mea, et quia paritura sum Regem, qui CLAUDIUM VIRGINITATIS MEAE NON VIOLABIT.*"

2) Hymn at Lauds for the Solemnity of the Mother of God:

Fit porta Christi pervia

¹ *Sermo* 191, 1 and 2 (*PL* 38, 1010).

² *Mansi*, 7, 462. There the physical integrity in birth is seen as a sign of the virginity before and after birth.

³ *D-Sch*, 503.

⁴ *D-Sch*, 1880.

omni referta gratia,
transitque rex, et PERMANET
CLAUSA, UT FUIT, PER SAECULA.

3) Third Antiphon for Vespers of the same Solemnity:

Rubum, quem viderat Moyses incombustum, conservatam agnovimus tuam laudabilem virginitatem, Dei Genetrix, intercede pro nobis.

It is only the third of these which might be disputed as to its clarity about the physical integrity of the Mother of God. The other two are quite explicitly clear as to the physical integrity (the "closedness") of Our Lady, in birth and after.

I cite these examples of the Church at prayer (by chance or by design mistranslated or omitted in the English translation of the *Liturgy of the Hours*)—and there are others—so that the Magisterial statements may be set within a context. This is particularly important because, since the time of Mitterer's work in 1952, some theologians have attempted to find the Magisterial statements lacking in concreteness.⁵ It appears to me that such an attempt to re-interpret the meaning of words is a totally unhistorical approach to the theological science and an easy way to obviate what is, for some, a doctrinal embarrassment. It is important to note that the Second Vatican Council, when it repeated the traditional teaching on the *virginitas in partu* in *Lumen Gentium*, No. 57 ("... in nativitate vero, cum Deipara Filium suum primogenitum, qui virginalem eius integritatem non minuit sed sacravit. . ."), simply passed over any attempts to "re-interpret" the doctrine.⁶ That doctrinal embarrassment

⁵ Cf. K. Rahner, *Virginitas In Partu*, in *Theological Investigations, IV* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 134 ff. See also the present Primate of Ireland, Dermot Ryan, *Perpetual Virginity*, in the Maynooth collection *Mother of the Redeemer* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), 5.

⁶ That *Lumen Gentium*, No. 57, explicitly intends to teach the *virginitas in partu* can be clearly gathered from the official footnote (i.e., No. 10 in the Latin text), as well as from the official explanation presented to the bishops before their voting on the text (the *Relatio*). That official explanation reads, in the Latin: "*Partum autem Jesu fuisse virginalem verbis liturgicis et traditionalibus affirmatur. Quod Commissione Doctrinali suf-*

felt by some, I take to be the specifically biological aspect of the doctrine of the *virginitas in partu*. Yet, if we are to believe what we pray, and if we understand the historical development of the doctrine from the time of the *Protoevangelium* to its crystallization in the Magisterium (up to and including Vatican Council II), then the doctrine of the *virginitas in partu* is, at its very core, a biological statement. It is theology's task not to deny or interpret away that biological statement, but to attempt to grasp what it means for God and, therefore, for ourselves.

As regards Our Lady herself, I think that the doctrine of her *virginitas in partu* must be seen in the light of the New Creation, the work of Him who—almost as if they were His last words to us—solemnly declares, “Behold I make all things new” (Apoc. 21:5). Mary was meant to be—and is—the first masterpiece in that New Creation. For that reason, the *virginitas in partu* is more intimately related to her Immaculate Conception and to her Assumption into glory, body and soul, than it is related logically to the mysteries of the virginal conception and perpetual virginity.

By Adam's Fall, man, God's masterpiece (as we like to call ourselves, although this seems to ignore the angelic order), was changed for the worse both in body and soul (thus the teaching of Carthage and Orange). Man was no longer the masterpiece he was intended to be. The Redeemer changed this, however, and, as we know from faith, He did it by anticipation when Mary (who should have been part of the ruined masterpiece) was preserved free from Adam's sin. If we may, with oversimplification, classify the Immaculate Conception as nullifying the moral or spiritual consequences of the Fall and the Assumption, the preservation from total bodily corruption, as being the redundance or bodily overflow of that preservation, then we are permitted to view the preservation of total physical integrity in child-bearing as the natural concomitant to the per-

ficiens et satis clarum videtur.” (Acta Synodalia, Vol. 3, Part I, 369, No. 213.)

fected work of art. Mary is human creation just as it came forth from God's hand, integral in body and soul. As He made Her, so He preserved Her, in soul and body, so that She who is the perfect Church—the Church as she is meant to be and will become—might be presented to Him “without stain or wrinkle or anything of that sort” (Eph. 5:27).

This fact, namely Mary's perfect embodiment of the eschatological Church, is a reminder that Mary's mysteries are not hers alone. What God has done for her is, as is eminently true of her Son, *propter nos et propter nostram salutem*. In that sense, the mystery of the *virginitas in partu* forms a part of the science which today we call Christian Anthropology; so we may ask: What are the anthropological consequences of the *virginitas in partu*, and how do they apply to us?

If I may, I would like to answer that question indirectly by turning now to the second aspect of this paper, namely chastity, and place, for your consideration,—*in globo*, and thus lacking some of the nuances which time does not permit in a paper of this sort—certain recent approaches to sexual morality by some Catholic theologians.

It is essential to note that much of the moral theory set forth in innumerable books and articles in the past ten years locates the source of *all* meaning and value in human consciousness: the ultimate satisfaction or purpose of human life is located in conscious states—such as enjoyment, pleasure, even intellectual satisfaction. This emphasis on consciousness is rooted in what can only be called a radical dualism, which certain modern philosophies have substituted for the substantial unity of man, body and soul.

These philosophies have a long genesis. For Descartes, man is a thinking subject; the body is consigned to the objective world. For Hume, man is a momentarily-unified consciousness; the body is merely one set of phenomena among others. For Kant, man is an autonomous moral self; the body is left to mere nature. For Hegel, man is the final moment in the self-realiza-

tion of the Idea; the body is only a contingent datum of no ultimate meaning or value. Many a post-Hegelian effort has tried to restore the substantial unity of man, and, thus, some speak of man as "incarnate spirit." But that very expression—particularly popular among Catholics—reveals the conviction that man is primarily spirit, and that the person is not the body. *Geist in Welt* may be seen as an accurate summary of this position—of a stress, unduly heavy, on the conscious or psychic.⁷

In all of these approaches, the human body and its processes belong to the purely natural world. The body becomes mere matter: instrument, tool, and condition for the achievement of meaning and values which, in the end, are located in human consciousness only. This approach has been well, and approvingly, summarized in the CTSA study, *Human Sexuality*.⁸ In that work, we read:

It is not surprising then that recent development in moral theology has called into serious doubt the impersonalism, legalism, and minimalism that often result from such an act-oriented approach. Focusing on the isolated act and assigning it an inviolable moral value in the abstract left little room for consideration of the personal and interpersonal values that are central to genuine morality. Modern trends, returning to some of the emphases observed in Sacred Scripture, in the Middle Ages, and in the theology of St. Thomas, prefer to give greater importance to attitude over act, to pattern or habit over the isolated instance, and to the intersubjective and social over the abstract and individual.⁹

We can prescind from the claim that this new approach finds its origin in Scripture and St. Thomas and notice the description

⁷ The thought and expression of this summary-paragraph I owe to the excellent article of G. Grisez, *Dualism and the New Morality*, in *L'Agre Morale*, 5 (1977) 323-333, especially 324-325.

⁸ A. Kosnik, et. al., *Human Sexuality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

given by the authors themselves: "... attitude over act, ... intersubjective and social over the abstract and individual." As I have already pointed out, the stress is on the attitudinal—what I prefer to call the conscious or psychic—while the "act," for which we may substitute the words "material" or "bodily," is denigrated or not taken into adequate account.

This order of intentionality or attitude—the psychic—is further stressed when the authors of the same work list the values according to which human sexual activity is to be judged. These are seven: self-liberating, other-enriching, honest, faithful, socially responsible, life-serving and joyous.¹⁰ No mention is made, in such a list, of values such as: respect for the material order of created reality, the dignity of the human body and its actions, the God-given meaning of bodily functions, etc. What happens in such an approach is that not only the "act" (as they call it) but also the human body itself and its functions become totally subordinate to "spirit" or "intention" or "attitude." This is Platonism—or what we call today "subjectivism"—run rampant.

The work, *Human Sexuality*, has been roundly—and justly—criticized, both by the Magisterium and by some rather lonely voices in the field of moral theology; of the latter, Germaine Grisez and William May are outstanding examples. But one is deceived if one thinks that the general approach—if not all the specific conclusions—is limited to the authors of *Human Sexuality*. When, in referring to the sphere of the body and bodily activity considered apart from intentionality or purpose (the "spirit" again), Richard McCormick speaks of "pre-moral disvalue"¹¹; when Joseph Fuchs speaks of "pre-moral evil"¹² and

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 92-95.

¹¹ Cf. R. McCormick, *Notes on Moral Theology*, in *TS*, 33 (1972) 68-86; 36 (1975) 85-100; 38 (1977) 70-84. See also, McCormick-Ramsey (eds.), *Doing Evil to Achieve Good* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1978), Chapters 1 and 6.

¹² J. Fuchs, *The Absoluteness of Moral Terms*, in *Gr*, 52 (1971) 415-458.

Bruno Schüller of "non-moral evil";¹³ and Luis Janssens¹⁴ and Philip Keane of "ontic evil"¹⁵—each of them, in his own way, relegates the material and bodily to the non-moral sphere of life. The last mentioned, Philip Keane, professor of moral theology at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, explains it this way:

Two propositions can be offered to summarize what the mainstream of Roman Catholic theologians are saying on the question of moral evil. First, there are many actions in life that for one reason or another significantly fail to reach the full potential of human goodness and possibility. Second, such actions can be judged to be seriously morally evil only when they are evaluated in their total concrete context and only when this context shows that there is not a sufficient proportionate reason for permitting or even causing the actions to occur.¹⁶

The operative word in that paragraph is, I suggest, "reason." If the "reason" is sufficient, action is moral, despite what material or bodily purposes might indicate to the contrary. And so, to our vocabulary of "attitude," "intentionality," "inter-subjectivity," the "conscious" and "psychic," we may now add "reason"—and body becomes a function of "reason."

I presume that all of you are familiar with the conclusions, drawn from this approach to moral theology, to which the CTSA study arrived: a countenancing, when Reason is proportionate, of pre-and extra-marital sex, homosexuality, masturbation, contraception, etc. Many of those conclusions, however, had been anticipated in another very popular work of the seventies, *The Sexual Celibate*, by Donald Goergen.¹⁷ After an enlightening and sometimes fire treatment of Chastity and Tac-

¹³ Cf. B. Schüller, Chapter 5 of *Doing Evil to Achieve Good* (Note 11 above).

¹⁴ Cf. L. Janssens, *Ontic Evil and Moral Evil*, in *LS*, 4 (1972) 115-156.

¹⁵ P. Keane, *Sexual Morality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁷ D. Goergen, *The Sexual Celibate* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974).

tility and of Psychology and Sexuality (although one would have some reservations even to these chapters), the author moved on, in the second part of his book, to spell out concrete applications of his approach to virginity and celibacy. There he writes:

- a) on homosexuality: "We no longer have . . . sufficient theological grounds for perpetuating a destructive attitude. This does not mean that some homosexual relations are not unhealthy, unchristian, and sinful."¹⁸
- b) on masturbation: "My own opinion is that masturbation is more a question of maturity and integrated sexuality. Sexual maturity does not imply that a person does or does not masturbate. In one person it might be mature; in another person it might be immature and unintegrated."¹⁹ "Masturbation is not completely appropriate for the celibate, neither is it sinful. It is simply a fact of his or her life which he or she accepts insofar as it is there."²⁰

Not being a moral theologian, Goergen does not arrive at such conclusions in the same fashion as do the authors of the CTSA study, although his language frequently smacks of the same spiritualist-psychic—integrative—terminology of the men looked at above. (He treats us to such delights as "Insensitivity is as unspiritual as is promiscuity."²¹) Rather, the touchstone for his approach comes at practically the mid-point of his work, where he deals with the virginity of Our Lady. Expressing that, "before we explore the meaning of virginity in our day, it is important to consider the virginity of Mary,"²² he writes on that virginity:

To base the virginity of Mary upon the historical validity of the

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 200-201.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 203.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 226.

²² *Ibid.*, 125-126.

material in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke is a difficult task. . . .

.....

It is not necessary to maintain the virginal conception in order to hold to the fact that Jesus was born of the Holy Spirit or that Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit. . . .

.....

One looking to her physical virginity as an historically established fact is doomed to frustration. . . .

.....

Mary may or may not have been a virgin in the sense that I am using the word; she was, however, a chaste woman. She was a woman who was able to put her sexual life at the service of her relationship to God. . . .

.....

I do feel, however, that her virginity cannot be the argument for virginity today. She may not have been a virgin. We can look to her, however, for a deeper understanding of chastity and faith.²³

One gathers from the context that the "deeper understanding of chastity and faith" referred to is fundamentally a question of "orientation," of "one's purpose and goal," "one's service to God," and thus, once again, we are back to the attitude where the material or bodily is basically irrelevant. What counts is not biological reality, but attitude.

With much justice, elements of this "new" approach to chastity have been called the "new gnosticism," because they manifest the same disdain for the body and for the purpose of bodily functions. (One can recall all the many attacks made against *Humanae Vitae* and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Document On Sexual Ethics* as being merely examples of an outworn biologism.) Like the old gnosticism, there is the marked tendency to discount the body as a moral factor. For proponents of such thinking, God is not interested in biology.

²³ *Ibid.*, 128-131.

Theirs is a perverse reading of "The flesh profits nothing; the spirit alone gives life" (Jn 6:63).

And here, precisely, is the relevance of the *virginitas in partu* for the Church's teaching on chastity. As I mentioned earlier, the doctrine of the *virginitas in partu* is, at its very core, a biological statement. The physical integrity of Mary, prototype and perfect embodiment of the New Creation, is a reminder—much needed today—that God is indeed concerned with biology. He does not disdain the material order He has created. It is, rather, His intention to preserve, heal and perfect it, to draw it back to Himself in the perfection with which He endowed it at the beginning.

Anthropologically-speaking, the doctrine of the virginal birth functions as a theological control over an excessive Platonizing in many current philosophical endeavors. It serves, in this regard, to call attention to St. Thomas's understanding of the body-soul relationship—an understanding fully concordant, I believe, with the outlook of both the Old and New Testaments. From this point of view, matter and spirit serve as co-causal principles of the human person. Far from being a mere symbol of the soul or its tool, the body, as co-causal, shapes and moulds the soul which is its conjoined form; as a consequence, bodily integrity contributes to spiritual integrity and, thus, to a truly personal integrity.

It is for this reason that the Church so honors virginity; for this reason, too, virginity adds something over and above a consecrated celibacy which has not preserved virginity. The sacrifice of praise offered to the Creator, the presentation of one's body as a living, unblemished sacrifice, is an offering distinctive and unique, comparable in the Church's Tradition to martyrdom.

For that reason, virginity stands as the norm for the virtue of chastity—an integrity that is complete in body and soul. In the light of that norm, the dignity and meaning of bodily actions and functions must be studied by the Catholic moral the-

ologian. After Christ, and because of Him, the living witness to that norm is the ever-Virgin Mary.

It has often been said that the Mariological doctrines are the nerve centers for key dogmas of orthodox faith. We must extend that idea so as to include not only orthodoxy, but orthopraxis as well, thereby verifying once again the time-tested refrain to Our Lady—*Cunctas haereses interemisti in universo mundo*: “You have destroyed all heresies throughout the world.”

REV. WILLIAM B. SMITH
Academic Dean
St. Joseph's Seminary, Dunwoodie
Yonkers, New York