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Theological Significance of Mary's Virginity

Eamon R. Carroll

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THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF MARY'S VIRGINITY

The opportunities for examination on this topic are almost unlimited. Of many possibilities, the eschatological significance of Mary's virginity has been selected. I note at once that here I use "eschatological" in the sense that Christian mysteries, such as the Incarnation, the divine maternity, and virginity, are eternal in their effects. Every vocation in Christian life looks forward to the life of heaven; Christian virginity presages the future in its own special way. The theological considerations here developed are eschatological in the sense of seeking to illustrate the bond between Mary's virginity on earth and fulfillment of the divine plan of salvation in the world to come.

This delimitation does not deny other senses of "eschatological" which might also be properly applied to Mary's virginity. Thus the Messianic times are already eschatological, and our Lady's virginal commitment to Christ is part of the present "end-time." My consideration, however, is limited to the *novissima* that lie ahead—to the relation of Mary's virginity to the glory of heaven and the bodily resurrection, anticipated in her Assumption and promised to the elect.¹

The other term of our comparison is the virginity of Mary—which we take in its totality: It comprises the classic elements of the virginity *ante, in, and post partum*, but equally the integrity of soul, heart, and spirit—the total belonging to God and His service. We will also consider the virginity of our Lady as the authors of the late fourth century did so strikingly—as model of Christian virginity, as symbol of life to come.

¹ When the virginity of Mary was defined by the Lateran Council, 649 A. D., it was expressly stated that Mary conceived and brought forth virginally "in this last age," *D.B.*, no. 256.

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This is true not only of the virginal maternity of God the Savior in the virginity *ante partum* and *in partu*, but also of Mary's life-long or *post-partum* virginity.

In studying the eschatological significance of Mary's virginity, we will consider not only the personal fulfillment of the Mother of the Lord in the Assumption, but we will be concerned also with at least some social aspects of the earthly consecration and heavenly glorification of the Virgin Mary. All Christians and all theology have a stake in the virginity of Mary—from the redemptive virginity of the Annunciation to the exaltation of the Virgin Mary at the side of the virginal Christ who sits at the right hand of God the Father.² When Mary the Virgin entered into the joy of the Lord, she also entered into the heavenly intercession of Christ her Son. The Assumption set a seal upon Mary's virginal consecration to God; at the same time, she became more than ever in the full power of her human person, body and soul, queen of the saints, mediatrix of the Church on earth, tender mother of the Poor Souls.

In so ambitious an outline we do not intend more than to attempt a series of exploratory questions, to open up avenues of inquiry.

I. Virginity *ante partum*

The first concern in Christian history with our Lady's virginity was her virginity *ante partum*—which can be called simply the Marian aspect of the central Christian truth of the "virgin birth." In ordinary Christian usage virgin birth means the virginal conception of Christ, and the phrase is so used here. The credal formula, born of the Virgin Mary,

² The convention paper of Thomas Clarke, S.J., published in these Proceedings, illustrated the lasting redemptive significance of Mary's virginity vis-à-vis the Church's virginity.

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affirms the virginity *ante partum*. Rufinus' (d. 410) commentary on the creed reads:

He is born by the Holy Spirit from the Virgin. For this passage chaster ears and a purer mind are called for. What you are expected to understand here is that He who, as you have already learned, was born ineffably from the Father, had a shrine constructed for Him by the Holy Spirit in the recesses of the Virgin's womb. And just as no imperfection is conceivable in the sanctification bestowed by the Holy Spirit, so we should not envisage any defilement in the birth from the Virgin. In this birth the world had something unprecedented vouchsafed it, and for a very good reason. For it is congruous that He who is only Son in heaven should be only Son on earth as well, and therefore should be born in a unique manner. . . .³

This outlook on the virginity of Mary we share with all Christians who accept the virgin birth as historically and doctrinally true. And we share with them also the conviction that the essential idea in the virgin birth is Christological rather than moral or ascetic. The virginal conception of Christ is a sign of the intervention of Yahweh the Savior, who does not depend, as St. John puts it, on the will of blood, or the will of the flesh, or the will of man.⁴ No creature's will determines the temporal existence of Christ. What the will of the human father initiates in ordinary human generation God alone does in the origin of Christ by an exercise of creative divine power. This beginning of redemption in the conception of Christ has eschatological significance for the life to come. Scheeben puts it:

³ Rufinus, *A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed*, translated and annotated by J. N. D. Kelly, in *Ancient Christian Writers* (ed. J. Quasten & J. Plumpe) 20 (Westminster, Md., 1955) 42.

⁴ M. E. Boismard, O.P., *St. John's Prologue* (Westminster, Md., 1957) defends the manuscript tradition that sees *John* 1, 13, as singular, "was born," and a direct reference to the virgin birth.

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. . . the bodily production of Christ must be the prototype and assurance of the spiritual and holy regeneration of men as children of God and also the pledge of the glorious regeneration of the entire man in His resurrection. As the prototype of man’s resurrection, Christ’s bodily production must be directly carried out by God Himself through divine power. In particular, it must also be the prototype of the virginal motherhood of the Church, whereby, as the instrument of the Holy Ghost, she cooperates in the regeneration of men as children of God.⁵

Christ is not only the new Adam; He is the last Adam. *1 Cor.* 15, 45: “So also it is written, The first man, Adam, became a living soul; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. . . . V. 49: even as we have borne the likeness of the earthly, let us bear also the likeness of the heavenly.” A new and immortal sonship is here involved. In lieu of a spreading race of men, split by sin, heirs of the first Adam, the new Adam stands at the head of a reborn race united in Himself through a new incorrupt generation of grace.

What is our Lady’s personal involvement here? The defined truth of the virginity *ante partum* concerns the miracle of her maternity in virginity. Beyond the strict definition, Christian tradition attaches great value to Mary’s virginal consent, seeing in the soul of our Lady at the Annunciation also a “virginitas mentis,” i.e., her virginal consecration to God. When Christian thought came to recognize as of faith the perpetual virginity of the Mother of the Lord, it began to stress also her intent of virginity and to interpret in this sense the question of *Lk.* 1, 34: “How shall this be?”⁶ When Mary’s perpetual virginity was finally recognized as itself a revealed

⁵ M. J. Scheeben, *Mariology*, trans. T.L.M.J. Geukers, 1 (St. Louis and London, 1946) 71; cf. also Michael Schmaus, *Katholische Dogmatik: Mariologie*, 5 (München, 1955) 141; a second edition (1961) of this notable *Mariologie* has just appeared; B.-H. Merkelbach, O.P., *Mariologia* (Paris, 1939) 225.

⁶ The reader is referred to *MS* 7 (1956), for articles touching on these themes, e.g. E. R. Carroll, O.Carm., *Our Lady’s Virginity “post partum,”* 69-102; Neal M. Flanagan, O.S.M., *Our Lady’s Vow of Virginity*, 103-121.

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truth, then our Lady's virginal consent at the Annunciation took on a deeper significance also in Christian understanding.

Among the *rationes convenientiae* for the virginal conception of Christ we still meet as an inheritance from the Fathers and the Scholastics the argument that if He had been born in the normal way of marriage, Christ would have been subject to original sin; or at least that it was not fitting that the Lamb of God, who came to take away the sins of the world, should depend in His human origins on a manner of conception in which original sin is transmitted.⁷ The argument is faulty in a number of respects. In fact, it was long held and used as an objection against the Immaculate Conception that original sin would be ineluctably transmitted in normal conception from two human parents. (In the case of Christ we know that the substantial anointing of His humanity by the Hypostatic Union already rendered original sin impossible in Him.)

Yet there are, I submit—and again this is an exploratory probing—deeper values in the virginal conception of Christ with which the Fathers were concerned, however incomplete their ideas on the manner of transmission of original sin. This has been brought out by Michael Hurley, S.J., in a recent commentary on the phrase "born incorruptibly" from the third canon of the Lateran Council held under Pope St. Martin I (649).⁸ When the magisterium is invoked in support of the

See also Christian P. Ceroke, O.Carm., *Luke 1:34 and Mary's Virginity*, in *CBQ* 19 (1957) 329-342, and Richard Kugelman, C.P., *The Object of Mary's Consent in the Annunciation*, in *MS* 11 (1960) 72; J. M. Alonso, C.M.F., *Virgo Corde*, in *EphM* 9 (1959) 175-228.

⁷ Louis Bouyer, *Le trône de la sagesse* (Paris, 1957 and its English translation by A. V. Littledale, *Woman and Man with God* (London, 1960), and the American edition, titled *The Seat of Wisdom* (New York, 1960), comments at length on the patristic outlook; this article depends on Bouyer for much of what follows.

⁸ Michael Hurley, S.J., *Born Incorruptibly: The Third Canon of the Lateran Council (A. D. 649)*, in *The Heythrop Journal* 2 (1961) 216-236.

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definition of the virginity of Mary, this canon is always the one first mentioned and is usually presented as having formally defined the three-fold virginity of Mary—*ante partum*, *in partu*, and *post partum*. The obscurity of the phrase of the original Latin, *in corruptibiliter eam genuisse*, is commonly admitted—even in Denzinger we find an alternate reading given, *in corruptibiliter eum genuisse*. But, in spite of this difficulty and the complexity of the context, mirrored in the variant English translations, there has been general agreement that the phrase somehow referred to the virginity *in partu*, in distinction from virginity *ante partum* and *post partum*, both of which are explicitly stated in the Lateran canon.⁹ The translation suggested by Father Hurley reads:

If anyone refuses to confess in accordance with the holy Fathers that the holy ever-Virgin immaculate Mary is literally and truly Mother of God, inasmuch as in this last age she conceived without seed, of the Holy Spirit, and brought forth without corruption the very one who is literally and truly God the Word born of God the Father before all ages, her virginity remaining inviolate after [this] birth as well—let him be condemned.¹⁰

The contention of Father Hurley is that the difficult phrase—“brought forth without corruption”—has no reference to virginity *in partu*, but means that the human nature of Christ was not corrupted by original sin. The stress is not on the virginity of Mary, even though her virginity *ante partum* and virginity *post partum* are affirmed in the Lateran canon; the accent falls rather on the truth that the virginally conceived Christ was thus kept from original sin.

The author argues from the circumstances of the times.

⁹ J. A. de Aldama, S.J., argues for the miraculous virginity *in partu*, cf. *Natus ex Maria Virgine*, in *Gr* 42 (1961) 37-62; cf. also Gerard Owens, C.S.S.R., *Our Lady’s Virginity in the Birth of Jesus*, in *MS* 7 (1956) 43-68.

¹⁰ Hurley, *art. cit.*, 216.

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The intent of the council was anti-Monothelite; if it seems strange that freedom from corruption (or sin) brought about through the virginal conception should be advanced as an argument, here is the reasoning: The Monothelite heresy said that if a human will were admitted in Christ, there would be opposition between human and divine wills. The Lateran states that the two wills and operations are in harmony, *cohaerenter unitae*, and then continues with the argument that the human will of Christ was not opposed to the divine will, because original sin, the inherited root of opposition, was not to be found in the humanity of Christ who was conceived virginally and therefore born incorruptibly, without sin, of the Virgin Mary. This is the argument of Maximus the Confessor also, whose influence was so great that he has been called the "father of the canons of the Lateran Council of 649."

According to Maximus, the conflict of wills envisaged by the Monothelites could be caused only by sin; since there was no sin in Christ, there was no conflict. And there was no sin because of the virgin birth. Everything else follows from this: Christ's human nature was incorrupt and sinless, the human will of Christ was in harmony with the divine; hence, the change from incorruption to corruption caused by Adam could be undone and human nature restored from corruption to incorruption.¹¹ Pope St. Martin I, whose energetic espousal of the canons of the Lateran Council gave these proceedings ecumenical force (Hurley shows this too), said in his opening address of the council: "Having been conceived without sin, Christ came forth uncorruptedly from the virgin."¹² The anti-Monothelite tenor of his remark, as of the whole gathering, supports the interpretation of the canon in the same sense.

What is our Lady's place here? By no means primary, truly. Yet she is the "holy immaculate Virgin Mother"—the sinless

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 232-233; these ideas are completely from M. Hurley.

¹² *Ibid.*, 216 and note 2.

virgin from whose pure flesh the sinless Christ is formed. In the mind of the conciliar Fathers, the virginity of Mary was a key defense of the truth of the Incarnation.

The mind of Maximus himself is that Mary's virginity expresses her faith in God's power to create anew. Human marriage and procreation bring forth beings inevitably destined for death. Virginity, as a Christian vocation, forestalls death, and Mary's virginal faith raises her to the plane of the resurrection. Through it she receives the power to bring to a new birth, even to eternal life, the descendants of Adam.¹³

Leo the Great used a similar argument two centuries prior: It was necessary that he be born in a new way who was to bring to our human bodies the grace of an unstained integrity. It was necessary that the incorruption of the child should protect the original chastity of the mother and that the chaste cloister and holy chamber he had chosen should be safeguarded by the infused power of the divine Spirit. . . .¹⁴

II. Virginity *in partu*

The *virginitas in partu*, if Father Hurley is right, was not defined at the Lateran Council, 649. It is nonetheless the defined teaching of the Church by force of later magisterial interventions.¹⁵ But it is likewise true that the Church has never stated officially what precise sense attaches to the *virginitas in partu*. In the past decade a spate of writings on Mary's virginity *in partu* has appeared. The 1952 book by the Austrian, Father Albert Mitterer, *Dogma und Biologie der heiligen*

¹³ Bouyer, *Woman and Man with God*, 94, interpreting Maximus from *Ambigua*, in PG 91, 1157, and *Expositio orationis dominicae*, in PG 90, 889.

¹⁴ Hurley, *art. cit.*, 234, from St. Leo's Second Sermon on the Nativity, PL 54, 195-196.

¹⁵ E.g., Paul IV, *Cum quorundam* (1555) lists among Unitarian errors: "Virginem Mariam . . . nec perstitisse semper in virginitatis integritate, ante partum scilicet, in partu et perpetuo post partum . . ." cf. *D.B.*, no. 993.

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Familie, launched certain questions concerning the exact meaning of the virginity *in partu*, with the implication that what has been commonly held for so many centuries about the miraculous character of this virginity might turn out to be tradition with a small "t" instead of with a capital T. This controversy will not be reviewed here.¹⁶ Father W. J. Burghardt noted last year¹⁷ in his presidential address the mid-1960 decree of the Holy Office concerning writings on the virginity *in partu* which were treating this delicate topic with deplorable crudity of expression and, what is more, in open dissent from the traditional doctrine of the Church and the pious sense of the faithful. The decree then said—I cite its wording published in Italian translation in the *Ephemerides Mariologicae*¹⁸—that in the future publications of this type concerning this theme are forbidden. The monitum of the Holy Office names no writing, cites no author. If I might hazard an opinion as to one type of article the monitum might have in mind, I would say it forbade especially the over-popularizations which took questions raised or, if you like, positions tentatively advanced by Mitterer as answers, without nuances, without sufficient explanations, and with an embarrassing and objectively irreverent incursion into gynecological detail.

¹⁶ Albert Mitterer, *Dogma und Biologie der heiligen Familie nach dem Weltbild des hl. Thomas von Aquin und dem der Gegenwart* (Vienna, 1952); Dermot Ryan, *Perpetual Virginity*, in *Mother of the Redeemer*, ed. K. McNamara (New York, 1960) 104-133 (defending the Mitterer position); briefly (also pro-Mitterer) Werner Dettloff, O.F.M., *The Virgin Birth*, in *ThD* 7 (1959) 53-58, from original *Virgo-Mater: Kirchenväter und moderne Biologie zur jungfräuliche Mutterschaft Mariens*, in *WW* 20 (1957) 221-226.

¹⁷ *Vision for a New Decade*, in *MS* 12 (1961) 13-14. Father Burghardt warned against an ultra-conservative interpretation of the monitum: "I would summon you to just the opposite. There is still work to be done, essential research, on Mary's virginity in childbirth. The problems are not being solved or dismissed by the Holy Office; a limiting framework is apparently being set up in which alone the discussion may be carried on: respect for tradition, propriety of language, and in certain instances top-level censorship. But the discussion must be carried on, if the problems are to be brought to solution."

¹⁸ *EphM* 11 (1961) 137-138; the monitum is dated July 27, 1960.

I do not share the views of Mitterer, yet I think he has rendered Mariology a real service in requiring theologians to re-appraise their theological understanding of the *virginitas in partu*. Often enough, where this aspect of our Lady's virginity has been mentioned in books, it was stated simply as miraculous and little more was said of it. Laurentin has taken up Mitterer's questions more than anyone I know, and from a massive sampling of patristic writings has drawn up a defense of the miraculous character of the *virginitas in partu*.¹⁹ His documented argument defends the *virginitas in partu* precisely as a *miracle*, i.e., not a prodigy, but a sign. For the Fathers, Mary's virginity in child-bearing was in some respect outside the ordinary course of nature—whether in terms of freedom from pain, preservation of the virginal seal, etc. Even here, however, their choice of terms is motivated by a consciousness of a divinely intended sign. They borrowed words from sacramental theology, from biblical imagery (*hortus conclusus*), from terms used for the Church, not because they lacked the ordinary medical vocabulary of educated men but, Laurentin contends, because they see in the virginity *in partu* indications of greater mysteries. It is worth observing, because of over-simplifications, that the strongest advocates of virginity *in partu*, such as St. Ambrose,²⁰ are also very anti-Docetist. And St. Ambrose makes a point of saying that one must not think of Christ's body as being spiritualized in order to be born—I note this against the simplistic view that the

¹⁹ René Laurentin, *Le mystère de la naissance virginale*, in *EphM* 10 (1960) 345-374; *Court traité de théologie mariale* (4th ed., Paris, 1959) 110-113; see also D. Fernández, C.M.F., *Maternidad perfecta y virginidad integral de María. Reflexiones críticas en torno a la teoría de A. Mitterer*, in *EM* 21 (1960) 243-295.

²⁰ St. Ambrose, *De institutione virginis*, in *PL* 16, 324, and *Expos. in Lc.*, in *PL* 15, 1655. Bouyer, *Woman and Man with God*, 54, n. 4, credits St. Ambrose with holding virginity *in partu* while at the same time strongly rejecting the notion that the Word passed through Mary without truly taking flesh from her.

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Fathers uncritically liken Christ's birth to the way light streams through a window. Moreover, in their explanations the Fathers show little dependence on the apocrypha; their reasons are theological, rather than apocryphal.

What are the greater mysteries of which Mary's virginity *in partu* is a sign? In the case of the virginal conception of Christ we recognize readily the sign of divine intervention, independent of the will of the flesh and the will of man. What is behind the sign of the virginity *in partu*? Laurentin finds a number of significances—especially in the same Fathers who wrote at length of the other aspects of Mary's virginity.

1. Mary is prototype of the virginity of the Church, in the child-bearing as in the conception of Christ; this is an extension of the sense of "Maria virgo incorrupta" to the "fides corrupta" of the virginal Church. (St. Augustine said in a Christmas sermon: "Christ, designing to establish virginity in the heart of the Church, first preserved virginity in the body of Mary. When men and women marry, the woman is given to her spouse and she will no longer be a virgin; but the Church could not be a virgin, if the spouse to whom she was given were not the Son of a Virgin."²¹)

2. As a sixth-century author puts it, Mary is "ikon of Eve,"—the angel's "rejoice" at the Annunciation is counterpart to the ancient curse, "You shall bring forth in sorrow" (*Gen. 3, 16*), and Mary's joyful child-bearing realizes and initiates at the dawn of eschatological times the new birth in Christ that is in store for all.²²

²¹ St. Augustine, *Sermo 188*, in *PL* 38, 1005; translation from *Sermons for Christmas and Epiphany*, trans. T. C. Lawler, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, 15 (Westminster, Md., 1952) 94-95.

²² Karl Rahner also takes exception to Mitterer and defends virginity *in partu* as miraculous. Rahner argues that the birth of Christ, no less than his conception, is for Mother and Son beyond the ordinary order of human origins since the fall. He sees the child-bearing of Christ as the counterpart to the sorrowful parturition of *Gen. 3, 16*. The birth of Christ from the Virgin

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3. Laurentin’s third theological significance for virginity *in partu* is that it is less for Mary’s sake than for Christ’s. Scheeben: According to the creed, it must be considered a privilege which characterized the very origin of Christ, and the natural supplement of the supernatural action of the Holy Spirit. For the Fathers, the physical birth of Christ manifests something of the incorruptibility of the spiritual births of which it is a sign—the eternal generation of the Word, the spiritual generation unto eternity of the adopted sons of God.

Like the virginal conception and the transfiguration, the virginity *in partu* is a physical sign of the inauguration of the eschatological condition of the resurrection. There is a close link between virginal incorruptibility, integrity of body, and the Assumption, as the final glorification, and hence lasting, eschatological incorruptibility. The body of the Virgin assumed into heaven has been beautifully called an “inextinguishable lamp.”

“Born of the Virgin Mary”—in its first meaning of virginity *ante partum*—already conveys the notion of incorruptibility implicitly; it was to become explicit when the Assumption came to the fore. Hippolytus (d. 235) speaks of the imperishable woods that formed the tabernacle for the body of Christ—“Ark formed of incorruptible woods—namely, the Virgin and the Holy Spirit.”²³

An authentic note in the apocrypha is the sense of connection between Mary’s virginity and her Assumption. Indeed, the most that can be claimed for the *transitus* apocrypha is a uniform insistence on a miraculous preservation of the body of

Mary is the prototype of the spiritual birth of us all. K. Rahner, S.J., *Virginitas in partu. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Dogmenentwicklung und Überlieferung*, in *Schriften zur Theologie*, 4: *Neuere Schriften* (Einsiedeln, 1961) 173-205.

²³ Hippolytus, *In Ps. 22*, in *PG* 10, 610, and *Dialogus 1*, in *PG* 10, 864-865.

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the Virgin.²⁴ The underlying consciousness of the virginal maternity seems to be the theological presupposite on which this conviction rests. E.g., pseudo-Melito has Christ say to His Mother: "Arise, my beloved one; you did not lose your virginity on earth; you will not suffer the dissolution of your body in the tomb."²⁵

In *Munificentissimus Deus*, although the virginity is not in fact the principal theological argument suggested, it has an important place. It occurs in the words of definition: "The Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory."²⁶

Commentators do not agree about the import given virginity by *Munificentissimus Deus*. For some, the stress is on the virginal maternity; but others see the virginity itself stated strongly, though succinctly, not in isolation from the maternity, yet with its own traditional value.²⁷ Pius XII's *Sacra virginitas*

²⁴ Clement Dillenschneider, C.S.S.R., *Le sens de la foi et le progrès dogmatique du mystère marial* (Rome, 1954) 132-136.

²⁵ Dillenschneider, *op. cit.*, 135 and note 63, taken from Tischendorf, *Apocalypses Apocryphae* (Leipzig, 1866), in turn from PG 5, 1238. See A. C. Rush, C.S.S.R., *Mary in the Apocrypha of the New Testament*, in *Mariology*, 1 (ed. J. B. Carol, O.F.M., Milwaukee, 1955) 172.

²⁶ *Munificentissimus Deus*, in AAS 42 (1950) 753-773.

²⁷ Dillenschneider, *op. cit.*, 132 ff, 160 ff, surveys the history of the Christian sense of the connection between virginity and Assumption. A protagonist of a close association between the privileges was Bernard Capelle, O.S.B., *La fête de l'Assomption dans l'histoire liturgique*, in ETL 3 (1926) 44; *Théologie de l'Assomption d'après la bulle Munificentissimus Deus*, in NRT 72 (1950) 1009-1027, esp. 1022-1023; *L'Assomption de Marie et la Rédemption*, in QLP 36 (1955) 169-177, which was also a paper, titled *L'Assomption*, in *Actes du congrès marial. Septembre 1954* (Brussels, 1955) 81-91. Cf. also Eduard Stakemeier, *Das Dogma der Himmelfahrt Mariens* (Paderborn, 1951) 49-51; Hugo Rahner, S.J., *Mariens Himmelfahrt und das Priestertum* (Innsbruck, 1951); Kilian J. Healy, O.Carm., *The Assumption among Mary's Privileges in Thom* 14 (1951) 81-84 gives a pre-definition conspectus of theological opinions; E. R. Carroll, O.Carm., *art. cit.*, MS 7 (1956) 98-100, and the references there given. Martin Jugie, *La définition du dogme de l'Assomption*

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appeared since the definition, and this has been regarded by some as a corollary to the Assumption.²⁸ Before the definition some authors proposed the Assumption as implicitly revealed in the corporal integrity of Mary, and they regarded her corporeal integrity as explicitly revealed in the perpetual virginity. Father Lonergan, citing Father Lennerz for example, wrote: “It would seem that the Assumption is an essential physical part of . . . corporeal integrity.”²⁹

Voices from the past that are cited in *Munificentissimus Deus* bear this out, e.g., St. John Damascene: “It was fitting that she, who had kept her virginity intact in childbirth, should keep her own body free from all corruption even after death. It was fitting that she, who had carried the Creator as a child at her breast, should dwell in the divine tabernacles. . . .”³⁰

If Capelle is correct—Jugie to the contrary—our Lady’s virginity was the reason for the choice of the Martha-Mary gospel (from the common of virgins) in the former proper of the Mass of the Assumption. The “better part” was virginity, and, as a consequence, Mary’s corporeal integrity is also preserved in the Assumption. There are other liturgical evidences of the same tenor.³¹

(extrait de *Ath*, fasc. 2, 1951) (Paris, 1951) 10, notes that of the three dogmas mentioned in the formula of definition only the virginity is not further elaborated in *Munificentissimus Deus*.

²⁸ *Sacra virginitas*, March 25, 1954, in *AAS* 46 (1954) 161-191. Merton regards it as a sequel to *Munificentissimus Deus*; see Thomas Merton, O.C.S.O., *The Pope of the Virgin Mary* (*Marian Reprint* 62) (Dayton, 1959) 9-10.

²⁹ Bernard Lonergan, S.J., *The Assumption and Theology*, in *SM* 4, 421.

³⁰ *AAS* 42 (1950) 761; St. Germain is cited to like effect.

³¹ Capelle, *art. cit.* in *ETL* 38-40; M. Jugie, A.A., *La mort et l’assomption de la sainte Vierge* (Rome, 1944) 211; Dillenschneider, *op. cit.*, 160-164, reports the divergent views, as well as further liturgical evidence favoring Capelle. For Capelle the virginity *post partum* was also an ancient and cogent argument for the Assumption; cf. also M. J. Lebon, *L’apostolicité de la médiation mariale*, in *RTAM* 2 (1930) 156-157.

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III. Virginity *post partum*

Ever since the fourth century the dogma of the perpetual virginity—that Mary remained a virgin after the birth of Christ, as before—has had associated with it the strong sense of the spiritual virginity of Mary—the *virginitas mentis*. (There is no doubt that the perpetual virginity of Mary was in pacific possession in the Church, though not yet defined, by the time of Ephesus.) The influence of ascetic intuitions in this respect is well known; Christian reflection on the holiness of our Lady, especially in ascetic milieux, strengthened the consciousness of her perpetual virginal dedication to Christ.

Historical studies on general Christian virginity, as well as on our Lady's perpetual virginity, have shown the gradual development from silence or near-silence in the first patristic writings, through denial and defense, finally to the strong statements by such fourth-century champions of Mary's virginity as St. Athanasius in the East, SS. Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome in the West.³²

³² It has not been thought necessary to repeat all the general references used in our earlier article on virginity *post partum*, cf. *MS* 7 (1956) 69-102: Jouassard, Ortiz de Urbina, etc. Since 1956, cf. W. J. Burghardt, S.J., *Mary in Eastern Patristic Thought*, in *Mariology*, 2 (ed. J. B. Carol, O.F.M., Milwaukee, 1957) 100-116. Further works used for this paper have been: in the first place, Thomas Camelot, O.P., *Les traités "De virginitate" au IV^e siècle*, in *Mystique et continence of Etudes Carmélitaines* 31 (1952) 273-292; *Virgines Christi. La virginité aux premiers siècles de l'Eglise (Paris, 1944)*; and *Virgines Christi*, in *VS* 70 (1944) 30-43, 110-124; also H. du Manoir, S.J., *Le sens spirituel de la virginité*, in *L'Immaculée Conception* (Congrès Marials Nationaux. VII^e Congrès) (Lyon, 1954) 317-342; J. M. Perrin, O.P., *Virginity*, trans. by Katherine Gordon (London, 1956); Bernard Laurent, S.J., *La consécration de Marie à Dieu*, in *RAM* (Revue d'ascétique et de mystique) 31 (1955) 226-248; Aubert Boudry, *Le mystère de la virginité*, in *BVC*, no. 34, July-August, 1960, 49-62; Francisco de B. Vizmanos, S.J., *La vírgines cristianas de la Iglesia primitiva* (Madrid, 1949); Ludwig Münster, *Hochzeit des Lammes* (Düsseldorf, 1955) esp. ch. 20, *Maria*, 137-140; Wilhelm Bertrams, S.J., *Il celibato sacerdotale* (Roma, 1960) esp. 14-16; C. Dillenschneider, C.S.S.R., *Marie dans l'économie de la création renouvelée* (Paris, 1957) 308-313; Hugo Rahner, S.J., *Our Lady and the Church*, trans. S. Bullough, O.P. (New York,

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The virginity *ante partum* and *in partu* were true of Mary alone in human history; these signs belong to the unique event of the Incarnation.

In her virginity *post partum*, however, Mary was to be the recognized model of all Christian virgins, men and women. Virginity *post partum* stands here not only for the defined truth of the physical integrity, but means her total commitment—soul and mind together with and directing the body to the loving service of Christ. During the persecutions of early times virgins came to be ranked with the martyrs as witnesses to the faith; their celibate lives were a testimony to the evangelical counsels. When peace came, the virgins became the ordinary witnesses within the Christian fold to the other-worldly values of the faith—they were witnesses to Christ, their virginal spouse. Their silent state voiced Christian preoccupation with the world to come; their dedicated existence was living testimony to belief in a future state where there would be neither marrying nor giving in marriage, where men would be like angels.

Virginity was compared to life-long martyrdom—hence would win first honors in heaven. For Origen and Cyprian in the third century, the hundred-fold belonged to martyrs, sixty to virgins, thirty to widows; but by the fourth century, as in Methodius (d. 311), the hundred-fold was also assigned to virgins.

Virginity, perfect integrity of flesh for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, was viewed as a sign on earth of the incorruptibility and immortality of God Himself, and of the life to come. According to St. Athanasius, God had given Adam the gift of incorruptibility (Greek, *aphtharsia*) and immortality. Sin introduced corruption (Greek, *phthora*) into our nature. This corruption can be destroyed only by the In-

1961) 22-32; *Christian Virginity*, compiled by M. V. McMenemy from the writings of Rembert Sobr, O.S.B., and James Kleist, S.J.

carnation. In heaven the work of Christ will be perfectly accomplished, and incorruptibility and immortality will be definitively restored in mankind. In this setting, Christian antiquity saw perfect virginal integrity on earth as an anticipation of the innocence to come in paradise.³³

Thus, St. Ambrose urges virgins to conserve in themselves that image of God which the first parents originally possessed.³⁴ Christ restored the incorruption which had been lost for us by sin. Therefore, the Christian already possesses the future, in germ and in hope, and incorruption will be achieved in the resurrection. To the virgin and to the Church also, virginity is both a sign and a hope—that is why it is so precious to them both.

In writings about Christian virginity in general there is a double element: one ascetic, renouncement; the other consecratory, union with God. Yet even the ascetic element must not be exaggerated so as to downgrade the dignity of marriage. If some of the Fathers were unduly pessimistic about the holiness possible in marriage, others paid tribute to the honor of matrimony, even while extolling the superiority of virginity. St. John Chrysostom wrote: "If I esteem virginity, it is not that I consider marriage an evil; on the contrary, I praise it very much. Indeed to condemn marriage is to lower virginity even more, to praise it is to render still brighter the miracle of virginity."³⁵

Nor should we forget that no matter how true it may be that marriage is divinely intended for the propagation of the human race, nonetheless, in the present situation, after the fall, marriage carries with it reminders of the revolt of man against God. The transmission of human life results in the

³³ Camelot, *Les traités "De virginitate,"* 283-284.

³⁴ Camelot, *art. cit.*, 284; St. Ambrose, *De inst. virg.*, in *PL* 16, 317, 330-331; *Exhort. virg.*, in *PL* 16, 346.

³⁵ Camelot, *art. cit.*, 279 and n. 2; St. John Chrysostom, *De virg.*, in *PG* 48, 539.

extension of the effects of the fall and, even though Christ has redeemed us, such effects as concupiscence and death remain and will not be overcome until the end of time for mankind in general.

Yet, together with the ascetic emphasis of the patristic writings on virginity, there is an exhilarating optimism, in terms of union with Christ, possessed in faith and charity here on earth, together with the hope of eternal possession in heaven. Christian virginity is a response to the eschatological kingdom of God that has already appeared, rather than a barricade against the power of a sexual sphere viewed as dangerous or even as sinful. Therefore St. Augustine can say, "The joy of Christian virgins is Christ, in Christ, with Christ, after Christ, by Christ and for Christ," and can tell virgins: "You do not have the right to love Him only a little, for because of Him you have given up even legitimate love."³⁶

Like the self-denial required of all Christian life, the special asceticism demanded of virgins is not simply a moral means; even this aspect of Christian virginity is bound up with the victory of Christ through the cross. But the eschatological sense of virginity appears in its greatest splendor in our Lady, who, though spared that rebellion which we call concupiscence, was called to a life of sacrifice in union with Christ.

At her Immaculate Conception, Mary already received the grace of virginity. From the instant of her conception, and in view of her divine motherhood, she was kept free from concupiscence. Finally, her virginal conception and child-bearing involved the Mother of God, body and soul, in the redemptive Incarnation. Mary's perpetual virginity was a permanent state of total dedication, soul and body, to her divine Son. St. Ambrose wrote: "The virginal origin of Christ is the finest ex-

³⁶ St. Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, in *PL* 40, 411, 428; see the translation by John McQuade, S.M., in *Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects*, in *Fathers of the Church*, 27 (New York, 1955) 135-212.

ample and highest tribute to virginity."³⁷ Again with St. Ambrose: "Christ, generated eternally without passion and without corruption from the bosom of the Father, has been born in time of a virgin Mother; His Incarnation has introduced upon the earth this unheard-of marvel and this angelic life."³⁸ In other words, Christian virginity, in all as in Mary, is inseparable from the mystery of the Incarnation, and inexplicable without Christ.

From the first moment of her conception Mary was destined not only to immunity from concupiscence, but to bodily virginity even in the conception and birth of the Child Jesus. By reason of her Immaculate Conception and her immunity from concupiscence Mary's soul was perfectly disposed to desire to remain a virgin in body and soul. And, finally, because she was destined to be Mother of Christ, she remained ever virgin, consecrated to God by grace from her conception.

The gift of freedom from concupiscence (sometimes called *virginitas animae*) was for Mary an apt disposition for bodily virginity as well as for the virtue of virginity. A still more fundamental reason, however, for this three-fold virginity—*virginitas carnis, virginitas mentis, virginitas animae*—is that Mary's whole nature was made sacred when it was consecrated to God at the moment of conception by a divine grace that sanctified her entirely.

If we seek the further reason for this total consecration of body and soul at the very beginning of Mary's life, Father Kilian Healy suggests this explanation, in the line of Scheeben: "The Word of God possessed Mary; He possessed her whole being without reserve from the moment of her conception. She is His bride as well as mother. It is this total consecration of Mary's nature to God that demands necessarily an immaculate soul and a virginal body. The body itself belongs

³⁷ *De inst. virg.*, in *PL* 16, 331, and *Exhort. virg.*, in *PL* 16, 343.

³⁸ *De virginibus*, in *PL* 16, 192.

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entirely and perpetually to God, and hence is made holy by Him.”³⁹

The total possession of Mary by God means also that through her immaculate soul the Word joined to her a holy and sacred body that would remain always virginal. She is truly the *hortus conclusus*. So holy and sacred is the flesh of Mary at the moment of her conception that it demands not only freedom from concupiscence, but bodily virginity as well. As Scheeben says: “Even the material element from which the flesh of Christ was formed possesses, even before it receives its form, a holiness such as is found nowhere else except in some degree in the forming of Eve from the bone of Adam; for that element belonged to the holiest being after Christ.”⁴⁰

The two privileges, the Immaculate Conception and the perfect virginity, are constituent parts of Mary’s total holiness. “Anything less than freedom from sin, and anything less than perfect integrity would be unbecoming to Mary.”⁴¹ Mary’s virginal consecration is the fruit of the Immaculate Conception, and for Mary the Immaculate Conception was her vocation to sacrifice, to loving commitment to God’s prevenient love.⁴²

The felicitous phrase of Bouyer for the Assumption, “eschatological ikon of the Church,” is applied by its author also to the Immaculate Conception:

[Mary] proclaims, prefigures, and realizes, in a wholly unique manner, all the sanctity to be attained ultimately by the Church, when it shall have reached its perfection. The Virgin “without spot or wrinkle” (*Eph.* 5, 27), to be presented to Christ at

³⁹ These ideas come from Kilian J. Healy, O.Carm., *The Harmony between the Immaculate Conception and the Perfect Virginity of the Mother of God*, in *VgI* (Romae, 1957) vol. 9, 278-285.

⁴⁰ Scheeben, *Mariology*, 1, 100-101.

⁴¹ Healy, *art. cit.*, 284.

⁴² Laurent, *art. cit.*, 246.

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the end of time, is the Church; but Mary, at the beginning of the new epoch, is already this Virgin without stain. She is, thus, the promise already fulfilled, the pledge already actualized, of what all of us together are to become. She is, as it were, the living image, present within time, of what will be brought about in us all only at the end of time.⁴³

Mary's initial and virginal holiness is eschatological in sense; it is the prologue to the drama of redemption that will end not only in union with the Risen Christ in her Assumption, but also in the ultimate resurrection of the flesh for all the saved.

All the positive values of Christian virginity, all its burning love of God, are perfectly epitomized in our Lady. The literature of Christian antiquity is so full of illustrative examples that it would require no great effort to make a florilegium even from individual authors, as Ambrose, Athanasius, Augustine, etc.⁴⁴

Some examples of the patristic outlook on the eschatological value of Christian virginity, as exemplified by the Virgin Mary, will serve our present purpose. We take for granted the New Testament teaching and remind ourselves of early testimony to virginal life and its other-worldly significance.

As early as St. Ignatius of Antioch we find the statement: "If anyone can live in chastity for the honor of the Lord's flesh, let him do so without ever boasting."⁴⁵ Christian realism is here very positive: It sees in the Incarnation of Christ a

⁴³ Bouyer, *Woman and Man with God*, 128-129; the author notes, 129, n. 24: "This is excellently expressed by S. Boulgakov, *The Wisdom of God*, pp. 177 sqq."

⁴⁴ This was recently done for St. Ambrose: Rhaudenses, *Maria ideale di vita cristiana nella dottrina di S. Ambrogio* (Milan, 1960).

⁴⁵ St. Ignatius, *Epist. ad Polycarpum*, 5, 2; see *The Epistles of St. Clement of Rome and St. Ignatius of Antioch*, trans. Jas. A. Kleist, S.J., in *Ancient Christian Writers*, 1 (Westminster, Md., 1949) 98.

sanctification of the flesh, to which a life of chastity is a tribute. Cardinal Newman has a relevant remark in his *Development of Christian Doctrine*. It is among the illustrative examples for the fifth note of true development, which is "anticipation of the future." He points out the wholesome attitude of Christianity toward matter as something which was "very good" in its creation, which became corrupt in Adam (along with the spirit), and which was restored in Christ.

It taught that the Highest had in that flesh died on the Cross, and that His blood had an expiatory power; moreover, that He had risen again in that flesh, and had carried that flesh with Him in heaven, and that from that flesh, glorified and deified in Him, He never would be divided. As a first consequence of these awful doctrines comes that of the resurrection of the bodies of His saints, and of their future glorification with Him; next, that of the sanctity of their relics; further, that of the merit of virginity; and, lastly, that of the prerogatives of Mary, Mother of God.⁴⁶

And Newman introduces the section on the "office of the Blessed Virgin" with the remark: "The special prerogatives of St. Mary, the Virgo Virginum, are intimately involved in the doctrine of the Incarnation itself. . . ." ⁴⁷

Newman cites from Athenagoras (fl. 177) testimony to virginal life in the early Church: "You will find many of our people, both men and women, grown old in their single state, in hope thereby of a closer union with God." ⁴⁸

St. Cyprian in the third century refers to virgins as the "more illustrious part of the flock of Christ." "In virgins blossoms the glorious fertility of our holy Mother the Church, and as the number of virgins grows, so the joy of our Mother

⁴⁶ J. H. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (New York, 1906) 402.

⁴⁷ Newman, *op. cit.*, 415.

⁴⁸ Newman, *op. cit.*, 408; from *Legatio pro Christianis*, in PG 6, 966.

increases." He strikes the eschatological note, addressing virgins: "What we shall become, you have already begun to be! You possess already in this world the glory of the resurrection; you travel through time without suffering the pollutions of time."⁴⁹

A series of fourth-century authors left treatises on Christian virginity: Methodius' (d. 311) *Banquet of the Ten Virgins*; St. Athanasius, whose various writings on this subject have been discovered and edited in recent years; Basil (d. 364), the doctor of medicine who later became bishop of Ancyra and the leading ascetic light of the semi-Arians; St. Gregory of Nyssa in an important treatise; St. John Chrysostom. In the West there was the great triumvirate of Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome at the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth century, when Helvidius and Jovinian denied our Lady's perpetual virginity in the course of attacking celibate practises.

Athanasius, involved in Arian controversy, sees virginity, like martyrdom, as a splendid sign of the triumph of the faith. "Jesus Christ who has saved our race from the slavery of corruption has given us, among all His gifts, that of having here on earth an image of the holiness of the angels, and this image is virginity."⁵⁰ In a work come to light only in the twenties, St. Athanasius proposes Mary as model of virgins. *Sacra virginitas* of Pius XII quotes a portion of the Athanasian portrait of the Virgin Mary.⁵¹ St. Athanasius suggests that Mary may have inspired St. Paul's teaching on Christian virginity.⁵²

⁴⁹ *De habitu virginis*, in *PL* 4, 445, 462.

⁵⁰ *Apol. ad Const.*, in *PG* 25, 640, and *De inc. Verbi*, in *PG* 25, 187.

⁵¹ St. Ambrose's dependence on St. Athanasius for his own portrait of Mary, model of virginity, has been brought out by various authors, Lefort, Janssens, etc., and is set forth at length in the soon-to-appear book by Charles W. Neumann, S.M., *The Virgin Mary in the Works of St. Ambrose*; cf. *MS* 7 (1956) 83 and note 36; *Sacra virginitas*, in *AAS* 46 (1954) 188.

⁵² *St. Athanase: Sur la virginité*, in *Msn* 42 (1929) 247, one of L. T. Lefort's early articles on the subject.

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Gregory of Nyssa wrote an important treatise on virginity. He describes “death as running aground against virginity incorporate in Mary.” For Gregory, “Death has been absorbed by life, and the life of the virgin appears as an image of the beatitude of the era to come; virginity brings with it many signs of the goods that are laid up for us in hope.”

That which happened in the womb of Mary Immaculate, when the fullness of divinity shone forth in Christ the Virgin, occurs also in every soul living virginally . . . (the virginal soul also conceives Christ the Word). . . . So great is the power of virginity, that it dwells in heaven by the Father of spirits, that it forms part of the heavenly choir, that it obtains the salvation of humanity. By its power it attracts God to unite Himself with human life and gives to man wings of desire to lift himself to heaven; virginity is a bond of intimacy between man and God, it is the intermediary which joins and harmonizes two beings naturally so distinct. How can one find words worthy to praise so great a marvel? ⁵³

The writings of St. Ambrose on virginity in general and on our Lady’s virginity in all aspects are so rich in number and profundity that any sampling does him scant justice.⁵⁴ The fourth century reaches its apogee in Ambrose, and his paean in praise of the Virgin Mary has seldom been surpassed. “Mary

⁵³ S. Greg. Nyssa, *De virginitate*, in PG 46, 377, 379-382, 323-324; cf. Mauricio Gordillo, S.J., *La virginidad transcendente de María Madre de Dios en S. Gregorio de Nisa y en la antigua tradición de la iglesia*, in EM 21 (1960) 1117-155.

⁵⁴ The reader’s attention is enthusiastically called to a book now in press, and promised definitely for early 1962, the doctorate thesis of Charles W. Neumann, S.M., *The Virgin Mary in the Works of St. Ambrose*. Originally defended in 1954, it has been brought up to date for its publication by the University Press, Fribourg, Switzerland. Meantime, cf. J. Huhn, *Das Geheimnis der Jungfrau-Mutter Maria nach dem Kirchenvater Ambrosius* (Würzburg, 1954); G. Jouassard, *Deux chefs de file en théologie mariale dans la seconde moitié du IVème siècle: saint Epiphane et saint Ambroise*, in Gr 42 (1961) 5-36.

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is the one who raised the standard of virginity for other virgins in a spirit of dedication to Christ."⁵⁵ We have evidence of the value Christ attached to virginity from the truth that He chose a Virgin for His Mother:

Father of grace, we thank you that we now see in holy virgins that angelic life on earth which once we lost in paradise. For what could contribute more to encourage a desire for virginity and perseverance in it than the truth that God was born of a virgin.⁵⁶

Your only-begotten Son Himself, about to come into the world to restore what had been lost, could not find a more pure source of His flesh, than by choosing for His dwelling place the Virgin, who would be at once the sanctuary of immaculate chastity and the temple of God.⁵⁷

Our Lord chose this form of life for Himself and for His Mother.⁵⁸ Further, He wished that His Mother be the model of virgins: "It could not be that the one who was to inspire others to practise virginity by her example should be in any way deficient here."⁵⁹ For His Mother this good Son has also laid up the reward of virgins: "He promised others they would not fail; could He permit His Mother to fail? She did not fail, the teacher of virginity remained constant."⁶⁰ Mary is not only model, she also distributes the grace of virginity to others:

Mary's grace was so great that not only did she keep the grace of virginity in herself, but also bestowed the privilege of purity on those she went to see. She visited John the Baptist, and

⁵⁵ *De inst. virg.*, in *PL* 16, 314.

⁵⁶ *De inst. virg.*, in *PL* 16, 330-331.

⁵⁷ *De inst. virg.*, in *PL* 16, 331.

⁵⁸ *Ep. 42 ad Sviricum*, in *PL* 16, 1124-1125.

⁵⁹ *De inst. virg.*, in *PL* 16, 317.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

he leaped in his mother's womb before he was born. At Mary's voice the little infant exulted, submissively hearkening to her, whilst yet unborn. And with good reason was it, that he persevered perfectly chaste in body, he whom the Lord's Mother for three months trained with, so to say, the oil of her presence and the unguent of her own chastity. She was, moreover, herself afterwards given to the care of John the evangelist, who knew not wedlock. And hence I marvel not that he above all others spoke divine mysteries, since he had close at hand the court of the heavenly palace of heavenly mysteries.⁶¹

A favorite comparison was to liken Christian virgins to the choir of virgins in heaven. St. Ambrose places Mary at the head of that heavenly choir, using imagery from both Old and New Testament. From *Ex.* 15, 20 he took over and over again the example of Mary, sister of Moses and Aaron, leading the women in singing the canticle intoned by Moses at the crossing of the Red Sea.⁶² The application of this text to Mary, as leader of virgins, became common after the time of Ambrose and Jerome. A New Testament text that was often invoked was the scene from the *Apoc.* 14, 3 ff.: "And they were singing as it were a new song before the throne . . . for they are virgins. These follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were purchased from among men, first-fruits unto God and unto the Lamb, and in their mouth there was found no lie; they are without blemish."

Even though the virgins in the entourage of the Lamb of the Apocalypse may refer more to faith and to integrity of faith, it is significant that this purity of faith and attachment to Christ is expressed by the image of virginity. The same is true of *2 Cor.* 11, 2, where St. Paul compares the whole

⁶¹ *De inst. virg.*, in *PL* 16, 319; in *Exp. in Luc.*, in *PL* 15, 1930, Ambrose says: *Joannes ergo, qui plenius divina penetravit mysteria, non immerito laboravit, ut quae Deum generaverat, mansisse eam virginem declaret.*

⁶² Neumann, *op. cit.*, discusses at length the Ambrosian references to Mary leading the choir of virgins.

Christian community to a chaste bride offered to the heavenly bridegroom Christ: "For I betrothed you to one spouse, that I might present you a chaste virgin to Christ." Long before, the Shepherd of Hermas had spoken of the virgin as the "daughter of faith."⁶³

The Ambrosian hymn, *Jesu corona virginum*, conveys the same heavenly sense of virginity and of Mary's virginity: "Jesu . . . qui pergis inter lilia septus choreis virginum."⁶⁴

A brief note of ecumenical interest:

In *Humanae salutis*, December 25, 1961, Pope John announced the opening of the ecumenical council in 1962, and called for prayers in union with Mary the Mother of Jesus for a new Pentecost in justice and truth, in love and peace. The perpetual virginity of Mary has been a jagged stone of stumbling between Catholics and other Christians in the centuries since the Reformation (although Calvin and Luther themselves held it). Commonly, too, Protestants refuse to recognize the superiority of the state of virginity to that of marriage, as was defined by Trent.⁶⁵ There is, I believe, a close if often unconscious connection between the two denials. There I find it both hopeful and significant to call attention to a book by Max Thurian recently translated into English, *Marriage and Celibacy*.⁶⁶ The author belongs to the French Calvinist celibate community of Taizé, founded by Roger

⁶³ As quoted in Perrin, *Virginity*, xii, from *PG* 2, 906.

⁶⁴ Neumann, *op. cit.*, favors this view, quoting in its support A. S. Walpole, *Early Latin Hymns* (Cambridge, 1922) 113.

⁶⁵ *D.B.*, no. 980.

⁶⁶ Max Thurian, *Marriage and Celibacy*, trans. by Norma Emerton (London, 1959); Thurian has also written on our Lady, e.g., *Marie dans la Bible et dans l'Eglise*, in *Dialogue sur la Vierge* (Paris, 1950) 107-130. In *Marriage and Celibacy* he refers to the perpetual virginity of Mary without however committing himself, although another Protestant contributor to *Dialogue sur la Vierge*, Gustave Schmied, *Ma croyance en Marie mère de Jesus*, 11-35, does defend it.

Schütz. In *Marriage and Celibacy*, although still holding fast to the Protestant denial of the superiority of the state of virginity, he extols freely chosen celibacy along with the vocation of Christian marriage, and also refers interestingly to our Lady's virginity. A few sentences are indicative of his approach:

For Thurian, the Christian celibate has "chosen a truly new way of life inaugurated by Jesus, at the fulfillment of time." "The Christian celibate, therefore, commits himself not so much until death as until the return of Jesus Christ. That is the meaning of his permanent commitment. He chooses the state of celibacy for the sake of the kingdom and in expectation of the return of Christ. . . ." ⁸⁷

"The virginity of Mary when the Incarnation took place shows this meaning of complete dependence on the Lord. Mary was a virgin in her motherhood of Christ not because there would have been anything unseemly for her in marriage, but in order to show that in giving the Savior to the world she consecrated her body and her spirit to God alone in an act of perfect dependence." ⁸⁸

On the theological meaning of celibacy: "Voluntary celibacy for the kingdom of heaven's sake is the sign of a new order where marriage is no longer, as in the Old Testament, a necessity for ensuring posterity to Abraham. . . . Among Christians who must all use this world as not using it to the full, the celibate is the sign of the detachment required by the expectation of the kingdom of God. So celibacy is not alone in bearing this eschatological meaning, but it is a striking sign of the new order which detaches us from this passing world." ". . . celibacy is related to the resurrection from the dead; it is a sign of eternity, of incorruptibility and of life. . . . In the next world it is no longer necessary to ensure a succession, since we are

⁸⁷ Thurian, *op. cit.*, 103.

⁸⁸ Thurian, *op. cit.*, 110.

immortal. Further, in the kingdom of heaven there is only one Father, for all, like the angels, are called children of God. Because of this relationship with the resurrection from the dead, with eternity and with the angels, celibacy is a sign of the world to come."⁶⁹

Closing summary:

Here is a summary of what this article has attempted: Christian virginity and our Lady's virginity in particular are strongly eschatological in significance. Earlier papers in the convention gave both scriptural and liturgical collaboration of this truth. Father Clarke's speculative theology paper also underscored the sense of the kingdom to come in Christian virginity. The classic trichotomy of virginity *ante*, *in*, and *post partum* has been taken as the framework of comparison between virginity and eschatology in the present article. Eschatology has been restricted to the *novissima* that are still to come. Without denying that we are, of course, already in the "end-time" since the coming of Christ, the focus was rather on future fulfillment—of which present Christian virginity is the gauge and the promise.

Virginity *ante partum* was viewed from Christological vantage point—as Mary's share in the Incarnation, and therefore her involvement in our spiritual regeneration, in present grace, and in future glory. The concern of the Lateran Council of 649 with our Lady's virginity was a concern with the sinlessness of the Redeemer.

The theme of virginity *in partu* provided the opportunity for some remarks along the line of a *status quaestionis*. One theological value, as Laurentin has illustrated, of the miracle of the virginity *in partu* is its eschatological one—the rejoicing of Mary's child-bearing is opposed to the curse of parturition of the fall. There is also a close link between the virginity of

⁶⁹ Thurian, *op. cit.*, 112-115.

Mary and her assumption, as illustrated, for example, by *Munificentissimus Deus*.

Finally, virginity *post partum* was considered. In this respect Mary is the model of Christian virginity, of life-long dedication to God. Christian virginity in general is eschatological, for it witnesses to the world to come when the number of the elect will be complete, and there will be neither marriage nor giving in marriage. Virginity involves detachment through asceticism truly, but as a means to the positive value of consecration now and forever. Our Lady's consecration to God was total and sacrificial, its positive value the greater because concupiscence did not hamper her progress. Here even some Protestant authorities are finding a meeting ground with us concerning the state of virginity and the Virgin Mary that holds out ecumenical hope.

For a closing word, *Sacra virginitas* offers a practical corollary on Christian virginity in the words of St. Jerome: "For me, virginity means dedication through Mary and through Christ."⁷⁰

REV. EAMON R. CARROLL, O.CARM.
The Catholic University of America
Washington, D. C.

⁷⁰ *Epist.* 22, in *PL* 22, 405.