

5-2015

Mary, Spouse of Joseph, Model for Married Life

Joseph Arias
Christendom College

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

 Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Arias, Joseph (2015) "Mary, Spouse of Joseph, Model for Married Life," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 66, Article 3.
Available at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol66/iss1/3

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 frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

MARY, SPOUSE OF JOSEPH, MODEL FOR MARRIED LIFE

Joseph Arias, STL

Broadly, I propose to respond to the following question: What does the unique spousal relationship of Mary and Joseph have to teach families and individuals about the nature of marriage and conjugal love, especially in Christian marriage? While the circumstances of their particular relationship and calling might seem too extraordinary to appear relevant for recent thinking about marriage and family life, I will argue that it is precisely in view of the unique features of their spousal relationship that Mary and Joseph can be appreciated as exemplary for married life, even in modern times.

While the particular circumstances of the marital vocation of Mary and Joseph might appear too extraordinary to be relevant for contributing to an understanding of marriage in modern times, it is precisely in view of the unique features of their spousal relationship that Mary and Joseph can be appreciated as exemplary for married life in all ages. The writings of Saints Augustine, Ambrose, and Thomas Aquinas on marriage and virginity provide insights for understanding how the relationship of Mary and Joseph could be both perpetually virginal and perfectly conjugal at the same time. Ultimately, by revealing what is essential for a true marriage, even while maintaining

their virginity, the unique relationship of Mary and Joseph avoids supporting hedonistic and overly romanticized views of matrimony. On the other hand, by modeling conjugal love, they also provide a safeguard against overly legalistic views of marriage. But in their modeling they are not equal. Mary is the principal model, for Joseph first, and by extension for everyone else.

Broadly, I propose to respond to the following question: What does the unique spousal relationship of Mary and Joseph have to teach families and individuals about the nature of marriage and conjugal love, especially in Christian marriage? While the circumstances of their particular relationship and calling might seem too extraordinary to appear relevant for recent thinking about marriage and family life, I will argue that it is precisely in view of the unique features of their spousal relationship that Mary and Joseph can be appreciated as exemplary for married life, even in modern times.

In order to present the Blessed Virgin Mary as a model for married life, it is necessary to provide first an explanation concerning how she and Saint Joseph were true spouses even in the absence of carnal union. Although it might seem counterintuitive, in a certain respect it is precisely because of the complete absence of carnal relations that the covenantal relationship between Mary and Joseph can be understood as an exemplar for any true marriage. How can this be, given that most marriages are not perpetually virginal, and especially considering that the marital relationship itself is characterized by an intrinsic ordination to actions which per se are ordered to the procreation of children? It can be because the marriage of Mary and Joseph is *revelatory* of what is *essential to being spouses*.

In a strict sense, to speak theologically of a proposition as revelatory means that the proposition embodies a truth disclosed by God in a supernatural manner. This is a description of a formally revealed truth. A proposition may also contain a

virtually revealed truth. This can happen when the proposition is the conclusion from two premises, one formally revealed, the other naturally known. For example, joining the formally revealed truth that Jesus Christ is true God and true man to the naturally known truth that it belongs to man to laugh, yields the virtually revealed truth that Jesus Christ is risible, or capable of the species of laughter that is the product of rational delight.¹ Finally, in a wider sense we might speak of something as revelatory when it provides the occasion for deeper understanding of a given reality, such as the nature of marriage.

In light of the history of theological and canonical discussions on the marriage of Mary and Joseph, it is necessary to conclude that their relationship is revelatory of the essence of marriage at least in the wide sense of the term, if not also in the virtually or even formally revealed sense. Indeed, in some respects it is possible to trace the history of the development of the understanding of the essence of matrimony in relation to disputes about the status of the marital relationship of Mary and Joseph. In his 1954 doctoral dissertation at the Catholic University of America, “Legislation and Requirements for Permissible Cohabitation in Invalid Marriages: A Historical Synopsis and a Commentary,” Rev. Bernard Sullivan notes:

The notion of the essence of marriage remained obscure and confused until the time of Gratian and Gregory IX in the 12th and 13th centuries. At that time the problem of the relationship of marital consent and consummation was at the zenith of discussion and debate. The ideas of the ancient writers, such as Ambrose, had become obscured, and it became imperative to state with finality whether or not ‘consent’ alone

¹ Gerard Van Noort, *The Sources of Revelation, Divine Faith, Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 3: trans. and revised by John J. Castelot, SS, and William R. Murphy, SS (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1961), 208.

effected marriage, or whether ‘consummation’ was likewise necessary. The marriage of Mary and Joseph was a main point of the discussion.²

While some Church Fathers and Medieval writers held differing views precisely because they were confused about the marital status of Mary and Joseph, I will focus on some writings within the theological tradition that preserved clearly two truths that eventually became universally indisputable: 1) between Mary and Joseph there was a true bond of marriage; 2) the bond of marriage is brought into being not through carnal intercourse, but by means of the mutual consent exchanged between the man and woman.

I will start with a couple of brief texts from Saint Ambrose, whom Father Sullivan referenced. First, in reference to Joseph’s plan to dismiss Mary quietly, in his *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*, Ambrose wrote:

Let it not disturb you that Holy Scripture calls Mary wife: for it is not the deprivation of virginity, but the legally performed marriage contract that establishes the married state; in fine, no one can dismiss a wife whom he has not taken to wife; therefore he who intended to dismiss her acknowledges thereby that he had taken her to wife.³

Again, in his *De Institutione Virginis*, we read:

² Bernard Sullivan, “Legislation and Requirements for Permissible Cohabitation in Invalid Marriages: A Historical Synopsis and a Commentary (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1954), 3.

³ Saint Ambrose, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*, Book 2, No. 5, trans. in Joseph Mueller, *The Fatherhood of St. Joseph* (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1952), 24.

Nor let it disturb you because it is said that Joseph received his wife and departed into Egypt; for one betrothed to a man received the name (wife). For when the conjugal union is begun, then the title of marriage is recognized; for it is not the defloration of virginity that makes the marriage, but the conjugal contract. Finally, the marriage exists when he is joined with the girl, not when she is acquainted with manly mingling.⁴

There are two passages from Ambrose's most famous convert, Saint Augustine, which will be useful to consider here as well. The first comes from Book One of *De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia*.

If married people freely and with mutual consent have chosen to refrain from indulging carnal desires, the marriage bond between them is not loosened thereby: far from it. On the contrary, it will be all the stronger, the firmer that agreement is, an agreement to be kept with even greater love and concord, *not in the union of bodies*, but in the harmony of two hearts beating in unison. Hence there was not falsehood in what the angel said to Joseph: "Do not be afraid to take to thee Mary thy wife, for what is begotten in her is of the Holy Spirit." She is called wife ever since she had pledged her troth to him, *although he had not known her carnally, nor was ever to do so*; nor had the name "Wife" lost its meaning or become a falsehood because there had never been, and never would be, any carnal intercourse. For this virgin was to her husband a source of joy all the more holy and wonderful, because she became a mother without

⁴ This is my translation of Saint Ambrose, *De Institutione Virginis*, cap. 6, par. 41 [Library of Latin Texts]: *Nec illud moveat, quod ait quia Ioseph accepit coniugem suam et profectus est in Aegyptum; desponsata enim viro nomen accepit. Cum enim initiatur coniugium, tunc coniugii nomen adsciscitur; non enim defloratio virginitatis facit coniugium, sed pactio coniugalis. Denique cum iungitur puella, coniugium est, non cum virili admixtione cognoscitur.*

man's intervention, differing from him as regards the offspring, but altogether like him in mutual fidelity.⁵

In this passage it is clear that Augustine considered that the marriage of Mary and Joseph was true, and ever remained so since the pledge of fidelity, that is since the spousal contract. Moreover, in this text the holy Doctor also provides a principle for understanding how the conjugal bond itself can be strengthened in the absence, and even because of the absence, of bodily union. This point is addressed more fully a passage from the saint's *Sermon 51*.

It is not true that for the reason that Joseph had not carnally known the mother of the Lord he was not father, as if it were passion that made a woman one's wife, and not rather conjugal love. Pay attention to this well, dear brethren. Some time in the future the Apostle of Christ was going to declare in the Church 'It remains that those who have wives be as if they had none.' (1 Cor., 7:29). We know many among the brethren who, advanced in grace, in the name of Christ and with mutual consent abstain indeed from carnal indulgence, but do not at all withhold from each other their conjugal love. The more the former is restrained, the more the latter increases in them. Are those who lead such a life perhaps not wedded because they do not demand from each other the carnal debt? Yet she is subject to her husband as is becoming (Col., 2:18), and this the more so, the more chaste she is; and he, on the other hand, loves his wife truly and, as it is written, in honor and holiness (1 Thess., 4:4) as coheir of grace (1Pet., 3:7), just as Christ has loved the Church. (Eph., 5:25). *Therefore let no one put asunder those who can lead that life, nor*

⁵ Saint Augustine, *De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia*, Lib. I, c. 2, trans. in Sullivan, "Legislation ... Invalid Marriages," 7.

for that reason refuse the name husband and wife to those who are bound together, though not in the flesh, yet in their hearts.⁶

Combining aspects of both texts, we can discern several distinct but related Augustinian doctrines regarding marriage. First, the bond of marriage comes into being and is stable through the pledge of spousal fidelity, not through carnal union. Second, the marital relationship is strengthened in proportion to the increase of conjugal love, which itself can increase the more spouses mutually agree to abstain from conjugal relations for spiritual motives. Third, and very interestingly, the more chaste a wife is, the more reason her husband will have to love her truly, as Christ has loved the Church. Finally, the marriage of Mary and Joseph should be understood as illustrative for each of these truths. I will return to the second and third points below. But let us conclude our consideration of the first point by looking at some texts from Saint Thomas Aquinas, who not only agreed with Ambrose and Augustine but also provided an enlightening, systematic approach to the question of how the perpetually virginal marriage of Mary and Joseph can be consistent with the establishment of a relationship that is naturally and primarily ordered to the procreation of children.

Saint Thomas's systematic teaching on the virginal marriage of Mary and Joseph can be found most clearly in Questions 28 and 29 in the Third Part of the *Summa Theologiae*. Question 28 is devoted to explaining the fittingness of the virginity of the Mother of God in conceiving Christ (article 1), in giving birth to Christ (article 2), after giving birth (article 3), and in her intention to remain a virgin before and after her espousal to

⁶ Saint Augustine, *Sermon 51*, Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, XXII, trans. in Sullivan, "Legislation ... Invalid Marriages," 6.

Joseph (article 4). The foundation in revelation for the first two articles is the Septuagint and Matthean rendering of Isaiah 7:14, “Behold a virgin shall conceive and shall bear a son.” Among the many reasons for fittingness given for the truths in the first two articles, a succinct set of reasons comes in Thomas’s reply to the second objection of Article 2: “Christ wished so to show the reality of His body, as to manifest His Godhead at the same time. For this reason He mingled wondrous with lowly things. Wherefore, to show that His body was real, He was born of a woman. But in order to manifest His Godhead, He was born of a virgin, for *such a Birth befits a God*, as Ambrose says in the Christmas hymn.”⁷

The foundation in tradition for the fittingness of the virginity of the Mother of God *post partum* (article 3) is the early-Church abhorrence of the error of Helvidius, who held that after the birth of Christ Mary and Joseph conceived and bore other children in the natural manner. Reasons provided to help explain that abhorrence include the doctrine’s derogatory nature in relation to Christ as Only-Begotten of the Father, which Thomas believes should be honored *in time* through being the only-begotten of Mary; its derogatory nature in relation to the Holy Spirit whose shrine is the virginal womb; its derogatory nature in relation to Mary, who would have voluntarily forfeited her virginity which had been miraculously preserved in her; and its derogatory nature in imputing extreme presumption to Joseph to violate the virginity which he knew to have been divinely preserved. Thomas uses these and other like considerations to set up a foundational claim of the fourth article: “Now it is clear that for

⁷ Translations of the *Summa Theologiae* are from The Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1981).

reasons already given virginity had a special place in the Mother of God.” Thomas joins this observation with the principle that “works of perfection are more praiseworthy when performed in fulfillment of a vow,”⁸ hence, “it was ... fitting that her virginity should be consecrated to God by vow.” But the ultimate foundation for thinking that Mary took a vow of virginity before she conceived Christ is found in her response to the angel of the Annunciation: “How shall this be done, because I know not man?” Quoting from Augustine, Thomas notes, “She would not have said this unless she had already vowed her virginity to God.”⁹ Thus, Thomas agrees that Our Lady’s perplexity is inexplicable unless her response is taken as indicative of the *state* of virginity, which one enters only through a deliberate and voluntary promise made to God to preserve virginity.

Now a special Thomistic contribution is found in the account of the manner in which Mary’s vow became absolute. Still in article four, Thomas notes that Our Lady was bound by the precepts and customs of the Old Law, according to which “it seemed to be forbidden ... not to take the necessary steps for leaving a posterity on earth.”¹⁰ Hence, “while the Law was in force both men and women were bound to attend to the duty of begetting, since the worship of God was spread according to carnal origin, until Christ was born of that people.”¹¹ Accordingly, Thomas maintains that prior to her espousal Mary

⁸ See *Summa Theologiae* II-II Q. 88, art. 6, and Q. 189, art. 2.

⁹ *Summa Theologiae* III Q. 28, art. 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Reply to Objection 1 (the objection had quoted Deut.7:14: “No one shall be barren among you of either sex”).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, corpus.

did not vow virginity absolutely, although she desired to do so, but “under the condition that it were pleasing to God,”¹² and “yielding her own will to God’s judgment.”¹³ After her espousal, and knowing that it was acceptable to God, “by their common consent she took a vow of virginity together with her spouse” in an absolute manner before the annunciation of the angel.¹⁴

Thomas’s account so far allows us to understand why, in light of the Old Law, Mary would have refrained from taking an absolute vow of virginity prior to her marriage. However, at the end of Question 28, some questions remain. If Mary did desire to vow virginity absolutely prior to her espousal, in what manner did she desire to marry Joseph? Also, given the Old Testament expectation of begetting children in marriage, how did Mary and Joseph ever come to the conclusion that they should take an unconditional vow of virginity after their espousals? Finally, if they were eventually going to arrive at the conclusion of an unconditional vow while under the Old Law, why make the distinction between a conditional vow and an absolute vow in the first place? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to consider some points from Question 29, *On the Espousals of the Mother of God*. Thomas devotes only two articles to this question: 1) Whether Christ should have been born of an espoused virgin? 2) Whether there was a true marriage between Mary and Joseph?

The principal parts of the first article that are relevant here are the first objection and its reply. The first objection to the fittingness of Christ being born of an espoused virgin is that

¹² Ibid., Reply to Objection 1.

¹³ Ibid., corpus.

¹⁴ Ibid., Reply to Objection 3.

since espousals are ordered to intercourse, and the Blessed Virgin never wished for that act with her husband, which would have been “derogatory to the virginity of her mind,” she should not have been espoused. Saint Thomas replies: “We must believe that the Blessed Virgin, Mother of God, desired, from an intimate inspiration of the Holy Ghost, to be espoused, being confident that by the help of God she would never come to have carnal intercourse: yet she left this to God’s discretion. Wherefore she suffered nothing in detriment to her virginity.” Hence, for Thomas, God’s internal inspiration plays an important part in the explanation of why Mary would have had a positive desire to enter the married state while at the same time desiring never to consummate that state.

The body of the second article of Question 29 directly addresses the nature of marriage in relation to the vow of Mary and Joseph.

Marriage or wedlock is said to be true by reason of its attaining its perfection. Now perfection of anything is twofold; first, and second. The first perfection of a thing consists in its very form, from which it receives its species; while the second perfection of a thing consists in its operation, by which in some way a thing attains its end. Now the form of matrimony consists in a certain inseparable union of souls, by which husband and wife are pledged by a bond of mutual affection that cannot be sundered. And the end of matrimony is the begetting and upbringing of children: the first of which is attained by conjugal intercourse; the second by the other duties of husband and wife, by which they help one another in rearing their offspring.

Thus we may say, as to the first perfection, that the marriage of the Virgin Mother of God and Joseph was absolutely true: because both consented to the nuptial bond, but not expressly to the bond of the flesh, save on the condition that it was pleasing to God. ... But as to the second perfection which is attained by the marriage act ... this marriage was not consummated. ... Nevertheless, this marriage had the second perfection, as to upbringing of the child.

It is clear from this text that Saint Thomas believed the marriage bond between Mary and Joseph was absolutely true according to its form, and that the absence of consummation detracted nothing from this first perfection of wedlock. Moreover, this first perfection was brought into being “because both consented to the nuptial bond” itself. But what does it mean to say they did not consent “*expressly* to the bond of the flesh, save on the condition that it was pleasing to God”? The answer to part of this question appears to be contained in the body of Question 48, Article 1, of the Supplement of the *Summa*.

... marriage is not essentially the carnal union itself, but a certain joining together of husband and wife ordained to carnal intercourse, and a further consequent union between husband and wife, in so far as they each receive power over the other in reference to carnal intercourse, which joining together is called the nuptial bond. Hence it is evident that they said well who asserted that to consent to marriage is to consent to carnal intercourse implicitly and not explicitly. For carnal intercourse is not to be understood, except as an effect is implicitly contained in its cause, for the power to have carnal intercourse, which power is the object of the consent, is the cause of carnal intercourse, just as the power to use one’s own property is the cause of the use.

For Thomas, consenting to the nuptial bond does not have to involve explicit reference to carnal intercourse. (Hence, formulas for exchanging marital consent frequently make no mention of carnal intercourse.) But if two persons exchange matrimonial consent, they implicitly give and receive power over the other in reference to carnal intercourse. In canonical language, we can say that whatever the form of words used to express consent, if true matrimonial consent is exchanged, then the man and the woman necessarily exchanged rights in relation to each other for actions which per se are ordered to the procreation of offspring. The objective ordination of the bond of marriage in relation to carnal intercourse, by giving the moral

right or power to it, helps explain why Saint Thomas was so concerned with providing a detailed explanation of the vows of Mary and Joseph.

In order to underscore the importance of the order in which Saint Thomas believed the desires, vows, and states took place, it is necessary to note another principle found in his reply to the first objection of Question 48, Article 1 of the Supplement. “The reason why consent to marriage after taking the vow of virginity is sinful, is because that consent gives a power to do what is unlawful: even so would a man sin if he gave another man the power to receive that which he has in deposit, and not only by actually delivering it to him.” Hence, it is very significant for Thomas when the vow of Mary became absolute. On his account, if it were absolute prior to the contracting of marriage, it would not have been lawful for her to have entered into marriage, excepting a dispensation from God. Positing a conditional vow first allows Thomas to explain Mary’s desire for perpetual virginity and the lawfulness of her matrimonial consent.

Having considered the relevant passages from Questions 28 and 29, it will be helpful to set in order Saint Thomas’s account of how Mary progressed from a conditional vow of virginity, to marriage, to an absolute vow together with Saint Joseph. In view of the important role virginity would have in her vocation, by the grace of God Mary apprehended the blessing of virginity and desired it early on. Yet because of the force of the Old Law and the obscurity of divine providence in relation to her virginal desire, she made a vow of virginity in a conditional manner only, yielding her will to God’s judgment, and preserving a balance (so to speak) between what she desired in her heart by grace and what she knew intellectually from the Law (that she might find herself in such a position is not surprising given that in her person she was literally a bridge between the Old Law and the New). Being disposed to follow God’s will in all things, and in

keeping with her knowledge of the customs of the Old Law, “from an intimate inspiration of the Holy Spirit” Mary then desired “to be espoused, being confident that by the help of God she would never come to have carnal intercourse: yet she left this to God’s discretion. Wherefore she suffered nothing in detriment to her virginity” in mind or desire.¹⁵ Accordingly, Mary and Joseph exchange true matrimonial consent, being open to consummation according to God’s will.¹⁶ This allows their contracting of marriage to be both valid and virtuous. After contracting marriage, by divine grace (but in a way not clearly specified by Saint Thomas), Mary and Joseph discern with certainty that God wills their marriage to be virginal in perpetuity. Consequently, with mutual consent they vow virginity absolutely.

One notable assumption throughout Saint Thomas’s synthesis is that Joseph himself is a virgin. It is evident from his

¹⁵ In his *Commentary on the Sentences* of Peter Lombard, IV Sent., dist. 30, q. 2, a. 1, q.2 ad 2um, Thomas explains further: “she was supernaturally assured, before her marriage, that Joseph was of the same mind; therefore she suffered no detriment to her virginity. However, this did not impair the veracity of the marriage, because their intention was not placed as a condition in their consent; such a condition, since it would be against the purpose of marriage—procreation—would annul it.” Quoted in Boniface Llamera, *Saint Joseph*, trans. Sister Mary Elizabeth (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1963), 45.

¹⁶ See also the interesting commentary of Cajetan on the third part of the *Summa*, Q. 28, art. 2: “The condition (if it should please God) should not be taken in its most common sense, namely, expecting that God will not deny or prohibit it, but rather that He will permit it. Thus (upon consenting to the marriage) virginity would disappear. The verb “to please” (*iubere*) is taken to mean ‘to command’; as if to say: If God should command it. It is reasonable to believe that they should not desist from the vow which by divine inspiration they had made before marriage, except by divine command.” Quoted in *Ibid.*, 44.

reply to the fifth objection of Question 28, Article 3, that Thomas inherited this understanding from Saint Jerome, in the latter's work "Against Helvidius." Replying to the charge that the "brethren" of the Lord must refer to offspring of the same parent, Thomas says, almost in passing, "but Joseph, as Jerome says, is rather to be believed to have remained a virgin." Turning to the words of Jerome, we find what is surely one of the most profound statements made by any Church Father concerning Joseph's relationship to Mary. Addressing Helvidius, Jerome wrote: "You say that Mary did not remain a virgin: I claim much more, even Joseph himself was a virgin through Mary, so that a virgin son might be born from a virginal marriage."¹⁷

What could it mean to say that Joseph himself was a virgin *through* Mary? Among other significations, the preposition *per*, *through*, can mean either "by means of," or "for the sake of." Both meanings can make sense here. It is for Mary's sake that Joseph, by divine grace, preserved his virginity prior to and during their marriage. Furthermore, because Mary's virginity was preserved for the sake of Christ, Joseph's virginity was ultimately preserved for the same reason, as Jerome mentions. Also, it is most reasonable to think that Joseph maintained, grew in appreciation for, and lived more intensely his own vocation to virginal chastity *by means of* Mary's model and her spousal help. Hence, it may be said that as "Teacher of Virginity," a title introduced by St. Ambrose and referenced explicitly by Pope

¹⁷ "tu dicis Mariam virginem non permanisse: ego mihi plus vindico, etiam ipsum Ioseph virginem fuisse per Mariam, ut ex virginali coniugio virgo filius nasceretur." Saint Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium de Mariae virginitate perpetua* (CPL 0609) par.: 19, col.: 213, line 16.

Pius XII, Mary's primary and most important disciple was Joseph himself, her most chaste spouse.¹⁸

Spousal help as such is specified in relation to the spousal bond uniting the couple. In harmony with St. Jerome's statement concerning Joseph's virginity through Mary, we must also admit that it is through his marital bond with the Blessed Virgin that Joseph participated most eminently in her dignity. In his encyclical letter on devotion to St. Joseph, *Quamquam pluries*, Pope Leo XIII taught:

In truth, the dignity of the Mother of God is so lofty that naught created can rank above it. But as Joseph has been united to the Blessed Virgin by the ties of marriage (*maritale vinculum*), it may not be doubted that he approached nearer than any to the eminent dignity by which the Mother of God surpasses so nobly all created natures. For marriage is the most intimate of all unions which from its essence imparts a community of gifts between those that by it are joined together. Thus in giving Joseph the Blessed Virgin as spouse, God appointed him to be not only her life's companion, the witness of her maidenhood, the protector of her honour, but also, by virtue of the conjugal tie (*coniugali foedere*), a participator in her sublime dignity.¹⁹

In a similar way, the Dominican theologian Boniface Llamero taught, "the entire theology of St. Joseph (Josephology) has one first and principal basis: the marriage which united him to Mary,

¹⁸ See Saint Ambrose, *De institutione virginis*, c. 6, n. 46; PL XVI, 320; and Pope Pius XII, Encyclical Letter *Sacra virginitatis* (On Consecrated Virginity), March 25, 1954.

¹⁹ The English and Latin texts are taken from the edition found on the Vatican website: http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15081889_quamquam-pluries.html; and http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/la/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15081889_quamquam-pluries.html, respectively.

the Mother of Christ. This first principle is indisputably recognized by writers on St. Joseph. ‘This fact,’ says Lepicier, ‘is the reason and foundation of all the dignities and privileges of this holy Patriarch.’”²⁰ Borrowing from Saint Thomas’s formulation, the foundation for the teaching of Pope Leo and Llamero can be stated in the following way. “In every genus, the nearer a thing is to the principle, the greater the part which it has in the effect of that principle.”²¹ Through the conjugal bond (*vinculum*) or covenant (*foedere*), Joseph approached nearer to Mary than any created person. Hence, he participated more sublimely in the dignities of her grace, her charity, her virginity, her chastity, and every virtue she models and aids others in obtaining and increasing.

Briefly, I want to raise and respond to two possible objections. The first has to do with the claim that through the marital bond Joseph was closer to Mary than any human person. One might object that paternity or maternity should be seen as a closer relation than spouse. For a child derives his very being from his parent, and the paternal relationship is never-ending. What could be a more profound human relation than that? While it may be that the parental relationship is more intimate in some respects, there is at least one respect in which the spousal relation draws a man and a woman closer. That respect concerns the wills of the two involved. In his 1930 encyclical letter on Christian marriage, *Casti connubii*, Pope Pius XI stated: “By matrimony, therefore, the souls of the contracting parties are joined and knit together more directly and more intimately than

²⁰ Boniface Llamera, *Saint Joseph*, 17. The Lepicier quote is from *Tractatus de St. Joseph*, p. 99 (ed. 2, Rome, 1929).

²¹ ST III Q. 27, Art. 5.

are their bodies, and that not by any passing affection of sense or spirit, but by a deliberate and firm act of the will; and from this union of souls by God's decree, a sacred and inviolable bond arises."²² The parental relation, however profound, does not naturally presuppose any mutual agreement of wills between the progenitor and the begotten. On the other hand, mutual voluntariness in the form of consent is a necessary condition for any natural or sacramental nuptial bond. Hence, with respect to voluntary engagement, marriage must draw two nearer than other family ties.

The second objection questions how Mary can be considered the exemplar and source for the dignities of her spouse, when it must be Jesus Himself who has those roles. In response it is necessary to affirm, of course, that Jesus is the *ultimate* exemplar and source, even for Mary herself. In fact, in the same article where Saint Thomas explicated the rule that the nearer a thing is to the principle the more it partakes of its effect, he goes on to say: "Now Christ is the principle of grace, authoritatively as to His Godhead, instrumentally as to His humanity ... But the Blessed Virgin Mary was nearest to Christ in His humanity: because He received His human nature from her. Therefore it was due to her to receive a greater fullness of grace than others."²³ But we may continue in this line of thinking by adding that as Joseph was then closest to Mary in agreement of will, it was due to him to receive a greater dignity than others.

We may also qualify things further and say that in terms of a spousal model and helpmate, Mary must be the *proximate*

²² *Casti connubii*, Vatican trans. (Boston, MA: Pauline Books and Media, n. d.), 6.

²³ ST III Q. 27, Art. 5.

source for Joseph's dignity and virtue, but at the same time Mary is necessarily an *instrument* of Jesus Christ, Who is the ultimate foundation for everything good she offers to Joseph and to us. I say *to us* also because there is a real way in which we are included in this progression even *through* Joseph. Jesus is the ultimate model and source for all; by Mary's nearness to Him, she is the model and source for Joseph through their conjugal bond; and, with Mary, Joseph also becomes a model for us.

Further on in *Quamquam pluries*, Pope Leo affirms that "Fathers of families find in Joseph the best personification (*praestantissimam formam*) of paternal solicitude and vigilance; spouses a perfect example of love, of peace, and of conjugal fidelity; virgins at the same time find in him the model and protector of virginal integrity (*habent virgines integritatis virginalis exemplar eundem ac tutorem*)." It is notable that Joseph is not only the protector of virginal integrity, but literally its *exemplar*. In its context, this teaching not only confirms Saint Jerome's teaching on Joseph's virginity through Mary, but also that teaching is further developed to present his virginity and every other virtue to every family and individual as modeled in Joseph.

I would like to conclude with some comments related to the teaching that spouses find in Joseph a "perfect example of love." Let us recall two points derived from Saint Augustine that were mentioned earlier: first, that the marital relationship is strengthened in proportion to the increase of conjugal love, which itself can increase the more spouses mutually agree to abstain from conjugal relations for spiritual motives; second that the more chaste a wife is, the more reason her husband will have to love her truly, as Christ has loved the Church. One important question that arises from these points is: what is the object of "conjugal love"? Considered from the point of supernatural revelation (especially Ephesians 5:25: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the Church, and delivered

himself up for her, that he might sanctify her”), the object of Christian conjugal love must include the mutual sanctification of the spouses. In *Casti connubii*, Pope Pius XI went so far as to say:

This outward expression of love in the home demands not only mutual help but must go further; must have as its primary purpose that man and wife help each other day by day in forming and perfecting themselves in the interior life, so that through their partnership in life they may advance ever more and more in virtue, and above all that they may grow in true love towards God and their neighbor, on which indeed ‘dependeth the whole Law and the Prophets.’ ... This mutual inward molding of husband and wife, this determined effort to perfect each other, can in a very real sense, as the Roman Catechism teaches, be said to be the chief reason and purpose of matrimony, provided matrimony be looked at not in the restricted sense as instituted for the proper conception and education of the child, but more widely as the blending of life as a whole and the mutual interchange and sharing thereof.²⁴

In this context, not only does the Augustinian teaching make sense, but also the reasons for the exemplarity of Mary and Joseph’s marriage become supremely clear. In fact, by paying attention to their marriage we are able to avoid two extremes. By revealing to us what is essential to marriage—the contract, not consummation—they help us avoid a hedonistic or overly romanticized view of matrimony, a lesson gravely needed in modern times. On the other hand, by modeling conjugal love in and through their spousal relationship, Mary and Joseph provide a safeguard against overly legalistic views of marriage which might see it as a mere exchange of goods or property rights. But in this modeling they are not equal. As we have seen, Mary is

²⁴ *Casti connubii*, p. 14.

the principal model, for Joseph first, and by extension for everyone else. Hence, as spouse, she truly is the model for all married life.

Author Biography

Joseph Arias is a lecturer in theology at the Notre Dame Graduate School of Christendom College in Alexandria, Virginia, where he serves as faculty advisor for graduate students concentrating in moral theology.

