Ever-Virgin: Teaching the Perpetual Virginity of Mary from Scripture

Few Marian teachings draw more pushback from Protestant friends and family than the perpetual virginity of the Mother of God. The usual objection is that it isn't biblical. A careful look at the text says otherwise.

Sooner or later, most presbyters, deacons, catechists, sponsors, and your everyday Catholic run into the same conversation: a Protestant friend, in-law, or inquirer hears that the Catholic and Orthodox Churches teach Mary remained a virgin not only in conceiving Christ but for the whole of her life, and the objection comes quickly: "this isn't in the Bible!" If the objector is well read, they might add that it wasn't even formally settled by the Church until the Fifth Ecumenical Council. Both halves of that objection deserve a real, concise, and systematic answer.

Take the dogmatic half first: The perpetual virginity of Mary was clearly articulated at the Fifth Ecumenical Council and formally dogmatized at the Lateran Council of 649.[1] However, it is what led to that dogma that is the real story, and in that story, we find the real apologetic. A simple appeal to dogma in its final form will not carry much weight with new seekers, inquirers, catechumens, or genuine objectors. Dei Verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Sacred Scripture, notes that "sacred theology rests on the written word of God, together with sacred tradition, as its primary and perpetual foundation."[2] Likewise, it notes that "easy access" to Scripture should be provided to the faithful.[3] Dogma, in other words, is rooted in Scripture and Scripture is to be made available to all. Therefore, what is taught should begin with Sacred Scripture as the first apologetic in the mind of the pastor, deacon, catechist, or casual teacher – not the other way around. The Patristic witness and the culminating dogma, at least in this context of catechesis and Christian witness, are the contingent reinforcing material – not the leading primary material.

Many, having wrestled with the complexity of the bible, often shy away from beginning with an honest dialogue on Scripture, especially if it is an ad hoc conversation or a question one is not

expecting. However, preachers and teachers are nonetheless expected to offer a substantive explanation, and the mental outline is simple when framed systematically for easy memory recall. Doing so not only brings Marian dogma to life in our own minds, drawing us closer to Christ, but it also gives energy and enthusiasm to the conversations that flow from it. As a former Protestant who lives deep in the heart of a predominantly evangelical part of the country, I've found that conveying confidence in Scripture and enthusiasm for the Lord wins not only instant credibility, but also the ears and mind of the listener. All that remains is the simple task of proving it. That task is surprisingly easy: following Scripture carefully through just three key passages, taken in the published order of the Synoptic Gospels, shows that the case for Mary's perpetual virginity was present and affirmed centuries before the dogma was formalized, and it was done so in the biblical codex that is the common denominator of Trinitarian Christianity. Knowing how to walk someone through the tripartite evidence with simplicity, patience, and confidence is essential to unveiling the beauty of the Faith in a way most have never heard it explained.

Matthew's Testimony: "Until" and "Came Together"

The first common objection comes from Matthew's infancy narrative, and it hinges on two phrases that read very differently in contemporary English than they did in their original linguistic context. The first appears in Matthew 1:18, which states that Mary was found to be with child "before they [Joseph and Mary] came together."[4] A modern reader might assume this implies the couple did come together, in the sexual sense, at some later point. But the phrase carries no such connotation in its original meaning; it simply marks the timing of events relative to their betrothal, without implying anything about what followed.[5] A little later, a more frequently cited phrase appears: when Joseph "took unto him[self] his wife, and knew her not till

she had brought forth her firstborn son" (Mt. 1:24–25). Two details matter here. First, "taking to oneself" (paralambanō/παραλαμβάνω) in the original Greek describes a legal and contractual reality: Mary belonging to Joseph through their betrothal, not a description of ordinary marital relations, which are secondary. Such relations would have been expected in a natural union, but this was a supernatural union, in which Mary bore the Word of God, and did not require them. To reinforce this neutrality of meaning, the same verb, paired with the same word for "know" (ginōskō/γινώσκω), appears in the opening chiastic structure of John's Gospel, where his own did not "receive" him and the world "knew" him not – language of reception and recognition and not of marital relations. Second, and more significantly, the word "till" (or "until") does not carry the sense of an ending point that modern English usage assumes. Rather, it describes a continuous state of being, rather than a state that terminates at a given moment.[6] Matthew narrates the infancy of Christ historically; John retells the same reality theologically, and the shared literary structure suggests a shared sense of "until" as an ongoing temporal usage, and not one that marks a termination in time. This is all to say, neither of Matthew's two famous phrases actually implies that Mary and Joseph had marital relations after Christ's birth.

Mark's Testimony: Brothers, Sisters, and "Kin"

The second objection is likely the most intuitive one and everyone has heard it: the Gospels plainly refer to Jesus's brothers and sisters. Mark 6 records the people of Nazareth asking, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joses, and of Juda, and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" (Mk. 6:3). On the surface, in English, this looks like a direct refutation of Mary's perpetual virginity. However, a closer look at how Mark structures the passage tells a more nuanced story. The verse distinguishes between Jesus's "kin" and his "house" (Mk. 6:4); the two are related but distinct categories in the ancient world, hence why

Mark parsed them out. “Kin” (Gr: syngenēs/συγγενής) refers to children of a different mother, and in scriptural context, it is akin to either cousins, as the West presumes, or stepsiblings, as the East presumes (should Joseph have been previously widowed). “House (oikos/οἶκος),” meanwhile, refers to the broader patrilineal household they are all a part of; it is the extended family bound together by descent through the father’s line rather than by direct maternal kinship.[7] The sisters mentioned in Mark 6 belong to this wider household grouping (oikos), not necessarily to Mary’s immediate family (syngenēs). This distinction is reinforced just three chapters earlier, where Mark separates the two groups even more sharply: in Mark 3, Jesus’s “house” is described as standing in opposition to him, while his “kin,” including his mother, come out not to oppose him but to minister to him (Mk. 3:31). Read together and drawing out the truth (exegesis/exēgeomai), these two passages from Mark suggest that what is often lumped together as one familial entity belonged to Jesus’s wider extended household rather than to Mary’s own immediate family. This reading is consistent with ancient Semitic kinship terminology, which used family language far more broadly than contemporary English does.[8]

Luke’s Testimony: “I Know Not a Man”

The last-ditch objection is usually Luke’s account of the Annunciation. When the Archangel Gabriel tells Mary she will conceive and bear a son, she responds with evident confusion: “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” - or, in the more literal older translation, “How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?” (Lk. 1:34). Both Protestants and Catholics agree this establishes Mary’s virginity at the moment of the Annunciation. The more interesting question is what the specific phrasing implies beyond that single moment.

The connection is not merely thematic, but literary, as the Greek idiom translated “I know not a man” is not simply a statement about Mary’s past; it echoes a specific and recognizable phrase

from the Old Testament. In Judges 11, Jephthah's daughter, mourning her vowed consecration, "bewailed her virginity" and "knew no man," contextual language widely interpreted as describing a permanent, ongoing state of consecrated virginity rather than a temporary fact about her past. Because Greek makes no strict grammatical distinction here between "I do not know man" and "I will not know man," Mary's own words at the Annunciation are reasonably read the same way. In fact, in order to be consistent in biblical continuity, the burden of proof shifts to the objector, as it is a statement not only that she has not yet had relations, but an indication that she does not intend to.[9] Luke frames the two scenes in parallel throughout, and the tradition reads the daughter's consecrated virginity as a figure of Mary's own, seeing in her words a declaration of perpetual, not merely present, virginity.[10]

Putting It All Together

First, Matthew 1:18 identifies the time in relation to betrothal; 1:24–25 points to the contract of union, which is a supernatural union, not a natural one; the word "until" in the examination of Scripture does not point to an ending point, but rather an ongoing reality. Second, Mark 3 and 6 show that his house and kin are distinct groups where context and nuance matter; his brothers are his family, but not necessarily his blood relations; his sisters are not his family at all, but simply part of his patriarchal lineage; therefore, no substantive argument can be made that Mary had other blood children – in fact, quite the opposite. Third, where the witnesses of Matthew and Mark mitigate the objection and cast reasonable doubt, appealing to Luke sees the burden of proof pivot in its own evidence and in consideration of the aforementioned compounding evidence. While it is true the Greek read out of context can be interpreted either way, the scriptural precedent in Judges points to an ongoing reality; therefore, the burden of proof lies not with the Church, but with the objector.

The Church Fathers reinforce the record of belief in Mary's virginity reaching back to the early third century.[11] For example, Hippolytus, Epiphanius, and Augustine all spoke in confirmed communication with other great leaders, such as Pope Damasus and Basil the Great, on Mary's virginity. It's simply not reasonable to offer objection when some of the most influential teachers during the Christological heresies described with uniformity what would be confirmed in dogma at a later date; the belief appears, wherever it surfaces, as an assumed and uncontested part of the Church's faith, not as an innovation requiring defense.[12]

Lead the Conversation with Confidence and Charity

Taken together, Matthew's "until" read through John's parallel chiasm, Mark's careful distinction between kin and household, and Luke's literary idiom echoing Jephthah's daughter, the case against Mary's perpetual virginity turns out to rest less on Scripture itself than on the assumptions a modern English reader brings to it. Taken as a single catechesis or apologetic, the most coherent reading of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, as well as the unanimous early Christian witness leading up to Chalcedon and the Lateran Council,[13] points in a single direction: Mary the Theotokos remained, before, during, and after the birth of her Son, *ever-virgin*.[14] For anyone preparing to walk a friend, family member, or catechumen through this teaching, the most important pastoral instinct is patience rather than pressure – let Scripture speak for itself. The objection usually comes from a sincere concern for biblical fidelity, not hostility to Mary herself, which means the most persuasive response is rarely a flat assertion of Church authority, but a slow, text-by-text walk through exactly what the Synoptics actually say in their original context. Approached that way, the perpetual virginity of the Mother of God stops looking like an imposition layered onto Scripture centuries later, and starts looking like what the earliest Christians always took it to be: a fidelity to the Gospel itself.

Notes

1. Lateran Council of 649, can. 3, in Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*, ed. Peter Hünermann, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), DS 503, which condemns anyone who does not confess that Mary conceived without seed and "incorruptibly bore" the Word, "her virginity remaining indestructible even after His birth." This is the first conciliar text to define virginity after the birth. The Second Council of Constantinople (553), can. 6 (DS 426), which is the council usually cited, affirms the title *Theotokos* together with the epithet *aeiparthenos* ("ever-virgin"), but its anathema concerns the *Theotokos* against Theodore of Mopsuestia; the epithet is used there as settled vocabulary rather than defined. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), §499; and *Catechism of the Ukrainian Catholic Church: Christ — Our Pascha* (Kyiv: Synod of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, 2016), §189, which states that the Lateran Council of 649 defined ever-virginity as virginity before, during, and after the birth of Christ.

2. Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (November 18, 1965), §24.

3. Ibid., §22.

4. Holy Bible, King James Version, Mt. 1:18.

5. Jerome, *The Perpetual Virginity of Blessed Mary, Against Helvidius* 4, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 6:336. Jerome argues that the preposition "before" in Scripture frequently marks order in thought rather than a sequence that must be completed.

6. Jerome, *Against Helvidius* 6–7, where the same argument is made from Deut. 34:6, Ps. 123:2, and Mt. 28:20, in which "until" marks no terminus at all. For the underlying construction, see *Greek-English New Testament: Byzantine Text*, comp. Maurice A. Robinson and William G. Pierpont, trans. Robert A. Boyd (2021), at Mt. 1:24–25 and Jn. 1:10–12, where *parelabon* and *egnō* render the same two verbs Matthew uses of Joseph. The identical argument is made independently in the East by John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew* 5.5, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st ser., 10:31–32: the evangelist used the word "till," not that thou shouldest suspect that afterwards he did know her, but to inform thee that before the birth the Virgin was wholly untouched by man." Two further parallels are adduced by the Nicene and Post-Nicene editors at 2nd ser., 8:68n: 2 Sam. 6:23, where Michal had no child "till" (LXX ἕως) the day of her death, and 1 Cor. 15:25, where Christ reigns "till" He has put all enemies under His feet. In neither case does the term mark a change after the stated point. See also *The Eastern / Greek Orthodox Bible: New Testament*, ed. Laurent Cleenewerck (2011), appendix E, "Mark 6:3 — The 'Brothers' of the Lord," which notes that Septuagint usage governs the New Testament sense of *heōs* at Mt. 1:25.

7. Robinson and Pierpont, *Greek-English New Testament*, at Mk. 6:3–4 and 3:31. The threefold division underlying the passage is that of LXX Num. 1:2, which enumerates Israel by sons, by kinsmen (*kata sungeneias*), and by the houses derived from their fathers' line (*kat' oikous patriōn*); see Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. *sungenēs*, and Philip J. Budd, *Numbers*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), at 1:1–2.

8. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §500, which treats this objection directly, identifies James and Joseph as sons of "the other Mary" (Mt. 13:55; 28:1; cf. 27:56), and refers the language of "brothers" to an Old Testament idiom for close kinship (Gen. 13:8; 14:16; 29:15). Jerome had made the same case at length in *Against Helvidius* 13–17, distinguishing four scriptural senses of "brethren" and showing from Gen. 29:12–15 that a nephew or kinsman is regularly called a brother. Cleenewerck, *Eastern / Greek Orthodox Bible*, appendix E, independently reaches the same conclusion from Septuagint usage at Gen. 14:14, 16 and 29:12, 15, observing that Greek possessed distinct words for cousin (*anepsios*) and kinsman (*sungenēs*), yet *adelphos* is the term the evangelists chose because it best renders the Semitic sense of "close relative."

9. Robinson and Pierpont, *Greek-English New Testament*, at Lk. 1:34. The decisive datum is lexical rather than grammatical: Mary's *andra ou ginōskō* reproduces LXX Judg. 11:39, *autē ouk egnō andra*, said of the daughter of Jephthah — on Christiaan Kappes's reading, the only other occurrence of the phrase in Greek, and one that in its source denotes a consecrated virginity undertaken by vow. See Kappes, "The Virgin Birth and Mary as Perpetual Virgin: A Jewess and the Temple" (2020), which sets the two annunciation scenes side by side and notes the further verbal contacts (the Spirit coming upon, *poiēson moi to rhēma touto* at Judg. 11:37 against *genoito moi kata to rhēma sou* at Lk. 1:38, the two months in the hill country against Mary's three, and the return to the house). On the range of readings of the vow itself, see David Marcus, *Jephthah and His Vow* (Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 1986), 26.

10. Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on the Nativity of Christ in the Flesh* 3, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., 13:232: "Mary that conceived Him abhorred the marriage bed . . . Because Mary perceived Him, she left her betrothed." Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity* 19, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., 5:365, reads Miriam the prophetess typologically as "a type of Mary the mother of God," taking her timbrel to signify virginity, an Old Testament figure read as prefiguring Mary's virginity, though not the Jephthah passage. Ambrose, *Concerning Virgins* 2.2.6–7, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., 10:374–75, who sets Mary before consecrated virgins as the pattern of virginity itself, "a virgin not only in body but also in mind"; and *On the Duties of the Clergy* 3.12.78–81, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., 10:83–84, on the daughter of Jephthah bewailing her virginity as a consecration freely embraced; Augustine, *On Holy Virginity* 4, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st ser., 3:418, who reasons directly from Lk. 1:34 that Mary "had before vowed herself unto God as a virgin"; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §506, citing the same treatise.

11. Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 10.17 (ca. AD 246–48), in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 9:424. Origen records that those who hold the Lord's brethren to be sons of Joseph by an earlier wife do so wishing "to preserve the honor of Mary in virginity to the end," so that her body, appointed to minister to the Word, "might not know intercourse with a man" thereafter; he adds that it would not be pious to ascribe the first-fruit of virginity among women to any other than to her, an explicit third-century verification, roughly three centuries before the Second Council of Constantinople. Cleenewerck, *Eastern / Greek Orthodox Bible*, appendix E, cites this passage as *Commentary on Matthew* 2:17; the locus in the Ante-Nicene Fathers text is book 10, chapter 17.

12. Basil, *Against Eunomius* 4, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., 8:68, reads "first born" at Mt. 1:25 as implying no second child: "there is therefore no need of any brother in comparison with whom He is styled first begotten." Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the*

Arians 2.70, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., 4:387, invokes "Mary Ever-Virgin" not as a thesis to be defended but as settled common ground inside an argument about the Son's divinity. Augustine states the doctrine repeatedly, most compactly at *Sermo* 186.1, quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §510. And the ancient liturgies embed the epithet in prayer rather than argument: the Divine Liturgy of St. James addresses the Son "who didst submit for our salvation to become flesh of the holy God-mother, and ever-virgin Mary," repeating it in the commemorations (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 7:538, 542). The discourse *Against Beron and Helix*, frag. 8, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 5:234, confesses that the Creator incorporated to himself a rational soul and a sensible body "from the all-holy Mary, ever-virgin, by an undefiled conception."

13. Cleenewerck, *Eastern / Greek Orthodox Bible*, appendix E, summary: no Father and no council ever read the Scriptures to teach that the Mother of the Lord bore more than one child. On the weight such unanimity carries, see Melchior Cano, *De locis theologicis*, as summarized in Ambroise Gardeil, "Lieux théologiques," in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, who gives the perpetual virginity of the Virgin Mary as a standing example of a doctrine held in common by the Fathers.

14. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §§499–501, 510, the last quoting Augustine, *Sermo* 186.1: Mary "remained a virgin in conceiving her Son, a virgin in giving birth to him . . . always a virgin." For the same formula in the Eastern tradition see *Christ — Our Pascha*, §189, and the Lateran Council of 649, can. 3 (DS 503).