

## QUESTION 29

### The Espousal of the Mother of God

Next we have to consider the espousal of the Mother of God. And on this topic there are two questions: (1) Was it fitting for Christ to be born of an espoused [virgin]? (2) Was there a genuine marriage between the mother of our Lord and Joseph?

#### Article 1

##### Was it fitting for Christ to be born of an espoused virgin?

It seems that the it was not fitting for Christ to be born of an espoused virgin (*Christus non debuerit de virgine desponsata nasci*):

**Objection 1:** Espousal is ordered toward carnal intercourse (*ad carnalem copulam*). But the mother of our Lord never willed to have carnal intercourse with her husband (*numquam voluit carnali viri copula uti*), since this [act of will] would have detracted from the virginity of her mind (*hoc derogaret virginitati mentis ipsius*). Therefore, it was not fitting for her to be espoused.

**Objection 2:** Christ's being born of a virgin was a miracle. Thus, in *Epistola ad Volusianum* Augustine says, "The very power of God that brought the members of the young man in through the closed doors brought the members of the infant out through the inviolate virginal womb of His mother. If an explanation is sought, the event will not be miraculous; if [another] example is demanded, it will not be unique." But miracles that are performed in order to confirm the Faith should be manifest. Therefore, since the miracle in question was obscured by the espousal, it seems that it was not fitting for Christ to be born of a woman who was espoused.

**Objection 3:** According to Jerome in *Super Matthaenum*, the martyr Ignatius gives as a reason for the espousal of the Mother of God "that His birth would be concealed from the devil as long as he thought that the infant came from a wife and not from a virgin." But this reason amounts to nothing, both because (a) the devil has cognition of what is happening corporeally with a perspicacity of understanding, and also because (b) through many evident signs afterwards the demons knew Christ in some way—hence, Mark 1:23-24 says, "A man with an unclean spirit ... cried out, saying, 'What have we to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know ... that you are the holy one of God.'" Therefore, it does not seem to be appropriate for the Mother of God to have been espoused.

**Objection 4:** Jerome gives another reason, viz., "... lest the Mother of God be stoned by the Jews as an adulteress." But this argument seems to come to nothing, since if she had not been espoused, then she would not have been able to be condemned for adultery. And so it does not seem fitting for Christ to have been born of an espoused virgin\*.

**But contrary to this:** Matthew 1:18 says, "When Mary His mother had been espoused to Joseph ..." And Luke 1:26-27 says, "The angel Gabriel was sent ... to a virgin espoused to a man named Joseph."

**I respond:** It was fitting for Christ to be born of an espoused virgin, first, *for His own sake*, and, second, *for His mother's sake*, and, third, *for our sake*.

(a) There are four reasons why it was fitting *for the sake of Christ Himself*:

First, lest He be rejected by non-believers as someone born illegitimately. Hence, in *Super Lucam* Ambrose asks, "What could the Jews or Herod be held responsible for (*posset ascribi*), if they were seen to be persecuting someone who had been born of adultery?"

Second, in order that the genealogy might be laid out in the customary way through the husband (*per virum*). Hence, in *Super Lucam* Ambrose says, "He who came into the world had to be enrolled in

the customary manner of the world. But it is the person of the husband (*virī persona*) who speaks for the dignity of the family in the senate and other courts. The custom of the Scriptures, which always look for the husband's origins (*virī originis*), instructs us as well."

Third, for the safety of the boy who was born, lest the devil should administer harms more vehemently against him. And this is why Ignatius claims that [Mary] had been espoused "in order that His birth might be concealed from the devil."

Fourth, in order that He might be brought up by Joseph. Hence, Joseph was called His father in the sense of His provider (*quasi nutritius*).

(b) It was likewise fitting *on the part of the virgin*:

First, because she was thereby rendered immune from punishment, lest, as Jerome says, "she should be stoned by the Jews as an adulteress."

Second, in order that she might thereby be freed from having a bad reputation (*ab infamia liberaretur*). Hence, in *Super Lucam* Ambrose says, "She was espoused, lest she be damaged by the ill-fame of a violated virginity—she in whom the pregnant womb would seem to reveal a sign of seduction."

Third, in order that, as Jerome explains, Joseph might give her support.

(c) This was also fitting *on our part*:

First, because by the testimony of Joseph it was proved that Christ was born of a virgin. Hence, in *Super Lucam* Ambrose says, "Her husband is a very trustworthy witness of her virtue (*locupetior testis pudoris maritus adhibetur*), since he would have been able to grieve over the injury and to avenge the disgrace if he had not acknowledged the mystery."

Second, because the very words of the virgin in asserting her virginity are rendered more credible. Hence, in *Super Lucam* Ambrose says, "Trust in Mary's words is more firmly planted, and a reason for lying is removed. For it seems that if she were pregnant without being espoused, she would have wanted to hide her sin by lying, whereas since she was espoused, she had no reason to lie, since giving birth is the reward of marriage and the grace of married women."

These first two points pertain to the firmness of our faith.

Third, in order that all excuses might be removed from those virgins who, because of their lack of foresight, do not avoid harm to their reputation. Hence, Ambrose says, "It was not fitting for virgins who are living with tarnished reputations (*sinistra opinione viventibus*) to be left with the cover of the excuse that the mother of our Lord had likewise been damaged by a bad reputation."

Fourth, as Augustine explains in *De Sancta Virginitate*, because [Mary's espousal] signifies the universal Church, who, "though she is a virgin, is nonetheless espoused to the one man Christ."

There can also be a fifth reason, viz., that because the mother of our Lord was both espoused and a virgin, both virginity and marriage are honored in her person—against the heretics who denigrate the one or the other of these states.

**Reply to objection 1:** The Blessed Virgin Mother of God should be thought of as having willed to be espoused because of a familiar movement by the Holy Spirit, confident that with God's help this would never lead to carnal intercourse. Still, she committed this matter to God's will. Hence, she did not suffer any damage to her virginity.

**Reply to objection 2:** As Ambrose says in *Super Lucam*, "Our Lord preferred men to have doubts about His origin rather than about His Mother's virtue. For he knew that the modesty of a virgin is delicate and that her reputation for virtue is slippery. Nor did he think that faith in His origin should be built upon insults to His mother."

Notice, however, that some of God's miracles are such that there is faith with respect to their occurrence (*miraculorum Dei quaedam sunt de quibus est fides*), e.g., the miracle of the virgin birth, the miracle of our Lord's resurrection, and even the miracle of the sacrament of the altar. And so the Lord

wanted these miracles to be more hidden, in order that faith in them might be more meritorious. On the other hand, some miracles are for the confirmation of faith. And it is fitting for these miracles to be manifest.

**Reply to objection 3:** As Augustine explains in *De Trinitate* 3, there are many things which the devil can do by the power of his nature and yet which he can be prevented from doing by God's power. And in this sense one can claim that by the power of his nature the devil was able to know that the Mother of God was a virgin and had not been corrupted, but he was prevented by God from knowing the manner of the divine birth.

Now it is no problem that later on the devil knew in some way that He was the Son of God, because by that time Christ was already showing His power against the devil and He was already suffering the persecution incited by the devil. By contrast, the devil's malice had to be impeded in His infancy, lest he persecute Christ too sharply at a time when He was not disposed to suffer it or to show His power, but instead was presenting Himself as in all ways similar to other infants. Hence, in his sermon *De Epiphania* Pope Leo says, "The Magi found the child Jesus small in size, in need of the help of others, unable to speak, and in no way different from the generality of human infants."

However, in *Super Lucam* Ambrose seems to be referring to the members of the devil [i.e., sinners]. For having set forth the above argument, viz., the argument about deceiving the Prince of the world (*de fallendo principem mundi*), he adds, "Yet He misled the rulers of the age (*principes saeculi*) even more. For the malice of demons easily grasps even hidden things, whereas those who occupy themselves with worldly vanities cannot know divine things."

**Reply to objection 4:** According to the Law, stoning for a judgment of adultery was meted out not only to a woman who was already espoused or married, but also to one who was being kept in her father's home in order to be married off as a virgin at some future time. Hence, Deuteronomy 22:20-21 says, "If ... evidence of the young woman's virginity is not found ... , the men of her town shall stone her to death, because she committed a disgraceful act in Israel by fornicating in her father's house."

An alternative reply is that, according to some authors, the Blessed Virgin was of the family or kindred of Aaron, and this is why, as Luke 1:36 tells us, she was related to Elizabeth. Now a virgin of the priestly tribe was killed for being defiled; for in Leviticus 21:9 we read, "If the daughter of a priest is caught in being defiled and dishonors her father's name, she shall be burnt with fire."

Some others refer Jerome's words to the 'stoning' of having a bad reputation.

## Article 2

### Was there a genuine marriage between Mary and Joseph?

It seems that there was not a genuine marriage between Mary and Joseph (*inter Mariam et Ioseph non fuerit verum matrimonium*):

**Objection 1:** In *Contra Helvidium* Jerome says that Joseph "was the guardian (*custos*) of Mary rather than her husband (*potius quam maritus eius*)." But if it had been a genuine marriage, Joseph would have truly been her husband. Therefore, it seems that there was not a genuine marriage between Mary and Joseph.

**Objection 2:** In commenting on Matthew 1:16 ("... Jacob begot Joseph, who was the husband of Mary (*virum Mariae*)"), Jerome says, "When you hear the word 'husband' (*vir*), do not let a wedding come into your mind (*tibi non subeat nuptiarum*), as I suspect it does; instead, remember that the custom of the Scriptures is that espoused males are called 'husbands' and espoused females are called 'wives' (*quod sponsi viri et sponsae uxores*)." But a genuine marriage is made up not of an espoused couple, but

of a couple who have wedded (*verum matrimonium non efficitur ex sponsalibus, sed ex nuptiis*). Therefore, there was not a genuine marriage between the Blessed Virgin and Joseph.

**Objection 3:** Matthew 1:19 says, “Joseph, because he was a just man and did not wish to take her in (*et nollet eam traducere*)”—that is, to take her into his home for permanent cohabitation—“decided to dismiss her in secret”—that is, as Remigius explains, “decided to change the time of the wedding.” Therefore, it seems that, since the wedding had not yet been celebrated, there was not yet a genuine marriage—especially because, after a marriage has been contracted, one is not permitted to dismiss his spouse.

**But contrary to this:** In *De Consensu Evangelistarum 2* Augustine says, “The evangelist could not possibly have thought that Joseph was to be separated from his union with Mary”—for he called Joseph Mary’s husband (*vir*)—“just because she gave birth to Christ as a virgin and not from sexual intercourse with him. For by this example the married faithful are clearly taught that if they remain continent by mutual consent, their union can still be a marriage and be called a marriage, even if it does not involve sexual intercourse.”

**I respond:** Matrimony (*matrimonium*) or marriage (*coniugum*) is called genuine (*verum*) by the fact that it attains to its own perfection.

Now an entity (*res*) has two sorts of perfection, *first perfection* and *second perfection*. *First perfection* consists in *the form itself*, from which it receives its species, whereas *second perfection* consists in the entity’s operation, through which the entity in some way attains its end.

Now the *form of matrimony* consists in a certain indivisible conjoining of minds (*in quadam indivisibili coniunctione animorum*) through which the one individual is obligated to preserve marital fidelity indivisibly with the other (*per quam unus coniugum indivisibiliter alteri fidem servare tenetur*).

On the other hand, the *end of matrimony* consists in the offspring to be generated and to be educated (*finis matrimonii est proles generanda et educanda*). The first of these [effects] is attained through conjugal intercourse (*per concubitum coniugalem*), the second is attained through other works of the husband and wife by which they comply with one another in bringing up the offspring (*per alia opera viri et uxoris quibus sibi invicem obsequuntur ad prolem nutriendam*).

So, then, one should respond that as regards *first perfection*, the marriage of the Virgin Mother of God and Joseph was altogether genuine, since both consented to the conjugal union, but not expressly to carnal intercourse except under the condition: *if it should please God*. And this is why the angel calls Mary the wife of Joseph when he says to Joseph in Matthew 1:20, “Do not be afraid to take Mary your wife to yourself.” In explaining this in *De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia*, Augustine says, “She is called his wife (*coniux*) from the first pledge of espousal, but neither had he known her, nor was he going to know her, by sexual intercourse.”

Now as regards *second perfection*, which occurs through the act of marriage, if this is referred to carnal intercourse through which offspring are generated, then the marriage in question was not consummated. Hence, in *Super Lucam* Ambrose says, “Do not be disturbed by the fact Scripture calls Mary a wife. For what is being declared is not the taking away of her virginity, but the celebration of the wedding as a witness to the union.” Still, this marriage also had second perfection with respect to the bringing up of the offspring. Hence in *De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia* Augustine says, “Every good of marriage was fulfilled in these parents of Christ: the offspring (*proles*), the fidelity (*fides*), and the oath (*sacramentum*). The offspring we know to be the Lord Jesus himself; the fidelity, because there was no adultery; the sacrament, because there was no divorce. What did not exist there was just marital intercourse.”

**Reply to objection 1:** Jerome is here taking ‘*maritus*’ (husband) from the act of a consummated marriage.

**Reply to objection 2:** Jerome is here using ‘wedded’ (*nuptias*) for nuptial intercourse.

**Reply to objection 3:** In *Super Matthaicum* Chrysostom explains that the Blessed Virgin was espoused to Joseph in such a way that she was also a resident of his house: “For just as in the case of a woman who conceives in the house of her husband, the conception is understood to be marital, so in a woman who conceives outside of his house, an assignation is suspected.” And so the fact that the Blessed Virgin was espoused would not have provided sufficiently for her reputation unless she were also a resident of his house. And this is why ‘*et nollet eam traducere*’ is better understood as ‘he did not want to ruin her reputation in public’ than as having to do with taking her into his house. And thus the evangelist adds, “... he decided to dismiss her in secret.”

However, even though she was a resident of his house because of her first pledge of espousal, the solemn celebration of the wedding had not yet occurred, and because of this they had not yet come together carnally. Hence, as Chrysostom points out, “The evangelist did not say, ‘... before she was taken to the house of her spouse’, since she was living at his house. For it was often a custom among the ancients to have the espoused women in their house. And this is likewise why the angel says to Joseph, “Do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife”—that is, do not be afraid to celebrate her wedding solemnly.

However, others claim that she had not yet been taken into his house, but was only espoused to him. Yet the first opinion is more consonant with the Gospel.