

RECONCILING MARY'S PERPETUAL VIRGINITY WITH THE "LABOUR PAINS" OF REVELATION 12:2

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I. The Church teaches as dogma that Mary was perpetually Virgin

- 1) Dogmatic Definition by Pope Martin I at Lateran Synod in 649:

"The blessed ever-virginal and immaculate Mary conceived without seed, of the Holy Spirit, generated the eternal Word of God without injury [to her virginity], and her virginity continued unimpaired after the birth." (Pope Martin I, Lateran Synod, Denzinger 256, 649 AD)

- 2) The dogma is supported by earlier references from the Church Fathers:

"[T]he Son of God... was born perfectly of the holy ever-virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit..." (St. Epiphanius, *Well Anchored Man*, 120, 374 AD)

"...for just as [Mary's] virginity posed no obstacle to her giving birth, neither did her childbearing destroy her virginity. Indeed, it was fitting that [the Redeemer], having entered human life to make us all incorruptible, should Himself originate from an incorruptible birth. In fact, according to our usual way of speaking, a woman who has not had relations with a man is called 'incorrupt'. ... As on the mountain the bush burned but was not consumed [Ex 3:1-3], so the Virgin gave birth to the light and was not corrupted. Nor should you consider the comparison to the bush to be embarrassing, for it prefigures the God-bearing body of the Virgin." (St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Birth of Christ*, PG 46, as quoted in Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, p. 155, before 397 AD)

"Behold the miracle of the Mother of Our Lord: she conceived as a virgin; she gave birth as a virgin; she remained a virgin after childbirth." (St. Augustine, *Serm. De Temp.* 23, before 430 AD)

For a detailed treatment of the development of the dogma, see *The Virginitas in Partu* by Msgr. Arthur Burton Calkins, <http://www.airmaria.com/vlog/stnd/stnd0002MsgrCalkins2.html>

II. The Church teaches as ordinary teaching that the Virgin Birth was without pain

- 1) Not explicitly defined in the dogma above, but still the *ordinary teaching* of the Church:

"To Eve it was said: 'In pain you shall bring forth children' (Gen. 3:16). Mary was exempt from this law, for preserving her virginal integrity inviolate, she brought forth Jesus the Son of God, without experiencing, as we have already said, any sense of pain." (*The Catechism of the Council of Trent*, issued by order of Pope Pius V, 1566, from English translation in Robert I. Bradley, S.J. and Eugene Kevane (eds.), *The Roman Catechism*, pp. 49-50)

- 2) The Church Fathers connect it with Isaiah 66:7 and also Mary's preservation from sin & death:

"As the Son has been given to us without a father, so the Child has been born without a birth. As the Virgin herself did not know how the body that received divinity was formed in her own body, so neither did she notice the birth. Even the prophet Isaiah affirms that her giving birth was without pain, when he says: 'Before the pangs of birth arrived, a male child came forth and was born' (Is 66:7)... Just as she who introduced death into nature by her sin was condemned to bear children in suffering and travail, it was necessary that the Mother of life, after having conceived in joy, should give birth in joy as well. No wonder that the angel said to her, 'Rejoice, O full of grace!' (Lk 1:28). With these words he took from her the burden of that sorrow which, from the beginning of creation, has been imposed on birth because of sin." (St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Song of Songs* 13; PG 44, as quoted in Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, p. 158, before 397 AD)

"In conceiving you were all pure, in giving birth you were without pain." (St. Augustine, *Sermone de Nativitate*)

- 3) The lack of pain is also logically connected to Mary's virginity during the birth of Christ:

"Whether Christ was born without His Mother suffering? I answer that, the pains of childbirth are caused by the infant opening the passage from the womb. Now it has been said above that Christ came forth from the closed womb of His Mother, and, consequently, without opening the passage. Consequently there was no pain in that birth, as neither was there any corruption; on the contrary, there was much joy therein for that God-Man 'was born into the world,' according to Is. 35:1,2: 'Like the lily, it shall bud forth and blossom, and shall rejoice with joy and praise.'" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, part III, q 35, art 6)

III. How can Mary be the Woman of Rev 12 who has labour pains?

- 1) The Woman of Revelation 12 is symbolic of both Mary and the Church:
 - “If the male child is Jesus, then the woman is Mary. This interpretation was upheld by the most sober-minded of the Church Fathers, St. Athanasius, St. Epiphanius, and many others. Yet ‘the woman’ also stands for more. She is ‘daughter Zion,’ which brought forth Israel’s Messiah. She is also the Church, besieged by Satan, yet preserved in safety.” (Scott Hahn, *The Lamb’s Supper: The Mass as Heaven on Earth*, p. 78)
 - “Victory over the ‘prince of this world’ (Jn 14:30) was won once for all at the Hour when Jesus freely gave himself up to death to give us his life. This is the Judgement of this world, and the prince of this world is ‘cast out’ (Jn 12:31; Rev 12:10). ‘He pursued the woman’ (Rev 12:13-17) but had no hold on her: the new Eve, ‘full of grace’ of the Holy Spirit, is preserved from sin and the corruption of death (the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of the Most Holy Mother of God, Mary, ever virgin).” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2853)
- 2) The Woman experiences pain in childbirth:

“She was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for her delivery.” (Rev 12:2)
- 3) How is this possible? Mary has *two* experiences of childbirth: one *natural*, one *spiritual*
 - “To Our Lady is ‘to be ascribed a double childbirth:
 - one *natural* and virginal, by which, without pain or injury of any kind, she begot the Son of God, the physical Christ;
 - the other *spiritual*, by means of which on Calvary, uniting her sufferings to those of the Redeemer, she begot the Mystical Body of Christ.”
 - (D. Squillaci, “Maria nella Donna dell’ Apocalisse”, *Miles Immaculatae* 5 (1969): 151, as quoted in Manelli, *All Generations Shall Call Me Blessed*, 356-7)
 - “According to R. Laurentin, the difficulty over the pains of childbirth on the part of the ‘woman’ of Revelation can be eliminated by a comparison:

In [Rev] 5:6 Christ appears in heaven in the form of an *immolated* lamb (cf. Jn 19:36). The sufferings of the woman who also appears in heaven in [Rev] 12:2, stands in relation to the *immolation* of the celestial Lamb. Thus, in the 12th chapter of Apocalypse, the reference is not to the childbirth at Bethlehem, but to the words of Christ on the cross: “Son, behold your Mother” (Jn 19:26). It is a question of the spiritual motherhood of Mary and of the compassion with which the Mother of Jesus shares in the sufferings of the immolated Lamb. Jn 19 and Apoc 12 are therefore, in strict relation to one another. In each passage Mary’s motherhood *in relation to the disciples* entails a context of suffering (Jn. 19:25; Apoc 12:2). (D Squillaci, “Maria nella Donna dell’ Apocalisse,” *Mile Immaculatae* 5 (1969): 151, as quoted in Laurentin, *Tutte le genti*, pp. 51-52).”

(Manelli, *All Generations Shall Call Me Blessed*, pp. 356-357)
- 4) Mary labours to bring her spiritual children, all followers of Jesus, to full stature in Christ:
 - “Then the dragon became angry with the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring, those who keep God’s commandments and bear witness to Jesus.” (Rev 12:17)
 - “Everyone knows that this woman signified the Virgin Mary. ... John therefore saw the Most Holy Mother of God already in eternal happiness, yet travailing in a mysterious childbirth. What birth was it? Surely it was the birth of us who, still in exile, are yet to be generated to the perfect charity of God, and to eternal happiness.”
 - (Pope St. Pius X, *Ad Diem Illum Laetissimum*, 24,
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_x/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_02021904_ad-diem-illum-laetissimum_en.html, 1904)
 - See also *Is Mary my Mother? A look at Revelation 12* by Matt1618 <http://matt1618.freeyellow.com/woman.html>
- 5) St. Paul describes his experience of forming others in Christ in the same way:
 - “My little children, of whom I am in labour again, until Christ be formed in you.” (Gal 4:19)
 - Labour pains are used metaphorically elsewhere in scripture (Rom 8:22, Jer 13:21, Hos 13:12-13, Mic 4:9-10)

IV. Explanation by Msgr. Calkins based on Marian Catecheses of John Paul II

In treating of the “woman clothed with the sun”, who appears in the twelfth chapter of the Book of Revelation, as being an image of the Church and of Mary, the Pope makes this comment in his catechesis of 29 May 1996:

Identified by her motherhood, the woman “was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for her delivery” (12:2). This note refers to the Mother of Jesus at the Cross (cf. Jn. 19:25), where she shares in anguish for the delivery of the community of disciples with a soul pierced by the sword (cf. Lk. 2:35). Despite her sufferings, she is “clothed with the sun” -- that is, she reflects the divine splendour -- and appears as a “great sign” of God’s spousal relationship with his people. [<http://www.ewtn.com/library/papaldoc/jp2bvm21.htm>]

Here the Pope, in effect, proposes a datum of the tradition i.e., that while Mary gave birth to Jesus in a painless way, her intense sufferings in union with Jesus on Calvary were the birth pangs by which she “begets as her children all those who become [his] disciples”. This truth is magnificently synthesized in the preface of the second Mass of “Mary at the Foot of the Cross” published in the *Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary*:

In your divine wisdom you planned the redemption of the human race and decreed that the new Eve should stand by the cross of the new Adam: as she became his mother by the power of the Holy Spirit, so, by a new gift of your love, she was to be a partner in his passion, and she who had given him birth without the pains of childbirth was to endure the greatest of pains in bringing forth to new life the family of your Church. [*Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, Vol. I: *Sacramentary* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1992) 117]

At the foot of the cross, then, Mary is not only a partner in the passion (*socia passionis*), but is instrumental in giving birth to the Church. Note well that there are two striking symbols for the generation of the Church on Calvary: the pierced Heart of Jesus from which flows blood and water, “the fountain of sacramental life in the Church” [*Roman Missal*, Preface of the Sacred Heart of Jesus] and the Heart of Mary to which the Holy Father makes an allusion in the above text by referring to Lk. 2:35.

Quite clearly, there is a partnership for the sake of our salvation, but it is not a partnership of strict equality, as the Holy Father tells us in the same catechesis of 29 May 1996:

It was fitting that like Christ, the new Adam, Mary too, the new Eve, did not know sin and was thus capable of co-operating in the Redemption. Sin, which washes over humanity like a torrent, halts before *the Redeemer and his faithful Collaborator*. With a substantial difference: *Christ is all holy by virtue of the grace that in his humanity derives from the divine person: Mary is all holy by virtue of the grace received by the merits of the Saviour*. [<http://www.ewtn.com/library/papaldoc/jp2bvm21.htm>]

Developing the notion of Mary’s labor pains on Calvary for the birth of the Church (cf. Rev. 12:2), the Pope stated in his catechesis of 17 September 1997:

On Calvary, Mary united herself to the sacrifice of her Son and made her own maternal contribution to the work of salvation, which took the form of labour pains, the birth of the new humanity. In addressing the words “Woman, behold your son” to Mary, the Crucified One proclaims her motherhood not only in relation to the Apostle John but also to every disciple. The Evangelist himself, by saying that Jesus had to die “to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (Jn. 11:52), indicates *the Church’s birth as the fruit of the redemptive sacrifice with which Mary is maternally associated*. [<http://www.ewtn.com/library/papaldoc/jp2bvm63.htm>]

Always subordinate and secondary, nonetheless Mary’s “maternal contribution to the work of salvation” is unique and the sacrifice by which the Church was born cannot be separated by her maternal collaboration.

(Excerpt from Msgr. Arthur Burton Calkins, *Pope John Paul II’s Ordinary Magisterium on Marian Coredeemption: Consistent Teaching and More Recent Perspectives*, <http://www.christendom-awake.org/pages/calkins/magmarcor.htm>)