

The Marriage of Saint Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Mystery of the Redemptive Incarnation

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Introduction

I address a particular question of doctrine and, therefore, of catechesis, about which there is a significant amount of confusion and error in our time. I refer to the marriage of Saint Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary, with particular reference to the mystery of the Incarnation. I address it, first of all, to teach the truth about the marriage of Saint Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary, and to respond to a rather widespread confusion and error in the matter. At the same time, it is my hope that the method of my study of the question will be helpful in teaching other articles of the faith, especially those subject to confusion and error, and in responding to the questions regarding them. From the start, it is important to observe that the confusion and error regarding the marriage of Saint Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary is found not only among dissenters from solid doctrine but also among authors and members of the faithful who sincerely desire to know the faith and teach it with integrity but who are poorly catechized on the question.

The focus of my study is the text of Lk 1, 26-38. It is the account of the Annunciation of Our Lord Jesus Christ which expresses the reality of the Mystery of the Incarnation. It is particularly rich and detailed, thanks to the contact with the memories of the Mother of God which Saint Luke clearly enjoyed.¹ My study is directed specifically to the understanding of verse 34, that is, the response of the Blessed Virgin to the announcement of the Mystery of the Incarnation at the beginning of Archangel Gabriel's dialogue with her.

The Archangel Gabriel, sent by God, appeared to the Virgin Mary, addressing her as "full of grace,"² making reference to the Mystery

of the Immaculate Conception which stands in the strictest possible relationship with the Mystery of the Redemptive Incarnation. In other words, Mary is indeed totally filled with divine grace because she was privileged from the moment of her conception to enjoy, in anticipation, the grace of the eternal salvation which her Divine Son, to be virginally conceived in her womb, would win for all men by His Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension. She enjoyed the singular favor of conception without any stain of original sin, in order that she might be the fitting vessel to receive God the Son at His conception. Under her Immaculate Heart, in her sinless womb, God the Son became man through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit.³

As Mary was pondering the meaning of the Archangel's salutation,⁴ Gabriel proceeded to declare:

Do not be afraid, Mary, for thou has found grace with God. And behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb and shalt bring forth a son; and thou shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he shall be king over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.⁵

Mary responded to the angel with the words: "How shall this happen, since I do not know man."⁶ The words in the English translation, "I do not know man," are a precise, and I would maintain the best, translation of the original Greek text. The question is: What do they mean?

Confusion in the Translation of the Greek Text into English

The words in question are translated differently in the various English versions of the Gospel according to Saint Luke. The translation

¹ It should be recalled that Saint Luke alone provides the account of the Annunciation, and the texts of the extraordinarily beautiful hymns: the *Magnificat* of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Lk 1, 46-55), the *Benedictus* of Zechariah, father of Saint John the Baptist (Lk 1, 68-79), the *Nunc Dimittis* of Simeon (Lk 2, 29-35), and the Angelic Hymn, *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, at the Birth of the Lord (Lk 2, 14).

² Lk 1, 28.

³ Cf. "Angelus Address," 14 July 1985, *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, Vol. VIII, 2 (Luglio-Dicembre 1985) (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1985), p. 125, no. 1.

⁴ Cf. Lk 1, 29.

⁵ Lk 1, 30-33.

⁶ Lk 1, 34.

which I have quoted is the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine revision of the Challoner-Rheims Version, published in 1941.⁷ It is a totally accurate translation of the Greek text of the verse in question. Mary's response to the Archangel's announcement does not question the truth of what the Archangel has declared and does not resist the truth with a contrary will but only seeks to understand how what the Archangel has declared can take place since, although she was married to Saint Joseph, she did not know man. In other words, although Saint Joseph and she had married, they did so with full respect for the consecration of her virginity to God, the offering of her virginity to God for consecration, made in her youth. In other words, Saint Joseph had married Mary with the intention to honor throughout their marriage her consecrated virginity.

We read, in fact, in the Gospel of Saint Matthew:

Now the origin of Christ was in this wise. When Mary his mother had been betrothed to Joseph, she was found, before they came together, to be with child by the Holy Spirit. But Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wishing to expose her to reproach, was minded to put her away privately. But while he thought on these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Do not be afraid, Joseph, son of David, to take to thee Mary thy wife, for that which is begotten in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus; for he shall save his people from their sins." Now all this came to pass that there might be fulfilled what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, 'Behold, the

virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son; and they call his name Emmanuel'; which is interpreted "God is with us." So Joseph, arising from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him, and took unto him his wife. And he did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn son. And he called his name Jesus.⁸

From the text of Saint Matthew, it is clear that Mary was already married to Saint Joseph at the time of the Annunciation, but that he had not yet brought her to his home. For that reason, upon learning of her pregnancy, Joseph, for the sake of decency, thought to divorce her in as discreet a manner as possible. To be clear, the word "betrothed" is not rightly understood as "engaged," but rather as "espoused" or "married," as the rest of the language of the text makes clear.

It should also be made clear that the statement that "he did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn son," is intended solely to underline that the conception was not the result of any carnal knowledge of Mary by Saint Joseph prior to the virginal conception of Christ in her womb. It does not at all mean to imply that he later had carnal knowledge of Mary, for he had married Mary with full respect for her virginity and understood that her conception was virginal. The Greek verb, in fact, does not exclude the continuation of an action beyond the time indicated.⁹ In any case, once she had conceived God the Son in her womb and given birth to Him, it was not possible that she would consider carnal relations with her husband, for she remained always a virgin as was fitting for the Mother of God.

Later, I will explain the meaning of the two stages of the rite of marriage in ancient Israel. Also, I will reflect more fully, especially from the text of Saint Matthew, upon the care of

⁷ Cf. *The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*, translated from the Latin Vulgate, a revision of the Challoner-Rheims Version, edited by Catholic scholars under the patronage of the Episcopal Committee of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (Paterson, New Jersey: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1941).

⁸ Mt 1, 18-25.

⁹ Cf. M. Zerwick and M. Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, 5th ed. (Roma: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2016), p. 2.

God the Father to provide for the virginal conception of His Divine Son and, at the same time, to provide for Him a foster-father, so that He might be, from the first moment of His conception, a member of the family of Joseph and Mary.

Other English translations of verse 34 of chapter one of the Gospel according to Saint Luke are not as accurate and even introduce confusion and error. I direct my attention to the translation in the Revised Standard Version/Catholic Edition, a translation which normally I prefer for its accuracy and beauty of language. I am sorry to say that it fails, in a serious way, in the translation of the verse. The Revised Standard Version/Catholic Edition translates the verse thus:

And Mary said to the angel,
“How can this be, since I have
no husband?”¹⁰

Curiously enough, the same version translates a part of the just-quoted verses of the Gospel according to Matthew thus:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to send her away quietly.¹¹

The text in question clearly presents Saint Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary as husband and wife, even though Saint Joseph had not yet brought his bride to his home to begin to live with him.

Several versions translate the verse in the same manner as the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine version of the Challoner-Rheims Version, for example, the Geneva Bible, and the Wycliffe Bible. The King James Version introduces the article, “a”, to the translation:

“since I know not a man.” Other versions translate “I know not man” in various ways which are, more or less, equivalent: “I have no relations with a man” (New American Bible); “since I am a virgin” (Jerusalem Bible, English Standard Version, New American Standard Bible, New International Version).

Confusion in Popular Presentations

I offer some examples of how the confusion and error have entered into popular presentations of the marriage of Saint Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

David Hottinger, writing regularly for *The Catholic Servant*, a most reliable Catholic monthly newspaper, introduced the confusion in his article, “St. Joseph, foster father of Jesus and spouse of Mary, a man who listens,” published in the March 2013 issue. Writing about the response of the Blessed Virgin Mary to the announcement of the Archangel Gabriel, which is recorded in verse 34 of the first chapter of the Gospel according to Saint Luke, he wrote:

The reaction of the Virgin Mary tells us, therefore, that she did not plan on “knowing man,” even *after* she was married. She had made a vow of virginity. And because the “Virgin most prudent” would surely not have failed to inform her spouse-to-be of this little detail, we can conclude that St. Joseph, her betrothed, shared this intention. He made the same vow.¹²

While Hottinger is thoroughly correct in presenting the virginal marriage of Saint Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary as the proper way to understand Mary’s response to the Archangel, he erroneously presumes that Joseph and Mary were not yet married at the moment of the Annunciation. After having received a letter pointing out to him his confusion in the matter, he published a full and accurate correction in the June 2013 edition.¹³

¹⁰ Cf. *The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version / Second Catholic Edition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006). [Hereafter, RSV/CE].

¹¹ Mt. 1, 18-19 (RSV/CE).

¹² David Hottinger, “St. Joseph, foster father of Jesus and spouse of Mary, a man who listens,” *The Catholic Servant*, March 2013, p. 12.

¹³ Cf. David Hottinger, “Correction to Article on St. Joseph,” *The Catholic Servant*, June 2013, p. 4.

Another example of the confusion is found in the English translation of Pope Benedict XVI's work on the Infancy Narratives in his three-volume *Jesus of Nazareth*. The original German text could be translated thus:

Matthew informs us first that Mary was betrothed to Joseph. According to the Jewish law which was in force, the betrothal already established a legal union of the two partners, so that Mary could be called Joseph's wife, even when the "bringing-home," which established the marital community, had not yet taken place. As betrothed, "the wife lived still in the parents' house and remained under the *patria potestas* (power of the father). After a year, the bringing-home or conclusion of the marriage followed." (Gnilka, *Das Mattäusevangelium. Erster Teil*, p. 17). At this time Joseph must have realized that Mary "was carrying a child from the Holy Spirit" (Mt 1:18).¹⁴

The German original makes it clear that in fact there was a legal bond of marriage between the husband and wife even before they lived together.

The English-language edition, on the other hand, obscures this by saying that Joseph "had not yet taken her into his home – the step

which established the married state."¹⁵ While the "marital community" (*die eheliche Gemeinschaft*) was established when the wife was taken into the husband's home, the marital state, in a legal sense, already existed with the "betrothal," which is accurately translated "espousal" or "marriage." "Betrothal," according to the ancient Hebrew practice, is marriage, not a mere engagement to be married.

It should be noted that the English translation also follows the Revised Standard Version translation of verse 34 of chapter one of the Gospel according to Saint Luke: "How shall this be, since I have no husband?"¹⁶ The German original, on the other hand, reads more correctly: "How shall this come about, since I know no man?"¹⁷ The original text of Pope Benedict's work, then, agrees that Mary and Joseph were in fact legally married at the time of the Annunciation.

It should also be pointed out that Pope John Paul II, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptoris Custos*, described briefly the Jewish marriage practice thus:

According to Jewish custom, marriage took place in two stages: first, the legal, or true marriage was celebrated, and then, only after a certain period of time, the husband brought the wife into his own house. Thus, before he lived with Mary, Joseph was already her "husband."¹⁸

¹⁴ "Matthäus berichtet uns zunächst, dass Maria mit Josef verlobt war. Nach dem geltenden jüdischen Recht begründete das Verlöbniß bereits eine rechtliche Verbindung der beiden Partner, so dass Maria Josefs Frau genannt werden konnte, auch wenn die "Heimholung" noch nicht geschehen war, die die eheliche Gemeinschaft begründete. Als Verlobte "lebte die Frau noch im Haus der Eltern un blieb unter der patria potestas. Nach einem Jahr erfolgte die Heimholung oder Eheschließung" (Gnilka, a.a.O., S. 17). Nun musste Josef feststellen, dass Maria "ein Kind trug aus Heiligem Geist" (Mt 1, 18)." Joseph Ratzinger/Benedikt XVI, *Jesus von Nazareth. Prolog: Die Kindheitsgeschichten* (Freiburg: Herder, 2012), p. 48. [Hereafter, *Jesus von Nazareth*].

¹⁵ Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, tr. Philip J. Whitmore (New York: Image, 2012), p. 38.

¹⁶ *Jesus von Nazareth*, p. 34.

¹⁷ "Wie soll das geschehen, da ich keinen Mann erkenne?" *Jesus von Nazareth*, p. 44.

¹⁸ "Ex Hebraici populi more duobus gressibus contrahebatur matrimonium: primum celebrabatur legitimum conubium (verum ipsum matrimonium), ac deinde solum post certum temporis spatium uxorem perducebat vir suam in domum. Antequam igitur cum Maria communiter vivebat, iam eius Iosephus erat «coniux»; ..." Ioannes Paulus PP. II, *Adhortatio Apostolica Redemptoris custos*, "De persona sancti Ioseph et opera in Christi Iesu Ecclesiaeque vita," 15 Augusti 1989, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 82 (1990), 22, n. 18. English translation: Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation Redemptoris Custos*, "On the Person and Mission of Saint Joseph in the Life of Christ and of the Church," Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortations* (Trivandrum, Kerala, India: Carmel International Publishing House, 2005), p. 831, no. 18.

Sadly, a false translation of no. 497 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* fails to respect the datum of the unbroken tradition. The text of no. 497 in the English translation reads:

The gospel accounts understand the virginal conception of Jesus as a divine work that surpasses all human understanding and possibility: “That which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit,” said the angel to Joseph about Mary his fiancée.¹⁹

The English version translates the Latin, “sponsam,” which clearly means spouse or wife, by the word, “fiancée.” The error is evident.

The error is found also in the *Angelus* addresses of Pope Francis on December 8 and 22 of 2013. In the December 8, 2013 *Angelus* address, referring to the account of the Archangel Gabriel’s announcement to Mary that she is to be the Mother of the Savior, Pope Francis declared: “This announcement troubles her even more because she was not yet married to Joseph; ...”²⁰ In the December 22, 2013 *Angelus* address, referring to Saint Joseph as “the betrothed of the Virgin Mary,”²¹ he declared: “Joseph and Mary were dwelling in Nazareth; they were not yet living together, because they were not yet married.”²²

Hebrew Marriage at the Time of the Annunciation

The matrimonial process in ancient Israel had two phases. In the first phase, called *kidushin* or consecration, the man or the person who is acting for him presents himself at the house of the desired woman to ask for her as his wife from

the one who has power over her or from the woman herself, if she is in her own power. Once the woman gives her consent, the matrimonial contract is drawn up. The best English translation of *kidushin* is “espousal” or “wedding”, not “engagement.” Angelo Tosato, in his magisterial study, *Il matrimonio israelitico: Una teoria generale*, explains:

For, although it is the first and initiating phase, and therefore in necessary relation with a second and completing one, this phase still plays an essential function in the establishment of the marriage bond. For, even if a man took possession of a woman, making her a prisoner and reducing her to slavery, even if a man has been joined carnally to a woman, and engages in a sexual relationship with her – following on and dependent on these facts alone there is not yet a marriage bond between these two, as long, that is, as the conclusion of the matrimonial agreement does not intervene. And, on the other hand, it is already from the conclusion of the matrimonial agreement – and not from the successive nuptial celebrations, nor, even less, from the subsequent cohabitation of the two – that a man “espouses” (*’rs*) a woman. He “espouses” her in the sense that he takes this woman to himself juridically as his wife, that he establishes her juridically as his wife.²³

¹⁹ “Narrationes evangelicae conceptionem intelligent virginalem tamquam opus divinum omnem comprehensionem et omnem possibilitatem superans humanas: «Quod enim in ea natum est, de Spiritu Sancto est», dicit angelus ad Ioseph circa Mariam eius sponsam (Mt 1, 20).” *Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), p. 136, n. 497. English translation: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., tr. United States Catholic Conference (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), p. 126, no. 497.

²⁰ “Questo annuncio la sconvolge ancora di più, anche perché non era ancora sposata con Giuseppe: ...” *Insegnamenti di Francesco*, Vol. I, 2 (Luglio-Dicembre 2013) (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana,

2015), p. 735. [Insegnamenti]. English translation: “The Angelus on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, 13 December 2013, p. 16.

²¹ “... il promesso sposo della Vergine Maria.” *Insegnamenti*, p. 786. English translation: “Appeal at the Angelus,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, 3 January 2014, p. 7.

²² “Giuseppe e Maria vivevano a Nazareth; non abitavano ancora insieme, perché il matrimonio non era ancora compiuto.” *Insegnamenti*, p. 786. English translation: “Appeal at the Angelus,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, 3 January 2014, p. 7.

²³ “Questa fase infatti, pur essendo soltanto la prima e incoativa, e quindi chiaramente in relazione necessaria con

This first phase corresponds to the canonical status of *matrimonium ratum*, that is, a validly contracted marriage. With the first phase or espousal, the fundamental rights and duties of marriage come into being, and, therefore, the spouses are rightly called husband and wife.

Tosato describes the juridical nature of the contract which constitutes the first phase of the process of marriage:

There should not be any doubts after what has been written up to this point, about the juridic nature of this first phase of the matrimonial procedure. There remains now only to summarize and to underline that which seems most important. It is the intention of the contracting parties, who participate in the negotiation and arrive at the matrimonial agreement, to bring about the “taking of a woman” not just in any manner, but rather in the entirely special manner which brings the “taken” woman into the juridic state of “wife” and the “taking” man into the juridic state of “husband”, both with a new, adequate patrimonial arrangement of their own. They intend, therefore, to carry out an act with multiple juridical effects. The juridic ordering recognizes,

regulates, and safeguards this subjective interest, guaranteeing for its part that the act duly carried out is really productive of its juridic effects. It carries this out with the whole ensemble of regulations, of custom and of law, which hitherto we have only glimpsed, but which we will have occasion, going forward, to see still better. To give an example: to safeguard the personal rights of the groom/husband over the bride/wife, the juridic ordering recognizes the crime of “adultery”. The espousal is therefore a true and proper juridic transaction, which creates rights and obligations.²⁴

Tosato’s careful exposition renders understandable the response of Saint Joseph to the discovery of the pregnancy of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The second and concluding phase of the matrimonial process is called *nissuin* or “nuptials.” It takes place when, after the established time has passed, full execution is given to the matrimonial agreement. It corresponds to the canonical juridical status of *matrimonium consummatum*. It is the moment of the nuptial ceremonies and festivities, to which are connected the departure of the bride from her father’s house, the leading of the bride into the

una seconda e completiva fase, tuttavia svolge una funzione essenziale nella costituzione del coniugio. Infatti, anche se un uomo si è impossessato di una donna, facendola prigioniera e riducendola in schiavitù, anche se un uomo si è congiunto carnalmente con una donna e intrattiene con essa una relazione sessuale, a seguito e dipendentemente soltanto da questi fatti, qualora cioè non intervenga la stipulazione dell’accordo matrimoniale – e non a partire dalle successive feste nuziali; né, tanto meno, a partire dalla successiva coabitazione dei due –, che un uomo «sposa» (*’rs*) una donna. La «sposa» nel senso che egli riserva giuridicamente a sé questa donna in moglie, che egli la costituisce giuridicamente sua moglie.” Angelo Tosato, *Il matrimonio israelitico: Una teoria generale* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1982), p. 87. [Hereafter, Il matrimonio israelitico].

²⁴ “Sulla natura giuridica di questa prima fase del procedimento matrimoniale, dopo quanto si è fin qui scritto, non dovrebbero esservi dubbi. Resta oramai soltanto da riassumere e da sottolineare ciò che sembra più

importante. È intenzione dei contraenti, che partecipano alla trattative e addivengono all’accordo matrimoniale, di dar luogo al «prendere una donna» non in qualsivoglia modo, bensì nel modo tutto speciale che immette la donna «presa» nello stato giuridico di «moglie», e l’uomo «prendente» nello stato giuridico di «marito»; entrambi con un loro nuovo, adeguato assetto patrimoniale. Essi intendono perciò compiere un atto dalla molteplice efficacia giuridica. L’ordinamento giuridico riconosce, regola e tutela tale interesse soggettivo, garantendo per parte sua che l’atto compiuto debitamente sia realmente produttivo dei suoi effetti giuridici. Ciò esso compie con tutto l’insieme di una normativa, di costume e di legge, che finora abbiamo solo intravisto; ma che avremo modo, procedendo, di sempre meglio vedere. Per esemplificare: a salvaguardia dei diritti personali dello sposo-marito sulla sposa-moglie, l’ordinamento giuridico sancisce il crimine «adulterio». Lo spozalizio è dunque un vero e proprio negozio giuridico, creatore di diritti e di doveri.” Il matrimonio israelitico, pp. 107-108.

house of the groom, and the beginning of cohabitation. Of it, Tosato writes:

Compared to the first moment, which bears a foundational function, this second moment bears a completing function. Nothing new is now stipulated with the nuptials. There is only the carrying out of the commitments undertaken with the espousals. It is true that this simple carrying out also has its own juridic relevance, however small. It can be said that now, with it, the marriage is completely concluded and the marriage bond is fully placed in being.

The groom, with the nuptials, “takes possession, dominion” (*b^el*) of his bride, in the sense that he now begins to exercise fully towards her his powers (but also his duties) as a husband. He is a man who, now also in fact, possesses a wife; a man who is now, in fact, “wifed” (*ba‘al ‘iššā*). And she is a woman who, now also in fact, belongs to the husband; a woman who is now, also in fact, “husbanded” (*b^eūlat ba‘al*).²⁵

The second phase of the matrimonial process, in short, does not make the couple any more married than they were from the moment of the matrimonial contract but gives execution to the juridical reality of marriage securely established at the first phase.

²⁵ “Rispetto al primo momento, che ricopre funzione fondamentale, questo secondo momento ricopre una funzione completiva. Nulla di nuovo viene ora stipulato con le nozze. Si dà soltanto adempimento agli impegni presi con lo spozalizio. Vero è che questo semplice adempimento ha esso pure, per quanto piccola, una sua rilevanza giuridica. Si può dire che ora con esso il matrimonio viene completamente concluso e pienamente posto in essere il coniugio.

Lo sposo, con le nozze, “prende possesso, dominio” (*b^el*) della sua sposa, nel senso che comincia ora ad esercitare pienamente nei confronti di lei i suoi poteri (ma anche i suoi doveri) maritali. Egli è un uomo che, ora anche di fatto, possiede moglie; un uomo che è attualmente, anche di fatto, ammogliato (*ba‘al ‘iššā*). Ed essa è una donna che, ora anche di fatto, appartiene al marito; una donna che è

The late Father René Laurentin, making reference to Mary’s decision from her youth “not to belong to any man but to God alone,” explains her marital status at the time of the Annunciation with these words:

The Bibles inexactly translate “engaged,” while Mary is really married to Joseph in keeping with the two phases of Hebrew marriage: the consent (*qidushin*) before the Annunciation, and the second phase, the introduction of the wife into the house of the husband (*nissuin*), in accord with Joseph’s agreement to a virginal marriage (non-consummated).²⁶

Laurentin goes on to explain how Mary, by reason of her state of wife in a virginal marriage, believed that she had renounced the maternity of the Messiah. Referring to her vow of virginity, he declares:

But this vow brought about, on the contrary, the only means of achieving this unique privilege. Such are the paradoxes of the Most High. She receives, then, the response which makes new and clarifies everything.²⁷

Manuel Miguens, from a careful study of the sense of Lk 1, 27, concludes:

This description of Mary in Lk 1:27 is a technical expression of the Jewish marital law. The evidence for this comes from Deut 22:23 in the Greek

attualmente, anche di fatto, maritata (*b^eūlat ba‘al*.” Il matrimonio israelitico, p. 110.

²⁶ “C’est inexactement que les bibles traduisent «fiancée» alors que Marie est bien mariée à Joseph selon les deux phases du mariage hébreu: le consentement *qidushin* avant l’Annonciation, et la deuxième phase: introduction de l’épouse dans la maison de l’époux *nissuin* selon l’accord de Joseph pour un mariage blanc non consommé.” René Laurentin, *Marie, source directe de l’Évangile de l’Enfance* (Paris: Éditions François-Xavier de Guibert, 2012), pp. 64-65. [Hereafter, Marie].

²⁷ “Mais ce voeu réalisait au contraire le seul moyen d’accéder à ce privilege unique. Tels sont les paradoxes du Très-Haut. Elle reçoit alors la réponse qui renouvelle et clarifie tout.” Marie, p. 65.

translation, which in this case is a faithful rendering of the Hebrew text...

The realization that we have to deal with legal language is important for various reasons. First of all, this expression indicates a (particular) marital status of the persons involved. A woman in this situation is not defined just as a virgin (physically), but she is defined as a “betrothed/wedded virgin,” as a virgin involved in a marital situation: in fact, she is a virgin who is a wife...²⁸

Francis Filas, renowned Josephologist, after presenting a summary of the discussion of the marriage of Saint Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary, concludes by examining the status of the marriage, according to the Jewish law in force at the time of the Annunciation. Having presented the evidence of scholars of Jewish marriage practice at the time of the Annunciation and referring to the conclusion of the Biblical scholar, U. Holzmeister, he concludes:

The summaries of many other studies can be adduced to uphold this view that the betrothal of Joseph and Mary linked them in a valid marriage, which was later solemnized by the wedding ceremony. This conclusion is further confirmed by a sort of aprioristic argument proposed by Macabiau and modeled on the reasoning of Suarez: The gospels make it clear that Jesus was considered the legitimate son of Mary and Joseph. Therefore, one would be prone to conclude that Jesus had been conceived in Mary at a time when genuine marriage rights were considered by the

public to belong to His virginal parents.²⁹

The Marriage and the Redemptive Incarnation

Why all the concern about the marital status of Saint Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary at the time of the Incarnation? First of all, the most important event in the history of the world certainly merits the most careful study in all of its details. Even more so, the Christian wishes to understand as fully as possible the work of God in time for the eternal salvation of men.

The study of Lk 1, 34 has made clear two essential aspects of the mystery of the Redemptive Incarnation. First of all, the words, “since I do not know man,” make clear that the Blessed Virgin Mary had given her whole being to the Lord through the consecration to a life of virginity. The present form of the verb in Greek, as Father Settimio Manelli points out, signifies an ongoing reality. He writes:

Mary’s question would hardly make sense on the lips of a “spouse.” In reality, her words reveal something much more profound. Indeed, the word used is in the present, which in Greek suggests continuity. Hence, Mary says to the angel: “I do not know and I do not intend to know man.” For this reason, many authors, modern as well as ancient, conclude how “obviously one must therefore admit that the embarrassment of Mary arises from a precise commitment – vow or promise – to ‘not know man’, i.e., to be and to remain a virgin.”³⁰

The most precise translation of the Greek original in English would seem to be “since I do not know man,” for it indicates the state of life of a virgin. The translation, “since I am a virgin” or

²⁸ Manuel Miguens, *The Virgin Birth: An Evaluation of Scriptural Evidence*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: St. Paul Editions, 1981, pp. 66-67.

²⁹ Francis L. Filas, *Joseph: The Man Closest to Jesus. The Complete Life, Theology and Devotional History of St. Joseph* (Boston, MA: St. Paul Editions, 1962). P. 133.

³⁰ Settimio M. Manelli, “The Virgin Mary in the New Testament,” *Mariology: A Guide for Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, and Consecrated Persons* (Goleta, CA: Seat of Wisdom Books, 2007), p. 76 [Hereafter, *Mariology*].

“since I know not a man”, could be understood as a present condition which could change. The precise translation indicates that Mary is consecrated, has been set aside by God, as a virgin.

Manelli places the word, “spouse,” in quotation marks to indicate that Mary is indeed a spouse but not in the usual sense of a spouse who intends to consummate her marriage. This leads to the second important aspect of the mystery of the Redemptive Incarnation which is expressed in the verse in question. Mary is indeed the spouse of Saint Joseph and, therefore, the Divine Child conceived in her womb by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit is a member of the family of Joseph and Mary, and enjoys the foster-fatherhood or guardianship of Saint Joseph. In beginning the work of salvation, God the Father takes care that the conception of His only-begotten Son in human flesh, while virginal as it must be, is also completely legitimate. He is conceived in the womb of Mary, Wife of Saint Joseph.

Commenting on the text of Mt 1, 28-35, Manelli writes:

The primary scope, therefore, of Matthew is to present “the origin of Jesus,” making clear the conjugal bond of Mary and Joseph, so as to demonstrate the legitimacy of the child, and the virginal conception, to indicate the divine origin of Jesus and his messianic identity.³¹

The Gospel according to Saint Matthew is marked, in particular, by attention to the juridical nature of our faith and its practice, presenting Christ as the New Moses, the New Lawgiver, most eminently in the Sermon on the Mount. Thus, his text helps us to understand more fully the first response of Mary to the Annunciation, by which she seeks to understand how she is to conceive the Divine Child and yet remain faithful to her consecration as a virgin, a fidelity which her spouse, Joseph, had freely accepted in marrying her. It is inconceivable that God the Son, at His Incarnation, would not respect fully,

indeed would not bring to perfection, both the virginity of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the sanctity of her marriage to Saint Joseph.

Conclusion

The importance of an accurate understanding of the marital status of Saint Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary is evident for a correct understanding of the great mystery of the Redemptive Incarnation. *Father John A. Hardon’s Basic Catholic Catechism Course* provides a careful summary of all that I have tried to illustrate. In a particular way, the falsehood regarding the marital status of the Blessed Virgin Mary, propagated by some today, is explained. I quote a part of the explanation:

The fact that Jesus was virginally conceived and born after the marriage of Mary and Joseph means that Jesus was conceived and born within wedlock. This is contrary to what so many, even priests, are saying at the present time, namely, that Jesus was born out of wedlock, like the children of so many unmarried women today, and that this is not an “abnormal” situation. A pregnant, unwed mother is said to be, according to these people, in the same condition as Mary, who they claim was also unwed at the time she conceived Jesus. This is false; it is indeed a very serious falsehood, for it undermines the sanctity of marriage and the reason for that sanctity. It is said by defenders of this position that Jesus was conceived after Mary and Joseph were engaged, but not yet married.³²

As I mentioned at the beginning, the erroneous position described above is held both by those who knowingly dissent from the perennial teaching of the Church and also by many individuals who are simply poorly catechized and therefore fall prey to such false teaching.

³¹ Mariology, p. 79.

³² Raymond Leo Cardinal Burke, ed., *Father John A. Hardon’s Basic Catholic Catechism Course* (Bardstown: Eternal Life, 2012), p. 27.

In conclusion, I urge careful attention to the teaching on the virginal maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The account of the Annunciation in the Gospel according to Saint Luke and of the Dream of Saint Joseph regarding the Virginal Conception in the Gospel according to Saint Matthew provides for the core of the teaching, which is illumined through a study of the practice of matrimony in ancient Israel. I conclude with the divinely inspired words of the angel of the Lord to Saint Joseph: “Do not be afraid, Joseph, son of David, to take to thee Mary thy wife, for that which is begotten in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus; for he shall save his people from their sins.”³³

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³³ Mt 1, 20-21.