

Summa Theologica III q29. Of the espousals of the Mother of God

1. Whether Christ should have been born of an espoused virgin?
2. Whether there was true marriage between our Lord's Mother and Joseph

[From the *Summa Theologica* of Saint Thomas Aquinas as translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, and from the works of Blessed John Duns Scotus as selected and arranged by Jerome of Montefortino and as translated by Peter L.P. Simpson. Texts are taken from the *Opus Oxoniense* and the *Reportata Parisiensia* of the Wadding edition of Scotus' works.]

Article 1. Whether Christ should have been born of an espoused virgin?

Aquinas

Objection 1: It would seem that Christ should not have been born of an espoused virgin. For espousals are ordered to carnal intercourse. But our Lord's Mother never wished to have carnal intercourse with her husband; because this would be derogatory to the virginity of her mind. Therefore she should not have been espoused.

Objection 2: Further, that Christ was born of a virgin was miraculous, whence Augustine says (*Ep. ad Volus. cxxxvii*): "This same power of God brought forth the infant's limbs out of the virginal womb of His inviolate Mother, by which in the vigor of manhood He passed through the closed doors. If we are told why this happened, it will cease to be wonderful; if another instance be alleged, it will no longer be unique." But miracles that are wrought in confirmation of the Faith should be manifest. Since, therefore, by her Espousals this miracle would be less evident, it seems that it was unfitting that Christ should be born of an espoused virgin.

Objection 3: Further, the martyr Ignatius, as Jerome says on *Mt. 1:18*, gives as a reason of the espousals of the Mother of God, "that the manner of His Birth might

Scotus [*Oxon. 4 d.30 q.2; Report. ib.*]

Objection 1. It seems that Christ ought in no way to have been born of a betrothed Virgin. For [*Oxon. 4 d.30 q.2 n.1*] in 17 q.1 *Sunt quaedam*, and in d.27 ch.4, it says: "For those who have vowed virginity not only is marrying damnable but even wishing to be:" but Blessed Mary had vowed chastity (from the last article of the preceding question); therefore it seems laudable neither for her to have wanted to be betrothed nor for Christ to be born of her.

Objection 2. [*Report. 4 d.30 q.2 n.4*] The reason assigned for the fact that it was appropriate for her to contract marriage is so that her giving birth might be concealed from the devil and the mystery of the Incarnation remain hidden; but this reason is no reason; therefore it was not appropriate for Christ to be born from a betrothed woman. *Proof of the minor*: for the devil could recognize naturally the integrity both of her mind and of her body; therefore he could not have been so imposed upon through the marriage that he should fail to notice that a Virgin had conceived (something that exceeded the powers of nature). – *But if it be said*, that certainly, provided he had not been impeded by God, he could have known this

be hidden from the devil, who would think Him to be begotten not of a virgin but of a wife.” But this seems to be no reason at all. First, because by his natural cunning he knows whatever takes place in bodies. Secondly, because later on the demons, through many evident signs, knew Christ after a fashion: whence it is written (*Mk.* 1:23,24): “A man with an unclean spirit . . . cried out, saying: What have we to do with Thee, Jesus of Nazareth? Art Thou come to destroy us? I know . . . Thou art the Holy one of God.” Therefore it does not seem fitting that the Mother of God should have been espoused.

Objection 4: Further, Jerome gives as another reason, “lest the Mother of God should be stoned by the Jews as an adulteress.” But this reason seems to have no weight, for if she were not espoused, she could not be condemned for adultery. Therefore it does not seem reasonable that Christ should be born of an espoused virgin.

On the contrary, It is written (*Mt.* 1:18): “When as His Mother Mary was espoused to Joseph”: and (*Lk.* 1:26,27): “The angel Gabriel was sent . . . to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph.”

I answer that, It was fitting that Christ should be born of an espoused virgin; first, for His own sake; secondly, for His Mother’s sake; thirdly, for our sake. For the sake of Christ Himself, for four reasons. First, lest He should be rejected by unbelievers as illegitimate: wherefore Ambrose says on *Lk.* 1:26,27: “How could we blame Herod or the Jews if they seem to persecute one who was born of adultery?”

Secondly, in order that in the customary way His genealogy might be traced through the male line. Thus Ambrose says on *Lk.*

by his natural power; *on the contrary*, he could have equally been impeded if the Blessed Virgin had not married; therefore this appropriateness is no appropriateness.

Objection 3. [*Oxon. ib.*] Betrothal and marriage are ordained to carnal copulation; but the Blessed Virgin had vowed chastity to God, and from thence she had proposed perpetually to abstain from all carnal copulation; therefore she ought not to have contracted marriage, nor Christ to have been born from a betrothed woman.

On the contrary, [*Oxon. ib.*] In *Matthew* 1 it says: “Since Mary the Mother of Jesus had been betrothed to Joseph.” And in *Luke* 1 it says: “The Angel Gabriel was sent to Mary, a Virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph.”

I answer that, [*Oxon. ib. n.2*] it must be said that Christ ought to have been born of a betrothed Virgin; for this fact there are appropriate reasons, and two are taken from Ambrose on that passage in *Luke* 1: “The Angel Gabriel was sent etc.” *The first reason* is so that her spouse might be witness to Mary’s virginity, and thus she would not have occasion for lying about her virginity, because, according to Ambrose, if she had not been betrothed, she would have had occasion for lying, but as betrothed she would not have. And hence, both from the testimony and as a presumption, more credit would have been given to the fact about her virginity. – *The second reason* is so that Mary might not be noted as infamous, as would in fact have happened if she had brought forth when not betrothed. Christ therefore did not think that faith in his origin was to be built on injuries to his Mother; for he knew a virgin’s shame to be tender and her repute for honor fragile; therefore the Lord preferred that his origin rather than his

3:23: “He Who came into the world, according to the custom of the world had to be enrolled Now for this purpose, it is the men that are required, because they represent the family in the senate and other courts. The custom of the Scriptures, too, shows that the ancestry of the men is always traced out.”

Thirdly, for the safety of the new-born Child: lest the devil should plot serious hurt against Him. Hence Ignatius says that she was espoused “that the manner of His Birth might be hidden from the devil.”

Fourthly, that He might be fostered by Joseph: who is therefore called His “father,” as bread-winner.

It was also fitting for the sake of the Virgin. First, because thus she was rendered exempt from punishment; that is, “lest she should be stoned by the Jews as an adulteress,” as Jerome says.

Secondly, that thus she might be safeguarded from ill fame. Whence Ambrose says on *Lk.* 1:26,27: “She was espoused lest she be wounded by the ill-fame of violated virginity, in whom the pregnant womb would betoken corruption.”

Thirdly, that, as Jerome says, Joseph might administer to her wants.

This was fitting, again, for our sake. First, because Joseph is thus a witness to Christ’s being born of a virgin. Wherefore Ambrose says: “Her husband is the more trustworthy witness of her purity, in that he would deplore the dishonor, and avenge the disgrace, were it not that he acknowledged the mystery.”

Secondly, because thereby the very words of the Virgin are rendered more credible by

Mother’s honor be by some cast into doubt. And thus to virgins who live in bad repute no veil of excuse would be left, which they would have if the Mother of God had been defamed. – *Another reason* is touched on by Origen on that passage in Matthew 1: “Since she had been betrothed etc.,” so that, of course, the Spouse of Mary might do service for the Virgin and the Child going into and out of Egypt. – Finally, [*Oxon. ib.* n.3] it was appropriate for Christ to be born of a betrothed woman, so that he might not seem to take his beginning from an injury to the law, nor give occasion to the Jews and to Herod of persecuting him, since by the law about the offspring of an unmarried woman he would be damned.

Reply to Objection 1. [*Oxon. ib.* n.7] It must be said that it is indeed damnable for those who vow chastity either to mary or to wish to marry, unless they be sufficiently made certain that nothing would happen, through the contract of their nuptials, which might be repugnant to their vow of chastity, in which way the Blessed Virgin Mary was most certain, and consequently she did not expose herself to any danger of violating the vow she had already expressed.

Reply to Objection 2. I say that that reason and appropriateness is adduced by Ambrose, Augustine, and others. – *And when it is urged* [*Report.* 4 d.30 q.2 n.4] that the devil could have recognized the virginity of Mary by his own power; *I say that* that is true, unless, on account of his malice and the dignity of the One whom she carried, God had prohibited him from approaching her either intellectually or locally: and for that reason he was not permitted to recognize in any way the mystery of the Incarnation, as Bernard says (*Homil. 2 On “The Angel Gabriel was sent etc.”*). But although he could have equally

which she asserted her virginity. Thus Ambrose says: “Belief in Mary’s words is strengthened, the motive for a lie is removed. If she had not been espoused when pregnant, she would seem to have wished to hide her sin by a lie: being espoused, she had no motive for lying, since a woman’s pregnancy is the reward of marriage and gives grace to the nuptial bond.” These two reasons add strength to our faith.

Thirdly, that all excuse be removed from those virgins who, through want of caution, fall into dishonor. Hence Ambrose says: “It was not becoming that virgins should expose themselves to evil report, and cover themselves with the excuse that the Mother of the Lord had also been oppressed by ill-fame.”

Fourthly, because by this the universal Church is typified, which is a virgin and yet is espoused to one Man, Christ, as Augustine says (*De Sanct. Virg.* xii).

A fifth reason may be added: since the Mother of the Lord being both espoused and a virgin, both virginity and wedlock are honored in her person, in contradiction to those heretics who disparaged one or the other.

Reply to Objection 1: 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.

Reply to Objection 2: As Ambrose says on *Lk.* 1:26: “Our Lord preferred that men should doubt of His origin rather than of His Mother’s purity. For he knew the delicacy of virgin modesty, and how easily the fair name of chastity is disparaged: nor did He choose that our faith in His Birth should be strengthened in detriment to His Mother.” We must observe, however, that some miracles wrought by God are the direct object of faith; such are the miracles of the virginal Birth, the Resurrection of our Lord, and the Sacrament of the Altar. Wherefore our Lord wished these to be more hidden, that belief in them might have greater merit. Whereas other miracles are for the strengthening of faith: and these it behooves to be manifest.

been impeded if she had remained unmarried, nevertheless seeing her married he was singularly deceived, supposing her to be as other women are who carry in their womb.

Reply to Objection 3. I say [*Oxon.* 4 d.30 nn.8, 4] that the Blessed Virgin ought to have contracted marriage, as is clear from what has been said; but that that was not repugnant to her vow of chastity is established from this, that she did not, through her marriage, bind herself to anything repugnant to her vow. For then, when she had wished carnal copulation, would she have so bound herself; but she did not wish this, except under the condition *if it should be asked for*; but she had been taught by revelation that that condition was not at any future time to be put in place (on which see the following article).

Reply to Objection 3: As Augustine says (*De Trin.* iii), the devil can do many things by his natural power which he is hindered by the Divine power from doing. Thus it may be that by his natural power the devil could know that the Mother of God knew not man, but was a virgin; yet was prevented by God from knowing the manner of the Divine Birth. That afterwards the devil after a fashion knew that He was the Son of God, makes no difficulty: because then the time had already come for Christ to make known His power against the devil, and to suffer persecution aroused by him. But during His infancy it behooved the malice of the devil to be withheld, lest he should persecute Him too severely: for Christ did not wish to suffer such things then, nor to make His power known, but to show Himself to be in all things like other infants. Hence Pope Leo (*Serm. in Epiph.* iv) says that “the Magi found the Child Jesus small in body, dependent on others, unable to speak, and in no way differing from the generality of human infants.” Ambrose, however, expounding *Lk.* 1:26, seems to understand this of the devil’s members. For, after giving the above reason---namely, that the prince of the world might be deceived---he continues thus: “Yet still more did He deceive the princes of the world, since the evil disposition of the demons easily discovers even hidden things: but those who spend their lives in worldly vanities can have no acquaintance of Divine things.”

Reply to Objection 4: The sentence of adulteresses according to the Law was that they should be stoned, not only if they were already espoused or married, but also if their maidenhood were still under the protection of the paternal roof, until the day when they enter the married state. Thus it is written (*Dt.* 22:20,21): “If . . . virginity be not found in the damsel . . . the men of the city shall stone her to death, and she shall die; because she hath done a wicked thing in Israel, to play the whore in her father’s house.”

It may also be said, according to some writers, that the Blessed Virgin was of the family or kindred of Aaron, so that she was related to Elizabeth, as we are told (*Lk.* 1:36). Now a virgin of the priestly tribe was condemned to death for whoredom; for we read (*Lev.* 21:9): “If the daughter of a priest be taken in whoredom, and dishonor the name of her father, she shall be burnt with fire.”

Lastly, some understand the passage of Jerome to refer to the throwing of stones by ill-fame.

Article 2. Whether there was a true marriage between Mary and Joseph?

Aquinas

Objection 1: It would seem that there was no true marriage between Mary and Joseph. For Jerome says against Helvidius that Joseph “was Mary’s guardian rather than her husband.” But if this was a true marriage, Joseph was truly her husband.

Scotus [*Oxon.* 4 d.30 q.2; *Report. ib.*]

Objection 1. It seems that there was not a true marriage between Mary and Joseph. For [*Oxon.* 4 d.30 q.2 n.1] in the last chapter of *Numbers* there is maintained a sacred law about marriages, and women are commanded to marry men of their own

Therefore there was no true marriage between Mary and Joseph.

Objection 2: Further, on *Mt.* 1:16: “Jacob begot Joseph the husband of Mary,” Jerome says: “When thou readest ‘husband’ suspect not a marriage; but remember that Scripture is wont to speak of those who are betrothed as husband and wife.” But a true marriage is not effected by the betrothal, but by the wedding. Therefore, there was no true marriage between the Blessed Virgin and Joseph.

Objection 3: Further, it is written (*Mt.* 1:19): “Joseph, her husband, being a just man, and not willing to take her away [*Douay: ‘publicly to expose her’], i.e. to take her to his home in order to cohabit with her, was minded to put her away privately, i.e. to postpone the wedding,” as Remigius [*Cf. *Catena Aurea* in *Matth.*] expounds. Therefore, it seems that, as the wedding was not yet solemnized, there was no true marriage: especially since, after the marriage contract, no one can lawfully put his wife away.

On the contrary, Augustine says (*De Consensu Evang.* ii): “It cannot be allowed that the evangelist thought that Joseph ought to sever his union with Mary” (since he said that Joseph was Mary’s husband) “on the ground that in giving birth to Christ, she had not conceived of him, but remained a virgin. For by this example the faithful are taught that if after marriage they remain continent by mutual consent, their union is still and is rightly called marriage, even without intercourse of the sexes.”

I answer that, 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

tribe; therefore Mary could not, according to the law, marry anyone except a man of her tribe; but Joseph was of the tribe of Judah, as is said in *Luke* 2, “Because that he was of the tribe of Judah and of the house of David;” but Mary was of the tribe of Levi, because Elizabeth was her cousin; therefore between Blessed Mary and Joseph there does not seem to have been a lawful marriage; for that marriage, entered upon against the law, was by that right null and void.

Objection 2. [*Oxon. ib.*] He who contracts a marriage consents to something other than cohabitation, because a brother and sister could consent in that way; therefore he consents to carnal copulation, for matrimony does not seem to add beyond cohabitation any other thing; but Mary did not consent to that because she had vowed chastity; therefore there was not a true marriage between her and Joseph.

On the contrary, Augustine says (*De Consensu Evangelist.* ch.1): “it was not lawful for the Evangelist to think that Joseph was to be separated from his marriage with Mary for the reason that she bore Christ, not from sleeping with him, but as Virgin. For by this example is marvellously insinuated to faithful spouses that, even when their continence is preserved by mutual consent, a marriage can remain, and be called marriage, without sexual mixing of the body.”

I answer that, it must be said that there was a true marriage between the Most Blessed Virgin and Joseph. But [*Oxon.* 4 d.30 q.2 nn.4-6] how that could be the case, when she had for a long time vowed her virginity, must be shown. Therefore one must know that in the marriage contract there is and enters in, indeed, a mutual giving of bodies to carnal copulation, but

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. For this reason the angel calls Mary the wife of Joseph, saying to him (*Mt.* 1:20): “Fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife”: on which words Augustine says (*De Nup. et Concup.* i): “She is called his wife from the first promise of her espousals, whom he had not known nor ever was to know by carnal intercourse.”

But as to the second perfection which is attained by the marriage act, if this be referred to carnal intercourse, by which children are begotten; thus this marriage was not consummated. Wherefore Ambrose says on *Lk.* 1:26,27: “Be not surprised that Scripture calls Mary a wife. The fact of her marriage is declared, not to insinuate the loss of virginity, but to witness to the reality of the union.” Nevertheless, this marriage had the second perfection, as to upbringing of the child. Thus Augustine says (*De Nup. et Concup.* i): “All the nuptial blessings are fulfilled in the marriage of Christ’s parents, offspring,

only under the implicit condition, *if it be asked for*; for it never be asked for, the obligation to render it is not compelling. Hence it is that those who contract marriage with the intention of at once vowing chastity do truly contract it: but by parity the vow of chastity of the Blessed Virgin Mary could stand in presence of a true contract; therefore she truly contracted marriage. For a marriage of this sort carried no prejudice with it to the vow already expressed; because, if it did, it ought to have done so by reason of the carnal copulation to which she was held under the condition, *if it be asked for*. But she was very certain that it would never be asked for (as was said in article 3 of the preceding question); therefore she could truly have contracted marriage without prejudice to her vow of chastity. In that contract, therefore, she gave and transferred lordship of her body to Joseph her spouse; but she did not give the use, nor did she bind herself to giving the use at some time, because she knew that he would never ask the use of it, and because God had absolved her from rendering this sort of debt, and he relaxed it for her by way of dispensation, so that even if it were asked for she should not render it.

But the fact that lordship might be separated from use is elegantly held in the chapter *Exiit, De Verbor. Significat. in 6* [*Oxon.* 4 d.30 q.2 n.6] where, from the relevant sentence, it is said that a lord can, having retained to himself the lordship of some thing, hand over the use to another, and that he can separate the use perpetually from the lordship, which is necessary for those using it and not having lordship over it; therefore Blessed Mary could similarly hand over lordship of her body to such an act, *if it be asked for*, having however held back the use, since she was certain that it was not ever to be asked for from her by

faith and sacrament. The offspring we know to have been the Lord Jesus; faith, for there was no adultery: sacrament, since there was no divorce. Carnal intercourse alone there was none.”

Reply to Objection 1: Jerome uses the term “husband” in reference to marriage consummated.

Reply to Objection 2: By marriage Jerome means the nuptial intercourse.

Reply to Objection 3: As Chrysostom says (*Hom. i super Matth.* [**Opus Imperfectum* among the supposititious works ascribed to St. Chrysostom]) the Blessed Virgin was so espoused to Joseph that she dwelt in his home: “for just as she who conceives in her husband’s house is understood to have conceived of him, so she who conceives elsewhere is suspect.” Consequently sufficient precaution would not have been taken to safeguard the fair fame of the Blessed Virgin, if she had not the entry of her husband’s house. Wherefore the words, “not willing to take her away” are better rendered as meaning, “not willing publicly to expose her,” than understood of taking her to his house. Hence the evangelist adds that “he was minded to put her away privately.” But although she had the entry of Joseph’s house by reason of her first promise of espousals, yet the time had not yet come for the solemnizing of the wedding; for which reason they had not yet consummated the marriage. Therefore, as Chrysostom says (*Hom. iv in Matth.*): “The evangelist does not say, ‘before she was taken to the house of her husband,’ because she was already in the house. For it was the custom among the ancients for espoused maidens to enter frequently the houses of them to whom they were betrothed.” Therefore the angel also said to Joseph: “Fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife”;

him to whom she transferred lordship of her body. Nor did the Blessed Mary do that by her own authority, but rather she retained that use to herself by the authority of the Holy Spirit, who properly reserved for her that use, in such a way that he to whom was handed over lordship and power of Mary’s body, and to whom such a use was thence owing, would never be about to demand it, nor ever about to request it, having been inhibited by the supreme power of God. – *Confirmation*: for an adulteress has over the body of another’s husband the power which she has acquired in marrying him, and nevertheless she does not have nor can she have use of that body because of the adultery, in which she has lost the right of asking for the debt from her husband; therefore if sin can perpetually prohibit use, though the power given in marriage stands, much more could the Holy Spirit do that because of some honorable cause, which causes were handled in the preceding article. *Another confirmation*: if someone had contracted with an oath an engagement to marry, and had afterwards vowed chastity, he would be held to contract the marriage promised by the oath, and thereafter, before the consumation of the marriage, he ought to enter religion; that man had given power, therefore, over his body to his wife by truly contracting marriage, and he had meanwhile the intention, as far as his part was concerned, of never giving the use of it, although he might not know whether his bride would in the meantime ask for the use or not; therefore much more is it licit thus to contract a marriage if he knew that his wife was never going to ask for the use, as is the case in the proposition about the Blessed Virgin.

Reply to Objection 1. It can be said, [*Oxon. ib. n.7*] in one way, that that law had been passed because of the daughters of

that is: “Fear not to solemnize your marriage with her.” Others, however, say that she was not yet admitted to his house, but only betrothed to him. But the first is more in keeping with the Gospel narrative.

Saphaad, lest, that is, their inheritance be transferred to another tribe, as is evident in the same place in the last chapter of *Numbers*. No women were held, therefore, to that law save those women on whom the paternal inheritance devolved, just as it had devolved to them when their father was

dead. But the Blessed Virgin was not an heiress in this way, so it was licit for her to marry a man of another tribe.

But if that law about marriage within one’s own tribe were to oblige everyone under the law of Moses, [*Oxon. ib.* n.8] *I say* that the Blessed Virgin was of the tribe of Judah, of which tribe she and her husband were, and indeed on the part of her father. For the Savior was of the tribe of Judah, in line with that passage of *Revelation* ch. 5, “The Lion of Judah has conquered;” which tribe, in Christ’s genealogy, was led down from Abraham right up to Joseph. But Joseph no more attained to Christ than anyone else whoever of the same tribe; therefore it is necessary for it have been the case that the Blessed Virgin was of the very same tribe on the part of her father; for on the part of her mother she was of the tribe of Levi, and of the priestly family, as is evident in *Luke* 1, where it is held that Elizabeth of the Levitical tribe was Mary’s cousin.

Reply to Objection 2. [*Oxon. ib.*] This is clear from what was said in the *solution*, because that consent exists in the handing over of mutual power over their bodies for the procreating of offspring, and consequently for use, *if it be asked for*. But here there was certitude that that use would never be asked for by Saint Joseph.