

“Did Mary Remain a Virgin After Jesus was Born?”

A Catholic friend and I (Protestant) were having a discussion about the differences in our beliefs, specifically the virginity of Mary. While we have no disagreement that Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit in Mary, we do disagree about Mary's ongoing virginity. It's my understanding that Catholics believe (1) Mary remained a virgin the rest of her life; (2) she was sinless; and (3) she was assumed into heaven, circumventing death. My contention was (1) Jesus had brothers and sisters, so Mary could not have remained a virgin; (2) the Bible states that Jesus was the only person to walk the earth sinlessly; and (3) Mary died a normal (human) death and is in heaven, just like believers after Jesus' death. I'm not trying to change his beliefs, but I would like some outside source of information on these topics.

The problem with these issues is that Protestants only accept Scripture as the basis for our authority, and Catholics accept Scripture AND Tradition as the basis for their authority, with Tradition often winning out. The three disputed doctrines you mention (and you're mainly right except for the doctrine of the Assumption: Mary's death is not disputed. The doctrine of the Assumption says her body was taken into heaven after death) are all based on Tradition.

The “Catholic in the pew” is often committed to what the Church teaches because that's all they know and they are taught that the Church's teachings are infallible and not to be questioned. Logic doesn't get in the way. For instance, I remember a discussion with a Catholic lady about Mary's supposed sinlessness. When I brought up the Magnificat, Mary's wonderful prayer in Luke where she says, “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,” pointing out that only a sinner needs a savior, the other lady

dismissed it, saying, "Oh, she was just being holy." End of discussion. Logic doesn't get in the way.

The question I would bring up is, What happens when Scripture—which is inspired and inerrant—contradicts Tradition? Asking that kind of question can serve as a seed-planting ministry in your friend's life.

Bigger than the Catholic doctrine issue, and predating even the birth of Christ, is the philosophical underpinnings of these three beliefs. Many of the Church fathers accepted Plato's teachings about the nature of reality, which are that only the unseen, spirit realm is important; the material realm is evil and unimportant. (The other, opposite philosophy at the time, and which still drives a great deal of Western thought, is from Aristotle, who taught that the material world is more important than the unseen realm of ideas.)

Plato taught that the mind and spirit was good and the body was base or bad. Many people, including many of the church fathers, took this belief and arrived at the conclusion that sex is evil, even in marriage, because it is a bodily function. Thus, because they wanted to believe Mary was sinless, the church decided that she had to stay a virgin because sex with Joseph would have been evil. Most non-Catholic theologians believe that Mary and Joseph had a normal marriage, producing several children which are mentioned in texts such as Matt. 13:55 ("Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?"). This "material is bad" idea is also behind the belief that she could not have experienced the decay of deathlike the rest of mortals, which spawned the idea of her assumption into heaven.

I suggest you check out this web site for further information:
www.reachingcatholics.org/

Hope this helps!

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