

ALLOCUTIO JULY 2015 – Fr. Justin Ford, Senatus Spiritual Director

We would have heard in today's gospel for the 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time one of several Scripture passages referring to 'brothers' or 'sisters' of Jesus: 'This is the carpenter, surely, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joset and Jude and Simon? His sisters, too, are they not here with us?'

At first sight that can be puzzling for us as Catholics, since our faith proclaims that Mary is the 'ever-Virgin' and so has no other children besides Jesus. Some of us are probably familiar with the explanation for this, but others maybe not. And especially as legionaries it's something good for us to understand, since we should be fully equipped to explain to others the Catholic teaching about Our Lady.

Some Catholics, maybe having no deep knowledge of the Spirit-guided nature of Church teaching authority, might blithely assume from this that the Church is wrong and Protestants are right on this point of Our Lady's perpetual virginity. Perhaps, they think, the bishops and saints of ancient times just never read these verses! Even for those of us fully accepting of the Church's infallible teaching of Mary as ever-Virgin, it's tempting just to say, 'Oh well, the passage doesn't mean Jesus' *actual* brothers and sisters'. But if we leave it at that, it can sound unconvincing to a non-Catholic, so it's good to go a bit deeper.

The New Testament was written in Greek, which has a separate word for 'brother' (*adelphos*) and for 'cousin' (*anepsios*). The word in the original biblical text to describe these male relatives of Jesus is *adelphos*, so it is naturally translated as 'brother' in English. Now, in the Hebrew of the Old Testament and in the Aramaic of Jesus and his disciples, there was no separate word for 'cousin'. When male cousins or like relatives were being referred to, normally the word for 'brothers' was simply extended to them. So in English, we tend to translate this term in such contexts with indeterminate words like 'kinsmen' or 'brethren'. But when, in the few centuries before Jesus, Jewish scholars were translating the Old Testament into Greek, they almost always chose the Greek *adelphos* (brother) rather than *anepsios* (cousin), even in cases where it was clear the men in question were not true blood-brothers. (The like is true for the term 'sister', *adelphē*.)

So it seems the conceptual thought-world of Hebrew language, with no sharp linguistic divide between blood-brothers and cousins, impressed itself on their way of using Greek – despite their awareness of an available alternative term simply meaning 'cousin'. It's reasonable to think that the authors of the New Testament, likewise of Jewish background but writing in Greek, naturally adopted the same usage, at least as a general rule.

This doesn't by itself prove that *adelphos* must be interpreted as 'cousin' in these passages about Jesus' relatives. It does however leave it open as a plausible possibility, especially should any other evidence point in that direction. Thus these New Testament passages by no means disprove Mary's perpetual virginity.

The same can be said of another couple of passages sometimes claimed by Protestants to indicate that Mary had other children after Jesus. Thus it's sometimes said that *Lk* 2:7 ('she gave birth to her first-born son') shows that there must have been *later-born* sons, if Jesus was the 'first-born'.

However, the Law of Moses gave special significance to the first-born son, who was to be consecrated to the Lord (*Ex* 13:2; 34:20). 'Did this mean the parents had to wait until a second son was born before they could call their first the "first-born"? Hardly. The first male child of a marriage was termed the "first-born" even if he turned out to be the only child of the marriage. This usage is illustrated by a funerary inscription discovered in Egypt. The inscription refers to a woman who died during the birth of her "first-born".' (Karl Keating *Catholicism and Fundamentalism*, p. 286)

Mt 1:24-25, which says Joseph 'took his wife, but knew her not until she had borne a son' is similarly inconclusive about what happened *after* the birth of Mary's son. Many scriptural parallels show this: "Michal the daughter of Saul had no children until the day of her death" (*2 Sam* 6:23). Are we to assume she had children after her death? ... "And they went up to mount Sion with joy and gladness... because not one of them was slain till they had returned in peace" (*1 Macc* 5:54). Does this mean the soldiers were slain after they returned from battle?' (Keating, *ibid.*, p. 285)

Now, is there scriptural evidence in the other direction, in favour of Our Lady's perpetual virginity? Although the Gospels *are* clear in asserting Jesus was virginally conceived, if we go by Scripture alone there

isn't the same direct statement of Mary's *perpetual* virginity thereafter. However, we do find various indications that Mary had no further children.

Thus Mary's words to Gabriel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' (*Lk* 1:34) imply Mary was committed to remain a virgin, as otherwise she would have assumed she would conceive Jesus naturally once she was married. The expression of *Mk* 6:3, calling Jesus 'the son of Mary', implies in the Greek idiom that he is her only son. And on the cross, Jesus entrusted Mary to John's care (*Jn* 19:27) – which would have been strange if Mary had other actual living sons such as James, Joseph, Judas and Simon. James and Joseph indeed seem to be sons of 'the other Mary' (*Mt* 27:56, 61; *Mk* 15:40), wife of Clopas and 'sister' of Mary mother of Jesus (*Jn* 19:25).

Finally, of course Catholics do not go by Scripture alone: we believe in the authority also of unwritten Apostolic Tradition (evidenced in affirmations of the early Church of Mary's perpetual virginity), and in the infallible interpreting authority of the Magisterium of Pope and Bishops, which shows its value especially in these cases when the meaning isn't immediately clear. But in any case, Scripture is fully open to our belief that Mary Mother of God is also truly the 'ever-Virgin'.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* gives us some of the inner meaning of why this was part of God's plan. So we read (506-507): 'Mary is a virgin because her virginity is the sign of her faith "unadulterated by any doubt", and of her undivided gift of herself to God's will. It is her faith that enables her to become the mother of the Saviour: "Mary is more blessed because she embraces faith in Christ than because she conceives the flesh of Christ." (St Augustine) At once virgin and mother, Mary is the symbol and the most perfect realization of the Church: "the Church indeed. . . by receiving the word of God in faith becomes herself a mother. By preaching and Baptism she brings forth sons, who are conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of God, to a new and immortal life. She herself is a virgin, who keeps in its entirety and purity the faith she pledged to her spouse" (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 64).'