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DOES OPENNESS TO LIFE MEAN NUMEROUS FAMILY? A NEW READING OF DOGMA OF MARY'S MOTHERHOOD AND VIRGINITY

Czy otwartość na życie oznacza wielodzietność? Nowe odczytanie dogmatu o macierzyństwie i dziewictwie Maryi

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62266/PK.1898-3685.2025.37.05>

Introduction

The sexual revolution of the 1960s brought changes in the perception of human sexuality. One of its bitter fruits was the widespread undermining of the connection between the unitive and procreative dimensions of the sexual act between a woman and a man, thus separating intercourse, as an expression of the mutual love of spouses, from its blessed consequences – the calling into existence of a new human person. Roughly since the time of the sexual revolution, due to "developments" in the field of contraception and methods of artificial fertilization, in the consciousness of most people, expressing love through sexual intercourse is one thing, and the decision to have a child is another.

In such a cultural context, the Church began to teach, or rather remind and emphasize, what it has always believed: that marriage, and along with it the sexual acts of spouses, are directed towards their good and towards the begetting of offspring¹. Faced with the possibility

¹ Of course, throughout the history of the Church, the two purposes of marriage have not always been treated as equally important. For centuries, the prevailing belief was that the most important purpose of marriage was the procreation of offspring; however, even then, the Church did not exclude the good of the spouses themselves as a purpose of marriage. Cf. M. Pogorzelska, *The Purposes of Marriage in Doctrine and Canon Law*, "Studia Teologiczne. Białystok-Drohiczyń-Łomża" 32(2014) 425-433; M. Delimata, *Marriage and Its Purposes in the Opinion of the Western Church Fathers*, "Poznańskie Studia Teologiczne" 22(2008) 103-115. For Church documents on the purposes of marriage, see: Leo XIII, Encyclical *Arcanum Divinae Sapientiae* on Christian marriage (10.02.1880), 26; Code of Canon Law (27.05.1917), can. 1013 § 1; Pius XI, Encyclical *Casti connubii* on Christian marriage in light of current conditions, needs, errors, and transgressions in the family and society (31.12.1930); Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes* (7.12.1965), 48, 50 (hereinafter: GS); PAUL VI, Encyclical *Humanae vitae* on the regulation of birth (25.07.1968), 11 (hereinafter: HV); John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio* on the role of the Christian family in the modern world (22.11.1981) 32; Code of Canon Law (27.11.1983), can. 1055 § 1, 1061 §, can. 226 § 2; Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches (18.10.1990), can. 776; Catechism of the Catholic Church (11.10.1992), 1643-1654.

of excluding the procreative dimension of marital intercourse – both through "artificial" contraception and natural family planning methods, which over time achieved almost watchmaker-like precision in determining a woman's fertile and infertile days², or directly committing the murder of an unborn child through abortion, which became acceptable in Western culture, the Church began to emphasize more and more frequently the necessity of spouses' readiness to accept new human life, or put differently: openness to offspring.

But does openness to life mean only consent to the conception of a (new) child? Does it mean only opposition to abortion, contraception, the unworthy use of natural family planning methods? This text will seek answers to these questions in the documents of the Magisterium of the Church, in order to then show how the Mother of Christ can be understood as a model of accepting life. Since presenting the Church's teaching on openness to life is not the main goal of this text, our discussion will be rather cursory. We will analyze contemporary documents (from Vatican II onwards), and among them primarily those of the highest rank³.

The method of this text will therefore consist in showing the figure of Mary through the prism of the Catholic Church's teaching on openness to life. "Information" about who the Mother of the Lord was we will seek primarily in the Bible as the most certain source for theology. However, we will refer only to those passages of Sacred Scripture that speak directly about the historical figure – Miriam of Nazareth, the Mother of Jesus. Thus, we will not refer to biblical passages that tradition relates to Mary in a symbolic way (e.g., the Woman clothed with the sun in Rev 12)⁴. By applying such a method, we want to get as close as possible to the real, historical Mary, a Woman of flesh and blood, who in her life repeatedly made dramatic decisions. In addition to Sacred Scripture, we will also take into account the faith of the Church expressed in Marian dogmas, which – in a manner similar to the Bible – flow from Divine Revelation transmitted in Tradition. Of particular importance for us in this context will be the dogma of the virginity of Mary.

1. Openness to life in the teaching of the Catholic Church

The Second Vatican Council begins the second part of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World „*Gaudium et spes*” (1965), entitled „Some More Urgent Problems”, by addressing issues concerning marriage. Number 50 of this constitution, which deals with the issue of marital fertility, is of primary interest to us. After showing the significance of marriage as being directed towards the good of the spouses in earlier numbers, the Council Fathers teach:

Marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the begetting and educating of children [...]. Hence, while not making the other purposes of matrimony of less account, the true practice of conjugal love, and the whole meaning of the family life which results from it, have this aim: that the couple be ready with stout hearts to cooperate with the love of the Creator and the Savior. Who through them will enlarge and enrich His own family day by day. Parents should regard as their proper mission the task of transmitting human life and educating those to whom it has been transmitted. They should realize that they are thereby cooperators with the love of God the Creator, and are, so to speak, the interpreters of that love. Thus they will fulfil their task with human and Christian responsibility, and, with docile reverence toward God, will make decisions by common counsel and effort. Let them

² It seems necessary to emphasize the moral dangers associated with the use of natural family planning methods. While these are legitimate means for planning or postponing conception, they can—similar to contraception—sustain a mindset "closed" to offspring.

³ We will limit ourselves to the conciliar teaching (GS) and papal encyclicals: HV; John Paul II, Encyclical *Evangelium vitae* on the value and inviolability of human life (25.03.1995 – hereinafter: EV). We will also refer to the CCC, which is a kind of summary of the Church's teaching.

⁴ A similar method is used by Elizabeth A. Johnson in her book *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, New York-London 2003.

*thoughtfully take into account both their own welfare and that of their children, those already born and those which the future may bring. For this accounting they need to reckon with both the material and the spiritual conditions of the times as well as of their state in life. Finally, they should consult the interests of the family group, of temporal society, and of the Church herself. The parents themselves and no one else should ultimately make this judgment in the sight of God*⁵.

Although a bit later the Council emphasizes that spouses who – after due discernment – generously decide to have a large number of children are particularly praiseworthy, it simultaneously reminds us that the criterion for openness to life is not the number of children in a family, but the extent to which the spouses are submissive to God's will in this matter. God is the Giver and Lord of life, and spouses "merely" actualize His plan.

Furthermore – as we read in Paul VI's encyclical „*Humanae vitae*” (1968) – spouses are to cooperate [...] with God in the generation and rearing of new lives⁶, because marriage takes its origin from God. The Creator established it for the good of people. For this reason, marriage – and with it the issue of begetting new members of the human family – is not solely a human affair, but primarily a matter of the One who called marriage into existence. Therefore, in fulfilling this duty of transmitting life they cannot proceed arbitrarily, as if they were free to determine for themselves morally right ways of acting; rather, they are obliged to conform their conduct to the plan of God the Creator⁷. The encyclical thus praises (claiming that they are practicing responsible parenthood) both those spouses who prudently and yet generously decide to have a larger number of offspring, and those who, for serious, objective reasons, decide to avoid conceiving another child⁸. Again, conformity with God's plan, the knowledge of which is possible through deep spiritual discernment, is essential.

John Paul II's encyclical „*Evangelium vitae*” (1995), in the sections devoted to human responsibility for life, states: „The most sublime manifestation of this responsibility is the transmission of life through the act of procreation, carried out by a man and a woman in marriage”⁹. This statement is set in the context of assertions concerning the creative power of God, which He transmits to man. Therefore, procreation is called by the Pope a continuation of creation. Spouses are thus incorporated into God's work, which still lies primarily in His power¹⁰. Once again, the connection between openness to life and the fulfillment of God's will is shown.

Based on what has been presented so far, it is easy to notice that the Church's teaching understands openness to life not only as a readiness to bear a child but also as a readiness for its comprehensive upbringing, i.e., formation. Openness to life cannot therefore be understood merely as consent to the existence of life, but as an attitude of continuous sensitivity to life that endures. Also in this dimension – the upbringing of children – spouses cooperate with God and are to be fully dependent on Him¹¹.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church in number 1653 defines the service of life precisely as the effort of raising offspring on many levels: The fruitfulness of conjugal love extends to the fruits of the moral, spiritual, and supernatural life that parents hand on to their children by education. Parents are the principal and first educators of their children (cf. Vatican Council II, decl. *Gravissimum educationis*, 3). In this sense the fundamental task of marriage and family is to be at the service of life (John Paul II, apost. exhort. *Familiaris consortio*, 28)¹². The Church's

⁵ GS 50.

⁶ HV 8.a

⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ EV 43.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ HV 8.

¹² CCC 1653

teaching is filled with themes reminding us that care and responsibility for life do not end with consent to the conception of a new human being, but begin at that moment, requiring from parents a constant new openness to cooperation with

Let us ask then: What about spouses who have no children? Is openness to life always synonymous with having offspring – biological or/adopted? The Catechism of the Catholic Church, in the subsection devoted to openness to life, in number 1654, also touches on this issue: „Spouses to whom God has not granted children can nevertheless have a conjugal life full of meaning, in human and Christian terms. Their marriage can radiate a fruitfulness of charity, of hospitality, and of sacrifice”¹³. It can therefore be stated that spouses who have no children and are not raising any can be open to life, ready to accept life, and their marriage can have deep meaning not only for themselves but also for others.

After outlining the Church's teaching on openness to life, let us proceed to the main part of this text, which aims to show the Mother of Christ as a model for accepting life. We will now analyze individual biblical pericopes showing the figure of Mary and, based on them, try to answer the question: In what way is Mary a model for accepting life? We will not refer to all texts that mention the figure of Mary (e.g., Gal 4:4; Mk 6:1-6), but only to a few selected ones that relate in some way to our topic. Bearing in mind the specificity of each Gospel, we will opt for a quasi-chronological order of the individual scenes. Thus, to some extent, we will harmonize the data from the individual Gospels, without losing sight of the truth that full harmonization is illegitimate and impossible. The justification for this methodological approach is the fact that even the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church „Lumen gentium”¹⁴ to some extent harmonizes the Gospel data about the Mother of Jesus, preceding them moreover with Old Testament anticipations¹⁵ and supplementing them with Marian dogmas (the Assumption of Mary¹⁶). Furthermore, it should be noted that when analyzing individual biblical scenes, we will not assess the historical character of the biblical narratives, assuming that all of them – even if they do not convey historical truth in a literal and very precise way – have their historical root, and above all, are the revealed word of God and in this sense contain a truth deeper than a simple, factual record of history. We will, however, sometimes refer to historical knowledge, which will serve as a "supplement" to the

The biblical narratives will thus be our starting point for the theological interpretation of the figure of Mary, which will sometimes go "beyond the text," supplementing the silence of Scripture on certain issues. Such a degree of freedom, however, will never be synonymous with statements "against Scripture," i.e., against the intention of the biblical author or against the faith of the Church. This method will allow us to outline a living image of the Mother of Jesus as a model for accepting life. It should also be emphasized that since – as established earlier – openness to life does not end at the moment of a child's conception but also includes its upbringing, in the biblical scenes we will try to find an answer to the question: In what way did Mary raise her Son? So: What kind of Mother was she?

Furthermore, the very title of this text indicates that we will be operating within the key of ecclesiotypical mariology¹⁷. Mary will be presented as a model for the Church, for all Christians – in this context especially for Christian spouses. Thus, she will be shown as our close sister in faith, who in her life experienced real hardships, made difficult and non-obvious decisions, discerned God's will, and sometimes – as St. Thérèse of Lisieux puts it – even

¹³ Ibid., 1654.

¹⁴ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church „Lumen gentium” (November 18, 1964), 55-58 (hereafter: LG).

¹⁵ Ibid., 55.

¹⁶ Ibid., 58.

¹⁷ E. ADAMIAK, „Traktat o Maryi” [Treatise on Mary], in: „Dogmatyka” [Dogmatics], vol. 2, ed. E. ADAMIAK, A. CZAJA, J. MAJEWSKI, Warszawa 2006, 199-201.

experienced the dark night of faith¹⁸. „For Mary belongs to our kind, she is a true Daughter of Eve, although without knowing the stain of that mother; she is our true Sister, who leading an earthly life in humility and poverty, fully shared our lot”¹⁹.

2. Mary accepts her Son – The Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38)

The scene of the Annunciation is one of the key biblical scenes for showing Mary's role in the work of salvation. Most often, an interpretation emphasizing Mary's obedience and her full, humble submission in accepting the mission of bearing the Messiah comes to the fore²⁰. Without removing these features from the image of Mary, let us also emphasize her other traits that become evident in this narrative.

First of all, Mary, before agreeing to become the Mother of the Son of God, carefully analyzes the situation she is in: she ponders the words of greeting and signals to the angel the fact that she has not yet begun sexual intercourse²¹. It can therefore be stated that Mary discerns the situation and does not too easily trust the angel, who in the conversation must convince her that he is indeed God's messenger and the revealer of His will. Mary is thus not inclined to make such an important decision too easily and quickly. This does not mean, however, that she lacks faith, but only that she does not lack prudence.

Moreover, the angel's words: „Do not be afraid, Mary” suggest that Mary does not feel comfortable in this situation at all. Fulfilling God's will at this moment has little to do with a sense of security and inner harmony. The young woman, recently betrothed, was perfectly aware of what an extramarital pregnancy meant. By agreeing to the angel's proposal, she knew she would find herself in mortal danger²² – for adultery, according to the Law, she faced stoning (Deut 22:20-27)²³. Inner anxiety, however, is not a sign of a lack of trust in God, nor does it become a reason for rejecting God's call. On the contrary, it can be said that Mary's decision is more precious in God's eyes the more effort and self-denial it requires from this young Girl. Could one even speak of Mary's merits if her decisions and actions did not require effort and self-sacrifice from her?²⁴

¹⁸ THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX, „Pourquoi je t'aime, ô Marie” [Why I love you, O Mary], Poetry 54/6, <https://archives.carmelidelisieux.fr/archive/pn-54/> [September 4, 2025]

¹⁹ PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation „Marialis cultus” on devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary (February 2, 1974), 56.

²⁰ A. MALISZEWSKA, „Kobieta wyzwolona. Maryja w teologii Elizabeth A. Johnson” [Woman Liberated. Mary in the Theology of Elizabeth A. Johnson], Katowice 2015, 130.

²¹ This is precisely how the statement „I do not know man” should be interpreted, as clearly indicated by the footnote to this verse (see „Biblia Tysiąclecia” [The Millennium Bible], 4th ed., Poznań 2003; „Biblia poznańska” [The Poznań Bible], Poznań 2004). Cf. G. BARTOSIK, „Z Niej narodził się Jezus. Szkice z mariologii biblijnej” [From Her Jesus Was Born. Sketches from Biblical Mariology], Niepokalanów 2013, 27.

²² Jane Schaberg reads the Annunciation scene primarily as a story about a „dangerous pregnancy outside the structures of patriarchal marriage”, emphasizing both the danger Mary found herself in and the fact that the Mother of Jesus at this moment acts in an absolutely autonomous way. J. SCHABERG, „The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives”, San Francisco 1987, 18.

²³ Johnson claims that the penalty of stoning prescribed by the Law for women for adultery was rarely carried out in the first century in Palestine. E. JOHNSON, „Truly Our Sister...”, 227. Nevertheless, real danger existed.

²⁴ It should be noted that – as McHugh claims – Mary's uttered „fiat” should not be interpreted as a manifestation of full resignation, obedient submission to God's plan, but rather as an expression of an ardent desire to fulfill God's will and joy. J. MCHUGH, „Maryja w Nowym Testamencie” [Mary in the New Testament], trans. A. Czarnocki, Niepokalanów 1998, 105. On the other hand, we cannot view Mary's response "too optimistically," as if it cost her nothing. Her „fiat” had a bitter-sweet taste, in which various feelings and thoughts certainly mingled.

Mary in this scene is therefore not servile or fearful – she bravely questions the angel²⁵ about the details of her task, which surpasses all human imagination²⁶. At the same time – it seems – the future Mother of Christ experiences inner anxiety and discomfort, which, however, do not dominate her freedom in choosing obedience to God's will. Her faith overcomes fear, and the Annunciation itself becomes an event of faith²⁷.

Let us also pay attention to a certain detail that often escapes our notice. Namely, the fact that Mary makes her decision in an absolutely autonomous manner. One might have expected that Mary, knowing the consequences of an extramarital pregnancy and living in a patriarchal environment, would behave quite differently. It would be quite reasonable and justified if she had consulted her future husband on this matter. It would also seem natural for a young girl to seek advice from some religious authority who could help her properly interpret the whole event²⁸. Let us remember that Mary was a teenager at the time (!)²⁹. God, however, speaks to Mary directly, not through the mouth of a religious authority or even a close person³⁰. The biblical narrative clearly shows, however, that Mary – as soon as she gains certainty that the angel is God's messenger and the revealer of His will – immediately agrees to become the Mother of Christ. Mary, therefore, on the one hand does not trust the angel's words "too easily" (amazement caused by the words of greeting, doubts about the manner of conception), on the other hand, she courageously (though perhaps not without anxiety) and without unnecessary delay makes her decision.

However, we must make an important reservation at this point. Mary's attitude cannot be understood as if only the mother (or father) were to decide independently – even if in "agreement" with God – about conceiving a child. The decision to accept new life should always be a decision of both spouses, who together discern God's will. In Mary's case, however, we are dealing with an exceptional situation. From the side of human activity, in calling a new human person into life, Mary fulfills a double role – father and mother simultaneously. That is: at the conception of Jesus, only Mary (without the participation of a man) cooperates with God – Jesus receives "flesh" (more precisely: human nature) only from Her³¹. Therefore, the consent of a man – a husband – is not needed. The decision belongs solely to Her.

²⁵ Elizabeth Johnson emphasizes the great courage of Mary in responding to the angel. E. JOHNSON, „Truly Our Sister...”, 254.

²⁶ Cf. G. BARTOSIK, „Z Niej narodził się Jezus...”, 19.

²⁷ E. JOHNSON, „Truly Our Sister...”, 257.

²⁸ Ibid., 256-257.

²⁹ Most biblical scholars and mariologists estimate Mary's age at the time of Jesus' birth to be 12-15 years. For example, J. BOLEWSKI, „Zrodzenie z Boga i Maryi Dziewicy” [Generation from God and the Virgin Mary], in: „Nosicielka Ducha. Pneumatofora. Materiały z Kongresu Mariologicznego Jasna Góra 18-23 sierpnia 1996 r.” [Bearer of the Spirit. Pneumatophora. Materials from the Mariological Congress Jasna Góra August 18-23, 1996], ed. J. WOJTKOWSKI, S. NAPIÓRKOWSKI, Lublin 1998, 118; J. McMANUS, „Błogosławioną zwać mnie będą...” [They Will Call Me Blessed...], trans. B. Widła, Warszawa 2004, 25; S. NAPIÓRKOWSKI, „Pierwsza chrześcijanka i przewodniczka pielgrzymującego ludu” [The First Christian and Guide of the Pilgrim People], in: „Kościół czci Matkę swojego Pana” [The Church Honors the Mother of its Lord], Przemysł 2003, 143; O. da SPINETOLI, „Maryja w Biblii” [Mary in the Bible], trans. A. Tronina, Niepokalanów 1997, 77; J. GUITTON, „Maryja” [Mary], Warszawa 1956, 41; P. GAECHTER, „The Chronology From Mary's Betrothal To the Birth of Christ”, „Theological Studies” 2(1941) 156; E. JOHNSON, „Truly Our Sister...”, 139.

³⁰ Cf. A. MALISZEWSKA, „Kobieta wyzwolona...”, 131.

³¹ The Church believes that Mary conceived Jesus in a virginal manner (which is officially confirmed in the Creed and recognized as a dogma of faith), and thus without sexual intercourse with a man. In the virginal conception, God in no way replaces a man – Jesus receives human nature solely from His Mother. More on this topic see: A. MALISZEWSKA, „Dogmat o dziewictwie Maryi w kontekście współczesnych pytań o moralną ocenę technik sztucznego zapłodnienia” [The Dogma of Mary's Virginité in the Context of Contemporary Questions about the Moral Evaluation of Artificial Insemination Techniques], „Teologia w Polsce” 10(2016) no. 2, 115-118; G.L MÜLLER, „Dogmatyka katolicka” [Catholic Dogmatics], trans. W. Szymona, Kraków 2015, 503, 507, 512.

So, can Mary – due to her exceptional situation – become a model for accepting life for ordinary spouses? It seems possible if we place the married couple as "one flesh" in Mary's place, rather than just the woman (or the man). Looking at Mary, then, one can state that the decision to call a new human being into existence takes place primarily between the spouses and God. Husband and wife should discern God's will in this matter and accept it. Of course, this does not preclude the possibility of help in discernment from third parties – confessors, spiritual directors, close persons. However, the final decision always belongs to the spouses; no one has the right to oppose or interfere in the decision for or against conception, provided of course it is not associated with unworthy methods (artificial insemination or contraception).

Like the Mother of Christ, spouses have the right to ask God questions, to feel fear and doubt, which, however, should not lead them to close themselves off from God's will. Looking at Mary, they should also learn courage in accepting every child, contrary to what the world tells them, and sometimes even important authorities. They must also – like Mary – allow themselves to be surprised by God.

Let us also note how momentous the decision made by Mary is. Although there is no certainty as to whether the conception of Jesus occurred immediately after Mary uttered her „fiat”, it seems that it probably did – God does not delay in fulfilling promises. Even if the conception occurred a bit later, the decision was made, and with it, its blessed effects flowed upon humanity. As St. Bernard of Clairvaux writes: „Behold, the price of our salvation is offered to you: if you consent, we shall immediately be set free”³². The Incarnation, which took place by the free initiative of God and thanks to the decision made in freedom by Mary, brought salvation. At this moment, a new chapter begins in the history between man and God – their new, closest union in the Person of the Logos. Mary's consent has salvific effects for all humanity. However, every other consent to the conception of a new human person also has salvific effects. Through this decision, a new being arises, who can accept the salvation offered by God. Then the personal history of salvation of the new human being begins.

A characteristic and unique feature of Mary's motherhood is her simultaneous virginity. At first glance, it may therefore seem that this uniqueness of Mary cannot in any way become a model for other persons – after all, no other woman can become a mother while remaining a virgin³³. Of course, modern artificial reproduction techniques (such as in vitro or artificial insemination) allow such a situation to be achieved on a biological level. However, Mary's virginity has its deeper and more essential dimension on the spiritual level. Understanding it becomes the key to understanding that the Virgin-Mother Mary is a model for the whole Church.

The Tradition of the Church has always understood Mary's virginity not only as a biological fact but read it in its spiritual aspect. Also contemporary, post-conciliar reflection strongly highlights the fact that Mary's virginity should be understood primarily in a spiritual

³² BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX, „Sermon 4,8-9”, cited in G. BARTOSIK, „Z Niej narodził się Chrystus...” [From Her Christ Was Born...], 21.

³³ Mary's virginal motherhood is sometimes evaluated – especially by feminist theologians – as a tool of oppression of women. This stems from the fact that Mary is held up to women as a model to emulate, but it is a model that women were unable to emulate, primarily because they cannot be mothers and virgins at the same time. See E. JOHNSON, „Mary, Mary, quite contrary,” „U.S. Catholic” 68(2003) no. 12, 12-17; E. ADAMIAK, „Błogosławiona między niewiastami. Maryja w feministycznej teologii Cathariny Halkes” [Blessed Among Women. Mary in the Feminist Theology of Catharina Halkes], Lublin 1997, 81; L. ISHERWOOD, D. MCEWAN, „Introducing Feminist Theology”, Sheffield 2001, 70. Personally, I rather lean towards the interpretation of St. Hildegard of Bingen, who claimed that Mary „unites women of different states”, being simultaneously a virgin and a mother. The simultaneous virginity and motherhood of Mary can thus be a symbol of solidarity for all women. Cited in: E. ADAMIAK, „Znaczenie tradycji duchowości kobiet dla teologii współczesnej” [The Significance of the Tradition of Women's Spirituality for Contemporary Theology], in: „Duchowość i religijność kobiet dawniej i dziś” [Spirituality and Religiosity of Women Past and Present], ed. E. PAKSZYSZ and L. SIKORSKA, Poznań 2000, 130.

key: as a sign, an expression of her total dedication to God³⁴. Virginité therefore means primarily complete entrustment to God, which should characterize people living in various states – including spouses.

It can therefore be said that every mother and every father should follow a path similar to Mary's – She, to be able to become a Mother, first had to become a Virgin, i.e., she had to give herself completely to God. God desires precisely such motherhood (and fatherhood), which is preceded by an act of giving oneself to Him alone. Only such parenthood is capable of entrusting the child, who is always called to life by God and is primarily His property, into God's hands. Motherhood and fatherhood should be experienced within the framework of just such a dedication to God, of which the virginal motherhood of Mary is the most perfect example³⁵.

Mary's acceptance of the life of Jesus, who was to become the Savior of the world, can furthermore become a model for parents who are gifted by God with "special" children. Mary, even before deciding to conceive, learns that her Son will not be an ordinary child. Jesus was exceptional through His greatness. We must realize, however, that both an extraordinarily wonderful child and an exceptionally vulnerable child, needing special care, i.e., a sick or disabled child, is a "special" child³⁶. Children who differ from their peers always require greater effort and sacrifice on the part of parents than average children. Both, through their otherness, often suffer from being misunderstood by the world, and not infrequently by their closest ones. It seems, therefore, that it is worth thinking of Mary's motherhood

3. Virginité for the Sake of the Son – Faith in the Perpetual Virginité of Mary

The biblical pericope of the Annunciation became for the Church the basis for faith in the virgin conception of Jesus, and subsequently also in the perpetual virginité of Mary – meaning virginité before, during, and after childbirth (Lat. „*ante partum, in partu, post partum*”). Despite the fact that it is difficult to find evidence in Sacred Scripture for Mary's perpetual virginité – on the contrary, the Bible contains mentions of Jesus' brothers and sisters

³⁴ J. NAUMOWICZ, „Wstę” [Introduction], in: „Pierwsze pisma greckie o dziewictwie” [First Greek Writings on Virginité], ed. J. NAUMOWICZ, Kraków 1997, 46. J.A. SOBROWIAK, „Dziewictwo Maryi wobec współczesnej kultury” [The Virginité of Mary in the Face of Contemporary Culture], „Salvatoris Mater” 4(2002) no. 1, 135, 139; D. MASTALSKA, „Dziewictwo Matki Zbawiciela. Teologia i duchowość” [The Virginité of the Mother of the Savior. Theology and Spirituality], Licheń Stary 2013, 18, 75; G.L MÜLLER, „Dogmatyka katolicka...”, 517; F. COURTH, „Mariologia – Maryja, Matka Chrystusa” [Mariology – Mary, Mother of Christ], in: „Podręcznik teologii dogmatycznej” [Textbook of Dogmatic Theology], ed. W. BEINERT, Kraków 1999, 137-138.

³⁵ Cf. J.A. SOBROWIAK, „Dziewictwo Maryi...”, 140.

³⁶ It is often postulated that special pedagogy should deal not only with children who do not meet a certain educational norm, but also with those who exceed this norm. For both groups are "special." See e.g., E. GRUSZCZYK-KOLCZYŃSKA, „Dlaczego dziećmi uzdolnionymi musi pilnie się zająć pedagogika specjalna? Wyniki badań nad dziećmi uzdolnionymi matematycznie” [Why Must Special Pedagogy Urgently Deal with Gifted Children? Results of Research on Mathematically Gifted Children], Forum Pedagogiki Specjalnej Warszawa 2014, <http://www.cfps.pl/2013-06-03-18-49-45/literatura/artykuly/item/1658-dlaczego-dziecmi-uzdolnionymi-musi-pilnie-sie-zajac-pedagogika-specjal-na-edyta-gruszczuk-kolczynska> [September 4, 2025].

(e.g., Mt 13:55–56; Gal 1:18–19)³⁷ which might suggest that Mary had other children³⁸, the Church has believed almost from the beginning that Mary's virginity – in the literal, physical sense, not just the spiritual – encompassed her entire life³⁹.

But what is the significance of upholding the assertion of Mary's perpetual virginity for our topic? What can Mary, Ever-Virgin, say about accepting life? It seems that faith in Mary's perpetual virginity can become a valuable antidote to tendencies that have been visible in the Catholic Church for some time. In Catholic publications, but also in pre-marriage courses or marriage retreats, one often hears calls to have as many children as possible. Such action is not in itself wrong, but heard constantly from various sides, it creates a feeling that only large families realize the ideal of a Catholic family, and that the decision to have a smaller number of children (if not motivated by very serious health or social problems) is an expression of selfishness. We must realize, however, that Mary, the model of maternal love, gave birth to only one Child (!), but let us immediately add – she gave birth to one Child because such was the will of God.

We can therefore wonder: was Mary happy about this, did she feel fulfilled, did she fully realize her maternal needs having only one Son?⁴⁰ How many marriages suffer because they cannot or believe they should not decide to have another child? Does Mary perhaps belong to

³⁷ The fact that the Bible mentions brothers and sisters of Jesus is explained in various ways. Most often they are understood as cousins (cf. G. BARTOSIK, „Z Niej narodził się Jezus...”, 39–40). Linguistic analyses somewhat confirm this thesis, as the term „adelphos” used in the New Testament, which basically means brother, can also refer to relatives, and even to members of a tribe, clan, or nation. Furthermore, the New Testament calls Christians brothers, i.e., members of one religious group. However, this understanding is questioned today. It is pointed out that the Greek language had a word meaning precisely cousins – „anepsios” – which, moreover, appears in the New Testament (Col 4:10). There were therefore no obstacles for Paul and the Evangelists to use this term if they meant Jesus' actual cousins. Besides, while the Septuagint renders the Hebrew terms for "cousins" and "relatives" through the Greek „adelphoi” – brothers, the New Testament is not a translation but an original text. Another argument against the possible use of the term „adelphoi” to mean cousins is the assumption that in other places in the Gospels this term rather means natural brothers than cousins – for example, Zebedee the brother of James and John or Lazarus the brother of Mary and Martha. Furthermore, there is a problem with the use of the word "sisters," which is used to mean cousins extremely rarely, and there is also no reason to use the words brothers or sisters in a metaphorical sense when they are listed by name (see E. JOHNSON, „Truly Our Sister...”, 198; A. MALISZEWSKA, „Kobieta wyzwolona...”, 107). Another line of argument against recognizing the brothers and sisters of Jesus mentioned in the New Testament as His biological siblings refers to apocryphal tradition, which presents them as children of Joseph from a first marriage (ProtEvJ 9, 2).]

³⁸ Also the passage Lk 1:24–25, which is sometimes cited by defenders of the perpetual virginity of Mary, says nothing about intercourse after the birth of Jesus, but only refers to the childbirth. The document resulting from Catholic-Lutheran dialogue in the United States, "Mary in the New Testament," states that both infancy Gospels attest only to the fact of the virgin conception of Jesus, not the perpetual virginity of Mary. „Mary in the New Testament. A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars”, ed. R.E. BROWN, K.P. DONFRIED, J.A. FITZMYER, J. REUMANN, Philadelphia 1978. For a Polish study of this document, see J. MAJEWSKI, „Błogosławić mnie będą. Nowotestamentalny obraz Matki Pana według katolicko-luterańskiego dialogu w USA”, Lublin 1997.

³⁹ For more on this topic, see A. MALISZEWSKA, „Dogmat o wiecznym dziewictwie Maryi – próba ustanowienia granic i reinterpretacji”, in: „Historia – interpretacja – reprezentacja”, vol. 3, ed. L. MOKRZECKI, M. BRODNICKI, J. TARASZKIEWICZ, Gdańsk 2015, 263–278, and A. MALISZEWSKA, „Macierzyństwo i dziewictwo w teologii feministycznej. Stanowisko Elizabeth A. Johnson”, „Śląskie Studia Historyczno-Teologiczne” 45(2012) no. 2, 295–296.

⁴⁰ McHugh claims that having such a perfect Child, Mary and Joseph did not need to have other children, who after all could not bring anything better into their family (J. McHUGH, „Maryja w Nowym Testamencie...”, 387). Without questioning the belief that Jesus was a perfect Man, it seems that such a view, however, treats Jesus, and other (potential) children, objectifiably and expresses a hidden conviction that only children are supposed to enrich the parents, and not parents for the children. Selfless parental love wants to offer itself to the child, not receive anything from the child. Would Mary and Joseph then not present such a perfect attitude – selfless parental love? Furthermore, following McHugh's logic, who claims that a child enriches the whole family community in its own way (p. 387), one might wonder if Jesus should not have had siblings who could have enriched Him in a special way.

their number? Do they, perhaps like Mary, decide against having more children for the sake of the good of the children already existing?⁴¹ Does their openness to life, understood as care for the proper upbringing and formation of children, express itself precisely in avoiding conception? Looking at Mary, who was the most wonderful Mother in the world, one cannot help but feel that she "wasted" herself as a mother. She could have given birth and wonderfully raised so many children! However, God had different plans for her.

Perhaps Mary's maternal unfulfillment had to wait until the time when Jesus hung on the cross and then offered her as a son His beloved disciple, that is, symbolically, the entire Church, and even humanity. Perhaps only then was Mary's motherly heart finally filled. Similarly, it may be with spouses who read God's will in such a way that they are not called to generate numerous offspring. Their hearts and lives, too, can be filled in an unexpected way with other tasks and parental love for other people, not necessarily their own children.

4. The Visitation (Lk 1:36–56) – Solidarity of Mothers

The information about the miraculous conception, awaited for years, by Elizabeth – a woman of advanced age perceived as barren – is conveyed to Mary by the angel during the Annunciation. Mary, upon receiving this precious information, immediately sets out on a journey. But what is the main purpose of Mary's journey? Does she hurry to Elizabeth only to verify the angel's words? To check if it is indeed as she was told? After all, such news would have reached her sooner or later; Elizabeth was her relative. Mary would not have had to endure the hardships of a solitary journey through the mountains. Yet she decides to set out. She then stays with Elizabeth for three whole months. It must therefore have been about more than just confirming the truth of the angel's words⁴².

The biblical narrative is quite restrained in showing the emotions that accompanied the women when Mary entered Elizabeth's house. Did they throw themselves into each other's arms or show affection in some other way? Were there tears of joy?⁴³ Many works of art depict their meeting precisely in this way: we see two women tenderly embracing. However, the Magnificat leaves no doubt as to how Mary felt, who in great exultation and joy sings a hymn to God. Her song is an outburst of joy from a Woman miraculously exalted by God.

Mary and Elizabeth are close to each other for many reasons. Both become mothers⁴⁴ at almost the same time, moreover in an unexpected and miraculous way. Their Sons are called to a great mission, and they only dimly perceive what this will mean⁴⁵. They are certainly a great support for each other. Furthermore, as we read in the biblical narrative, Mary stays with Elizabeth for about three months. We can only imagine how Mary helps Elizabeth, who is in an increasingly advanced stage of pregnancy. She relieves her of daily duties, ensures her rest, and supports her spirits. St. Bede the Venerable describes this event wonderfully: „*She enters the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and having learned that she will bear the servant and forerunner of the Lord, she greets her, not as if she doubted the heard oracle, but to congratulate her on the gift which she knew her fellow servant had received; not to confirm the*

⁴¹ Cf. J. McHUGH, „*Maryja w Nowym Testamencie...*”, 384, 387.

⁴² St. Ambrose writes about this as follows: „*She went to Elizabeth not because she distrusted the prophetic announcement, or because she had doubts, or was uncertain about what she had learned. On the contrary, she went full of joy with a great desire to render a pious service.*” Cited in: G. BARTOSIK, „*Z Niej narodził się Chrystus...*”, 52. See also: AMBROSE, „*Exposition of the Gospel According to St. Luke*”, in: „*Ojcowie Kościoła łacińskiego. Teksty o Matce Bożej*”, trans. W. Ebnowicz, W. Kania, Niepokalanów 1981, 69.]

⁴³ Some, however, detect a certain kind of fear caused by the presence of God in Elizabeth's cry upon greeting Mary. Cf. G. BARTOSIK, „*Z Niej narodził się Jezus...*”, 48.

⁴⁴ I deliberately do not use the future tense – „*will become mothers*” – because they are already mothers from the moment of conception.]

⁴⁵ Cf. J. McHUGH, „*Maryja w Nowym Testamencie...*”, 95.

angel's word with the testimony of a woman, but for the service of the young Woman to the woman of future age"⁴⁶.

But does Mary do this only for Elizabeth's sake? By caring for Elizabeth, Mary is already at that time caring for the little John. She therefore also joyfully accepts John's life and surrounds it with care from the very beginning. Mary – though she herself is pregnant – does not care only for herself, does not focus solely on her own Child, but remains open to the life of others: the woman with whom she shares a similar fate and her unborn child. The Mother of the Lord can therefore become a model of openness to life also in this dimension: joy at every child coming into the world and surrounding it with love from the first moments of its life.

5. A Mother's Love (Lk 2:41–52 and Mk 3:20–21; 31–35)

Both texts mentioned above: Lk 2:41–52 and Mk 3:20–21; 31–35 are classified as so-called anti-Marian texts⁴⁷. Let us look at them closely, however, to see if Mary is indeed presented in such an unfavorable light.

The first one, the finding of Jesus in the temple, seems strongly connected with the scene of the presentation of Jesus in the temple, and not only because of the place where both events occur. In the scene of the presentation of the newborn Jesus, we see Mary and Joseph, who, in accordance with the precepts of the Law, ritually give their Son to God, and Mary hears Simeon's bitter prophecy about her future sufferings because of her Child and His mission. The finding scene, in turn, is already the fulfillment of the prophecy – Mary and Joseph experience dramatic events – their teenage Son is lost, and for three days they do not know what has happened to him. Moreover, after finding Jesus in the temple, His Mother hears from Him words full of reproach, which make her aware of what she should have known and which she herself confirmed through the offering: Jesus belongs primarily to God the Father. Mary and Joseph, however, still do not understand what they hear (Lk 2:50)⁴⁸.

The Markan text also seems to present a very unfavorable image of Mary, who, along with relatives, wants to stop Jesus from fulfilling His messianic mission, perhaps shares the belief in Jesus' madness (or at least this opinion strongly influences her), and at the end of this story Mary hears words in which Jesus almost disowns His biological family and His own Mother. Mary seems not to comprehend who her Son is.

Let us try, however, to cast a completely different light on this pericope. As Elizabeth Johnson writes, it was not necessarily the case that Mary did not understand her Son. Perhaps she understood Him "only too well." She probably was perfectly aware of the great danger threatening Jesus if He continued His mission. She knew what the consequences could be of the fact that increasingly large crowds followed Him, recognizing Him as an authority. There was therefore a chance that He would be proclaimed the leader of an opposition liberation movement against the occupiers. Mary, moreover, knew not only the moods among the contemporary Jewish population but also knew Jesus perfectly well. She knew that He would not shrink from anything, even if He had to pay for it with His head. Can it therefore be surprising that she wanted to protect Him from suffering? Is this not how we imagine a loving mother? As one who is always ready to rescue her child from trouble? Who is guided only by his good?⁴⁹

Mary, however, had to undergo an inner transformation in her life: from love for her beloved Son-Man, whom she gave birth to and with whom she was uniquely connected by

⁴⁶ BEDE THE VENERABLE, „*Homily on the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary*”, in: „*Ojcowie wspólnej wiary. Teksty o Matce Bożej*”, trans. W. Kania, Niepokalanów 1988, 87.

⁴⁷ J. MAJEWSKI, „*Błogosławić mnie będą...*”, 15.

⁴⁸ On various interpretations of these words, and of the entire pericope, see J. MAJEWSKI, „*Błogosławić mnie będą...*”, 29–35; J. McHUGH, „*Maryja w Nowym Testamencie...*”, 160–161.

⁴⁹ Cf. E. Johnson, „*Truly Our Sister...*”, s.217, 221.

bonds of blood, to love for her Son as God, who decided to offer Himself for the salvation of the world. The biblical pericopes show us a certain path of development: from the finding in the temple, when Mary is not yet fully aware of who her Son is, through the intervention during the public ministry, when the Mother of the Lord is not yet ready for the death of her Son, to the cross, where she stands as one who perfectly understands who her Son is, and is able to accept God's will completely. Does it truly dishonor Mary (and contradict faith in her holiness and sinlessness) to state that she grew in faith, and that her maternal love matured?⁵⁰. Could Mary be our model if she were not subject to ordinary, human development? If we forget Mary's natural impulses as a Mother who fiercely defends her Son and also desires to always have her beloved Child by her side, we strip her of her truly human face.

We must ask, however, whether this transformation of Mary is in some way a model for other parents? Certainly, because every father and mother, regardless of what their child is like and what path it intends to follow, must learn to "let it go" from their hands. The situation seems particularly difficult when the child seems to be destroying its life and moving away from God. But it may prove even more difficult when the child "loses its life" – sometimes literally and ultimately – for God. Is it not harder then to stand before God in full trust of His plan, which humanly ends in absolute failure?

One cannot forget either that the awareness of how much of a struggle it was for Mary to understand and raise Jesus can be encouraging for parents who struggle every day with similar problems. Mary can therefore serve as a model for them of a mother who patiently tries to understand her own child and remains in constant readiness to verify her convictions about him.

The image of Mary is exceptionally malleable. The small amount of information about the Mother of Jesus allows us to "give free rein to our imagination," to add much in the places where Sacred Scripture is silent. On the other hand, the Church's faith in Mary's holiness (sinlessness) or her perpetual virginity strongly narrows the possibilities of interpreting certain biblical scenes. One can therefore debate certain details – for example, how exactly Mary's perfection or holiness was expressed, one can speculate about what emotions or thoughts accompanied her. It seems, however, that one cannot question the basic statement: Mary is the first among the saints, therefore she is a model for the Church, also in the matter of accepting life.

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⁵⁰ We must remember that especially St. Luke paints an exceptionally positive image of Mary in his Gospel, so it does not seem possible that through the narrative.

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