

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In this Sunday's Gospel reading, we have a couple of curious words and phrases which confuse many of our Protestant brothers and sisters, and therefore lead them to misinterpret sacred scripture regarding our Blessed Mother's *perpetual virginity*. First of all, we will look at Matthew's narration concerning Joseph and Mary's betrothal: "When his [Jesus'] mother Mary had been **betrothed** to Joseph, **before they came together**, she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 1:18). Secondly, we will look at a subsequent phrase concerning Joseph and Mary's relationship after Jesus' birth. As you can see, I have highlighted the word "betrothed" and the phrase "before they came together". In ancient Judaism, **marriage was not merely a singular event**. In fact, Biblical Hebrew never had a word for "marriage" itself, which provides further evidence of its more complex understanding. It should be understood, then, that to be "betrothed" (Greek: μνηστευθείσης—passive participle aorist), connoted a double meaning: first, it meant that both parties entered into a **REALITY**—one that was rooted in the moral sphere, and concerned the most sacred of matters. Subsequent upon the *reality*, was the **CONTRACT** itself, in which both parties consent to the impending marriage, followed by the execution of the contract. It should be noted, that the contract was not the reality, but was the *sign* of the reality of marriage. We thus have a three-fold movement—or better yet, a **change in status**—within the notion of marriage: a movement from (1) the **state** of singleness, to (2) the **state** of marriage betrothal (as a *marital status only*, though constituting each other as "husband" and "wife"), to (3) the full **state** of marriage. What differentiated the third state from the second state, was the act of the wife living inside the home of the husband. We therefore have enough information to understand what Matt 1:18 meant by "before they came together"; for many interpret this to mean, "before they had conjugal relations", but that would be wholly incorrect, both historically and theologically. Thus, we can confidently state that this passage infers or implies **absolutely nothing** regarding the marital relations of Joseph and Mary upon entering that *third state* of marriage. Let us now look at a second passage which, perhaps, becomes even more problematic for many of the faithful: "When Joseph woke from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he **took** his wife, but **knew** her not **until** she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus" (Matt 1: 24-25). Those opponents of Mary's perpetual virginity see this verse as proof that Mary had conjugal relations with Joseph. At first glance, one might agree with such opponents, but such conclusion has everything to do with a false assumption based on how we read the English translation, and does not account, again, with the historical facts, and how the GREEK *actually* reads. As St. Thomas Aquinas taught, in *taking* Mary, Joseph was showing his obedience to the "angel of the Lord" (Matt 1:20), and having first been betrothed to Mary, Joseph then "took" Mary into his house, thus fulfilling their nuptial status as fully married to each other. The notion of "knowing" is a bit more complicated. The Greek word here is ἐγίνωσκεν, which is simply the imperfect active indicative of the verb, "to know". St. Thomas Aquinas recognized that "to know" in sacred scripture, either meant **recognition**, or **bodily union**. But to understand this passage, we must also connect this "knowing" with the preposition "until" (Greek: ἕως). Since so much can be said here, for the sake of brevity, let me just note that Aquinas (as well as the Magisterium of the Church) interpreted this passage as an "unlimited and indeterminate" condition; that is to say, in connection with an interpretation by St. Jerome, what Joseph "knew" pertained to *intellectual recognition* of the great dignity belonging to Mary—as bestowed to her by God—as well as a *sensible recognition* of the grace which emanated from Mary, after having given birth to the Son of God. In another sense, in order to remove any doubt of Joseph's "knowing", the unlimited and indeterminate sense of the preposition "until", exposes the reality that Joseph's prior "knowing" of Mary implies **no change** in his "knowing" of her, *even after* Joseph takes Mary into his home. Thus, in either interpretation, we have the ultimate conclusion that Joseph could not have been directly responsible for Jesus' conception, nor is there any indication, scripturally, or within the tradition, that Mary's sexual state—at any point in her life—was anything other than virginal.

In Christ through Mary,  
Mr. Andrew M. Steele