

# THE SEX LIFE OF MARY AND JOSEPH

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I wonder if any of you have ever seen the film, “Bambi Meets Godzilla?” If so, you know that it opens, as most movies do, with a long series of credits, naming everyone who purportedly had anything to do with the film, including Bambi’s hairstylist, as we see Bambi dreamily walking through a spring meadow. When the credits are over, a huge, fashionably monstrous leg with a clawed foot steps massively and carelessly into the set while the music simultaneously thunders one single chord. It happens so fast, we do not even see Bambi disappear; end of movie. Perhaps, in like manner, the title of this paper might lead one to believe that after a few preliminary observations and teasers, the monstrous foot of tradition will ensure that the glimmers of seemingly humane and enlightened sympathy for Mary and especially for poor Joseph, her “most chaste spouse,” will be stamped out as decisively as Bambi was stamped out by Godzilla. Joseph and Mary did not have sex. End of paper. Mary and Joseph’s hairstylist, John Cavadini.

In fact, this paper does begin from the traditional conviction, shared both by Orthodox and Catholics, that Mary is “ever virgin,” and so that, in at least the most obvious sense, Mary and Joseph did not have a sex life. But is that really the end of the story? For contemporary people, especially contemporary Catholics who have gained, since the Second Vatican Council, a renewed appreciation for the goodness of sex within marriage, the traditional answer

seems incomprehensible and offensive, and perhaps in voicing their scruples these Catholics are echoing some of the worries that have prompted some Protestants (though not all) to leave the doctrine of Mary’s perpetual virginity behind. Everyone, of course, accepts as Scriptural the virginal conception of Jesus. But why, then, could not Joseph and Mary have had a normal sex life after that, the line of questioning goes. The Scriptural evidence is

**Icon of the Nativity (ca. 1475)  
St. Nicholas Monastery  
(Gostinopolye)**

actually inconclusive taken on its own. Catholics and Orthodox have thus allowed the traditional conviction to guide them, and, as noted, this paper accepts this decision, and yet goes on to try to “understand” what traditional faith “believes,” in a way that aspires to give the traditional doctrine some purchase in the imagination of contemporary questioners. Is this tradition to be reduced to a now outmoded ascetic sensitivity stemming from the fourth century, so that all it amounts to is, to one degree or another, a negative assessment of marriage, and one that we have outgrown? And, even if Mary and Joseph did not have sex, does this mean they did not in any sense of the phrase have a “sex life”? As far as sex is concerned, were they simply partners in the joint renunciation of sex, like two ascetics toughing it out side by side, with the conception, birth, nurturing and growth of the Incarnate Word thrown in as a kind of interesting sideshow giving their interesting first-time experiment something to do together to distract them from their strict ascetic regime? Can one even ask these questions? Having done so already, it would seem possible. And, having asked them, trying to answer them might prove a source of insight to people—perhaps all of us, to some unspoken extent—who may worry that the doctrine carries no intrinsic merit worth considering now that, like a hapless fourth-century Bambi, it has met with the potent and formidable Godzilla of modern sensibilities about sex. In trying to answer the question of the sex life of Mary and Joseph, I present something even more tentative than most of my first-time airings of an idea.

To begin in the East, in his Homilies on the Gospel of Luke, Origen considers the perpetual virginity of Mary already a settled point of doctrine, fully consistent with the biblical testimony (see Homily 7.4). He also points out that the reason Mary was frightened by the greeting of the angel, “Hail, full of grace,” is that she, as a good

student of the Law, knew that this form of address was unprecedented in Scripture (Homily 6.7). In other words, Origen is pointing out that Mary’s participation in grace is unique, and this conviction continues in both Eastern and Western Christianity, a grace of sinlessness in the East, and Immaculate Conception in the West. For Origen, however, the uniqueness of Mary is not isolated from her marriage to Joseph. His comments on her uniqueness come immediately after a discussion of the divine dispensation which committed the Incarnation to a woman who was already betrothed. In Origen’s reading, then, the marriage of Mary and Joseph is not accidental to the divine plan, but part of it, and so itself becomes theologically significant. It is not Teresa of Ávila, but Origen, who first makes the mystery of St. Joseph and his marriage to Mary an intrinsic part of the mystery of the Incarnation. Origen reports:

I found an elegant statement in the letter of a martyr—I mean Ignatius, the second bishop of Antioch after Peter. During a persecution, he fought against wild animals at Rome. He stated, ‘Mary’s virginity escaped the notice of the ruler of this age.’ It escaped his notice because of Joseph, and because of their wedding. ...

Origen continues to ponder the mystery of St. Joseph, pointing out that it is because he is the husband of Mary that the devil does not suspect that the Savior “had taken on a body.” Origen connects the mystery of St. Joseph with Paul’s reference in 1 Cor 2:6-8, where, as Origen reports, Paul comments that “‘We speak wisdom among the perfect, but not the wisdom of this age or the wisdom of the rulers of this age. They are being destroyed. We speak God’s wisdom, hidden in a mystery. None of the rulers of this age knows it. If they had known it, they would never have crucified the Lord of glory.’” The marriage of Mary and Joseph

is thus an intrinsic part of God's Wisdom, an intrinsic part of the logic of the Incarnation, which is the logic of God's *philanthropia*, a logic of foolishness, invisible to the ruling powers because it is, to them, foolishness and not wisdom. Origen invites us to contemplate the marriage of Joseph and Mary as an outcropping, one might say, of this foolishness.

Before citing 1 Corinthians, Origen had commented that without the presence of Joseph, the rulers of this age might have suspected a more than human origin for Jesus. They would not then have killed Him, but this is more than a clever ruse where Joseph is a mere placeholder to keep up appearances. Origen explicitly comments that the devil, in tempting Jesus, did not know who He was, and that Jesus does not reveal His identity to Him, implying that that itself is part of the temptation, to reveal His identity prematurely, and to conquer on the basis of an identity claim alone. [Had they known His identity, the Rulers of this world would not have crucified the Lord of Glory, and presumably would not have tempted Him either.] But this is not how the *philanthropia* of God, revealed and enacted in the Incarnation, conquers the devil. He does not pull rank—that's a temptation—but rather He lives and grows, struggles and wrestles with the temptations that season all human souls in Origen's theology. In fact, He is, to use an expression from the *Contra Celsum*, the "Great Wrestler," who defeats the rulers of this age not by exempting Himself from temptation but by taking it on at its largest dimension, conquering not by the abstract power of rank and identity, but by giving that up, the largest claim on rank and identity that anyone has, for a real fight. St. Joseph is very much a part of the wrestling. In the *Contra Celsum*, Celsus mocks Jesus as an inadequate God because the father of the god could not take proper care of Him as an infant, but rather He had to be taken into Egypt lest He be murdered. Origen comments, in effect, that the Incarnation is not a myth,

in which God enters human history as other than a true historical agent in a truly historical narrative. God does not, by a vulgar display of the miraculous, pull rank and impede the free will of those who would kill Jesus. The mystery remains "hidden." Origen paints an icon, as it were, of the flight to Egypt, allowing us to contemplate the awesomeness of the Great Wrestler, even as a baby. St. Joseph brings the family to Egypt, participating in the wrestling of the Great Wrestler, not just vacantly acting as a placeholder, but as an active agent of God's Wisdom, hidden in a mystery. Returning to the homilies on Luke, this time no. 11, Origen pictures someone in his congregation asking, "Evangelist, how does this narrative help me? How does it help me to know that the first census of the entire world was made under Caesar Augustus; and that among all these people the name of *Joseph, with Mary who was espoused to him and pregnant*, was included; and that, before the census was finished, Jesus was born?" Origen answers the question:

To one who looks more carefully, a mystery seems to be conveyed. It is significant that Christ should have been recorded in the census of the whole world. He was registered with the world for the census, and offers the world communion with himself. After this census, he could enroll those from the whole world *in the book of the living* (Rev 20:15 and Phil 4:3) with himself (11.6).

Far from using His divine identity or pedigree as a trump card, Jesus accepts and wills His identity as Joseph's son, Joseph espoused to Mary, as His entry into true solidarity with all of us, the locus of His communion in wrestling.

Commenting still later in the homilies (17.1), Origen states:

Luke ... clearly handed down to us that Jesus was the son of a virgin, and was not conceived by human seed. But Luke has also attested that Joseph was his father when he said, *And his father and mother were astonished by the things that were being said about him* (Lk 2:33). Therefore, what reason was there that Luke should call him a father when he was not a father? Anyone who is content with a simple explanation will say, ‘The Holy Spirit honored Joseph with the name of *father* because he had reared Jesus.’ But one who looks for a more profound explanation can say that the Lord’s genealogy extends from David to Joseph. Lest the naming of Joseph, who was not the Savior’s father, should appear to be pointless, he is called the Lord’s *father*; to give him his place in the genealogy. Thus *his father and mother were astonished by the things that were being said about him*—both by the angel and by the great number of the heavenly army, as well as by the shepherds.

It is Jesus’s identity as the son of Joseph that permits Him to be enrolled as in the line of David, as in an authentic human line of descent, not in a way that reduces Him to that descent, but in a way that catches all of our lines of descent up into His descent, such that His wrestling lifts us all with Him into the most authentic genealogy, that created by the *philanthropia* of God. The paternity of Joseph is the identity by which Jesus accepts us into HIS genealogy. Nor is this feature of Joseph’s paternity of Jesus separate from his identity as Mary’s husband. Jesus, Origen notes, wills His subjection to Joseph and to Mary, and Joseph, for his part, knows that Jesus is greater than he, so exercises his power over Jesus in all humility (Homily 20.5). Without calling it “the holy family,” Origen paints an icon of Jesus, Mary and Joseph where the identities are all functions of the mystery of God’s self-emptying

philanthropic love, and contemplating the family, we find ourselves contemplating that mystery.

As noted above, Origen regards the perpetual virginity of Mary as settled doctrine in the Homilies on Luke, as well as in the Commentary on Matthew (10:17), where he comments that the brothers and sisters of Jesus mentioned in Matthew are not the children of Mary and Joseph. Mary and Joseph are the parents, and biblically so designated, of Jesus only. Nothing else would make sense as Origen has laid it out, because it is by refusing to conquer Satan by revealing His identity as Only-Begotten of the Father, but by emptying that identity into hiddenness, into His identity as Joseph’s son, into His place in the genealogy of Joseph, that Jesus catches all of our genealogies up into true life, the Book of Life. The paternity of Joseph, as husband of Mary, is extended to us, even more, I would argue, than the maternity of Mary is extended to us, at least as far as Origen’s thinking goes. This is true only because of the uniqueness of the grace extended to Mary in the Incarnation, and because Joseph is her husband. Mary is the link with our flesh, and Joseph is the link with our identities, as these are caught up and configured in communion with Christ. In that sense, as the bearers of a transfigured identity in Christ, we learn what the paternity of Joseph is to us and he immediately becomes close to us. To put this still another way, because Origen explicitly regards the marriage of Mary and Joseph as an intrinsic part of the mystery of the Incarnation, it means their marriage is in one sense no longer private. It is “open” to all of us. It is not the start of a private family, but one where the hiddenness of Christ’s identity as son of Joseph is completely constitutive of the married life of Mary and Joseph, which is thus completely turned outward toward all people equally. The marriage of Mary and Joseph is already full of children, and for Mary and Joseph to have had sex



**Julius Schnorr von  
Carolsfeld  
Flight into Egypt (1828)  
Museum Kunstmuseum  
(Düsseldorf)  
Image courtesy of  
Wikimedia Commons**

and begun their own private family, as it were, would be to in some sense decrease the scope of their married life—in their case and in theirs alone. We can all call Joseph “Dad,” and will do so the more we are caught up into the human genealogy of Christ’s *philanthropia*.

Can we say more? It would be stretching the text of Origen perhaps, but is there any basis of thinking further say about the marital intimacy of Mary and Joseph given Origen’s groundwork? If Origen is in some way painting an icon of the Holy Family as a mode of contemplating the mystery of divine *philanthropia*, perhaps we can look to the iconographic tradition of the East both to help, and to purify, our imagination. I am thinking in particular of the icon of the Nativity,

which features both Mary and Joseph but each in their own way. Mary and the baby are the center of attention, but Joseph is always present in the lower left hand corner, looking concerned, and talking to a seemingly wise old man. He represents worldly wisdom and as such, the devil. He is tempting Joseph with the thought that there is and can be no such thing as a virginal conception and birth, that such things are absurd.

The icon thus invokes a passage from the Gospel of Matthew on which Origen’s commentary is, unfortunately, lost. Joseph received his own annunciation but unlike Mary’s, no permission was asked of him, though they are betrothed. Number one cause of possible resentment. Then the seemingly absolute contradiction of “conception/birth” and “virginal.” These very hard “secrets” were, as Origen pointed out according to St. Ignatius of Antioch, hidden from the Prince of this World from eternity. Here he is, tempting Joseph, sure that these things cannot happen. Since he is so convinced, it is proof that these are mysteries of profound love. The devil does not believe in love. It is “foolishness” and so is “hidden” from him. Wouldn’t this be the supreme challenge to a marriage? Requiring not just Mary to hold these things in her heart, but Joseph to believe what the angel has revealed and to accept that it is a *fait accompli* and that Mary has a higher allegiance? And yet, in his trust in God

Joseph reveals he has a higher allegiance too. Their shared higher allegiance, exchanged over the sharing of the most intimate secrets proper only to husband and wife, define them as husband and wife and in their shared love and trust the “secrets” hidden from all eternity remain hidden, precisely as marital intimacy. This marriage, we can see in the icon, and we would expect from Origen’s homilies, was not exempt from the wrestling, the temptations, and struggles that all married couples endure, though in this case, as directly occasioned by the divine *philanthropia* that is the essence of “foolishness,” they are even greater, as the icon depicts. The devil never understands marital intimacy anyway, seeing only pragmatic alliances of one sort or another—if he could have, he *would never have crucified the Lord of glory*.

So much for our imaginative work on an Eastern insight into the intimacy of Mary and Joseph. What about the West? Any hope of sex there? The patristic West is, if anything, even more adamant than the East about the perpetual virginity of Mary. However, because Catholics and some Protestants disagree about the value of these traditions and how they are to be received into contemporary faith, I do not want to begin with the texts in Augustine that are rather well known in any event, because it is not my purpose in this paper to make a claim about these disagreements so much as to understand the Catholic position. For this, I begin with the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, an advance beyond Augustine, but one that makes no sense, precisely as such, without the specifically Augustinian doctrine of original sin (and this is, I believe, the basis for potential East-West agreement on this point of Marian doctrine).

So, here goes. We grant the virginal conception of Jesus. No biblical Christian that I know of believes this insults the mystery of marriage. The Incarnation cannot come from the world. Karl Rahner, among others, has ably

explained this aspect of the Incarnation in his little book, *The Mother of the Lord*. To put it in Origen’s terms, the Incarnation does not come from the genealogy of Joseph, but instead lifts it up. To put it in Augustinian terms, the Incarnation is the most signal and complete act of grace, a sovereignly free act of God, and so it must be initiated by God. Everything else really flows from this.

The Immaculate Conception, meaning that Mary, redeemed from the moment of her conception, does not have the taint of Original Sin, is the correlate grace which ensures that creation, in the person of Mary, participates in the act of God’s grace freely with no external pressure coming from the greatness of God’s stature and the persuasiveness of His Almighty power, not to mention His inherent charming character (no kidding—it’s what Jeremiah complained about: “You seduced me, and I was seduced”). Mary must be free from the passions of fear and *ambitio saeculi* if she is to truly say “Yes” in a way that admits of no suspicion of sexual harassment, or rape, even divine date rape, in this relationship in which the power dynamic is so evidently uneven. As such, the doctrine really is the correlate of the idea that the Incarnation is the supreme act of God’s grace. This act would be no true grace if it destroys, co-opts or takes over created agency, but only if such agency is freed. In other words, this doctrine flows from, and supports, with the most tender and loving intuition of the Church, the doctrine of the virginal conception of Jesus as an act of God’s grace on behalf of all people. It is, as it were, the original spousal contract between God and human being, henceforth giving virginity a spousal form and at the same time revealing the deepest meaning of spousal love as free and utterly complete self-gift, empowering and engendering other self-giving. It is not the myth of a god sleeping with a human virgin. It is not rape disguised as a marriage.

As we have already mentioned, Scripture is not conclusive on whether or not Mary and Joseph had sex after the birth of Jesus, but tradition weighs in here and supplies the datum of faith that, in fact, they did not. In trying to understand what this means, let's try to conceive what we mean by the opposite situation, that is, that Mary and Joseph did have sex after the birth of Jesus. What would it mean for us if Joseph and Mary had sex? I believe that this way of asking the question is more likely to generate insight on the basis of the Western theological charism.

Again, taking as our starting point the traditional belief and contemplating the mystery revealed in the spirit of trying to "understand" it (which really means trying to love it better), let's try to conceive the opposite scenario. Here St. Augustine is a help, for, in the *City of God*, Book 14, he conducts a thought experiment about what sex between unfallen spouses would have been like. It actually doesn't look that interesting, but in a way, that is Augustine's point, to expose the appalling lack of imagination we bring to the topic. Whether or not one agrees with his specific suggestion about sex in paradise, his main contribution here is to teach that sex could have taken place in paradise before the Fall, but that it is impossible for us to imagine it now, because what he calls "lust" intervenes and blocks our imagination. All of the signifiers that are used to indicate "sex" are configured by the fallen sexual desire that Augustine calls lust and that is all a fallen creature can feel. One cannot talk about sex without arousing the passions in some way, and one cannot use the words referring to sex without lust intervening in some way. This is a topic I tried to cover in an earlier essay of mine.

So—what would it mean for Joseph and Mary to have sex? We cannot imagine this. More specifically, the question would be what would it mean for Mary to have sex, as someone exempt from the passions of original sin? It is not something we can imagine. We

do not know what it means. We do not know what we are saying when we say, Surely Mary had sex, what's wrong with it, she was married after all, and Joseph, if not unfallen, was a reasonable facsimile, a "just," i.e. righteous man, so they must have had beautiful sex. The question, "What's wrong with it?" however, presumes we know what "it" is in this case. But Augustine's insight is that we do not, and our every attempt to imagine it will only and inevitably distort it, for all we can do is imagine it on the basis of our own experience, in which, however beautiful sex in marriage may be, it is always to some degree ambiguous, to some degree opaque, to some degree "lustful" in the Augustinian sense, to some degree always tempting us away from fidelity as well as forming fidelity, etc. Mary having sex is a blank in the imagination, if we accept the doctrine of original sin. And to have sex with Joseph, "righteous" but not redeemed from the moment of his conception, adds to the confusion. Can a fallen and an unfallen person engage in the very activity that creates human community? Are the children fallen or unfallen? Does Mary fall, then, in having sex with Joseph? Or, does she somehow redeem his sexuality? But that is the work of Christ, not of Mary, to redeem any aspect of our being.

Sex and marriage are themselves difficult mysteries to contemplate despite the true joy that accompanies them. They are in themselves complex. One effect of "lust" as Augustine sees it is to turn sex into a "work" about which one can (at the crudest end) brag, or (at the more sophisticated end), imagine you are getting "good at it." What is "it"? What are you getting good at? This imagines sex primarily as a skill which one masters. This is "lust" in its most laundered and seemingly acceptable form. Instead of receiving a gift, I get "good" at a skill, something I can just as easily read about in the comedies of Terence in Augustine's world, or at the supermarket checkout stands in ours.

So, we could begin to imagine that Joseph and Mary, especially Mary, did it better than we can. That is what unfallen sex means. They do it better. They are better at it. They are at the top of the competition of sexual ability. Now the pressure is on! Sex is a “work.” If I do it right, I can take pride in my accomplishment and the sacrament will work for me!! Works righteousness, works righteousness, works righteousness! Anxiety sets in. Compared to Mary’s and Joseph’s, my sex isn’t holy enough, isn’t sacramental enough, isn’t blissful enough, isn’t expert enough, isn’t self-forgetful enough, isn’t good enough . . . What would it mean to have to contemplate unfallen sex in this world from the perspective of fallenness? To think of Mary having sex is already to have fallen into a works righteousness mode and to have rejected the grace of the Incarnation, and the correlate grace of the Immaculate Conception. Contemplating a true act of unfallen sex in a fallen world would be contemplating something that is not recognizably human to us. Paradoxically enough it is THAT, and not the perpetual virginity of Mary, that would take the fun out of sex, spoil its beauty for us, insult sex as we know it, because it would turn sex into a “work,” an unattainably righteous “work”—the only way we can imagine unfallen sex, and so the only way we can try to imitate it. An act of unfallen sex in our world would break the structure of sex as we know it. It would be an act of violence to our world, not a loving, saving intervention.

The loving, saving intervention is “silent”—“how silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given,” to quote the Christmas carol. It does not in a direct way intrude the unfallen economy into the fallen, as a kind of competition and contempt. The openly unfallen, directly side by side with the fallen, is contempt, not love; is competition, not invitation; is bullying, not tenderness. Instead this all happens “silently,” to use St. Ignatius’s image, taken over by the hymn, that is, “sacramentally.” Christ takes on the likeness of sinful flesh and by this means He marries us, not a

better version of us had we not fallen, but us, where we are, here in this world, how beautiful, He still loved us, He didn’t care, He married us anyway in the most complete and supreme act of lavish unselfcenteredness, as foolish as any act of sex is, in fact the very form of “foolishness,” which is grace, the Incarnation. And within that sacramental economy, the economy of foolishness, sex is possible again as itself—NOT in a way that is parallel to the sacramental economy.

Incorporation of fallen human beings into a society that is being redeemed, that is *in via*, on pilgrimage, the Church, the officially “foolish” society—this incorporation is the place where sexuality is reformed and transformed and its essence as stupidly foolish self-gift—not a “work” of self-justifying righteousness—is revealed. The possibility of being sacramentally configured to the supreme act of self-giving, of espousal, is given in Baptism and then especially in the Eucharist. “How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given!” Mary is “redeemed” from the moment of her conception, not created anew apart from Christ. It is not Mary, therefore, who renews marriage. Mary is not presented to us as a parallel economy, an immaculate version of our own lives to which we have no access, but as the first and most perfect fruit of grace and configuration to the one economy of redemption. Mary is the bridal chamber, in an Augustinian idiom, the fully free created response to the supreme grace, and incorporation into the Church means incorporation, too, into that fully free response, sacramentally, and not by trying to emulate something perfect as a “work” of our own. There is no short cut. There is no unfallen sex. There is the beauty of the spousal love of Christ, forming the human community of man and wife and lifting it into a supernatural reality that provides its heart and was intended to be its heart all along. Grace builds on nature, but that means, in a fallen world, grace heals, transforms and transfigures nature so that it is most fully itself in God.

Contemplating marriage is contemplating complexity and difficulty, joy, sorrow, etc. Contemplating the marriage of Joseph and Mary is to retain, in an unutterable act of tenderness, this contemplation of marriage as just that, complex, difficult, joyful, sometimes sorrowful. In this, our Western meditation merges with our Eastern one. To contemplate the marriage of Joseph and Mary as without sex is to retain the “difficulty” of the mystery of marriage. To regard them as having had sex, or to regard this as essentially a question of no consequence one way or the other, is to give up on the density of marriage, its difficulty and hence also its joys, the joys of a gift given and received in all of the fearsome and ineffable and so therefore intimate dimensions of gift giving. What further gift could be required of St. Joseph than to accept that his wife, his legal wife, is pregnant without his being consulted, even if it IS God? What further gift could be required of Mary, with respect to Joseph, than that she present him with the Incarnate Word as their child and that she entrust Joseph with His person and her own, not to take pride in Him as a personal possession and a “work” of theirs, but to share between them as the most beautiful and supreme gift there is? “How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given!” This silence is the substance of the married intimacy of Mary and Joseph, is the depth of intimacy, the “secret” kept from the Prince of Darkness from all eternity according to St. Ignatius of Antioch, transforming their married intimacy, once again, into something more deeply private and personal even than sex, and yet as such something open and available to everyone, the most open marriage of all.

What would sex mean in this situation? In an Augustinian vocabulary, it would be a signifier without a signified. Mary’s *fiat* is a perfect configuration to the “foolishness” of the Gospel, a perfect and perfectly loving self-forgetfulness, more “foolish” and more

ridiculous than any act of sex could be. She and Joseph share that gift as married love. The bond between a fallen and an unfallen creature is called, not “sex between Mary and Joseph, but—the Church.” It is not Joseph’s marriage to Mary, but rather the union of both of them with the Incarnate Word, which for them, and for them alone, is a bond in a special way, a unique participation in the grace of the Incarnation, one which obviates sex and makes of it a sign without a signified because that which it normally signifies in a marriage, the spousal love of Christ and the Church, is replaced by the Word Himself in person, and the intimate sharing of the trust, deeper than that required of any normal marriage, which constitutes the sharing of this gift, transfiguring the marriage of Joseph and Mary into a bond so solid that it is entirely hospitable to anyone and everyone else. This does not destroy the beauty of sex for the rest of us, but preserves it from the horrors of a narrow works righteousness that uses sex to achieve a kind of spiritual mastery and a separate return to the unfallen, paradisiacal condition. In this one case, sex, as a sign without a signified, would be an abuse of sex, and the renunciation of it a loving preservation of it for the rest of us. Did Mary and Joseph have sex? Thankfully—not. Did they have the specifically sexual intimacy proper to man and wife, a “sex life,” as we so unfortunately call it sometimes? Assuredly—yes.

Thank-You.

