

Summer 6-2010

O Virgin of Virgins, Our Mother: A Feminist Reconstruction of Mary's Perpetual Virginity as a Model for Christian Discipleship

Julia A. Feder

University of Notre Dame, jfeder1@nd.edu

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Recommended Citation

Feder, Julia A. (2010) "O Virgin of Virgins, Our Mother: A Feminist Reconstruction of Mary's Perpetual Virginity as a Model for Christian Discipleship," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought*. Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/jift/vol4/iss1/2>

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"Master of Sant'Apollinare", Procession of the Holy Virgins and Martyrs. ca. 526 C.E. , mosaic in the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, Italy.

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Meister_von_San_Apollinare_Nuovo_in_Ravenna_002.jpg

**O Virgin of Virgins, Our Mother:
A Feminist Reconstruction of Mary's Perpetual Virginity as a Model for Christian
Discipleship**

The novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, written in 1985 and turned into a movie in 2007, is the story of Florentino Ariza who falls in love with Fermina Daza as a very young man. They are unable to be together until later in life, nearly 52 years after their first meeting. Throughout this time Florentino remained in love with Fermina and singularly devoted to her in his heart. Yet, he has had hundreds of affairs with other women. Before Florentino and Fermina make love for the first time after so many years, he tells her, "I have remained a virgin for you." Watching the movie version of the story in a crowded Boston

theater, I witnessed the complexity of the audience's reaction to that climactic line. I could hear some laughing loudly, perceiving the line as a joke. Others I could hear momentarily smirking, perceiving the line as ironically both true and untrue. Others, undoubtedly, were silent with the profound realization that there was no irony in his statement at all; Florentino could make no truer statement to Fermina at that moment. In that movie theater I witnessed the audience's definition of virginity put to the test. Does a vow of virginity necessarily promise abstinence from sexual activity? Does a vow of virginity prescribe only the inner thoughts and dispositions of the individual, apart from any bodily action? Or, is a vow of virginity concerned with both inner attitudes and external actions, though somehow avoiding a collapsed identification of the two?

In Catholic theology, the answers to these questions affect women in a unique way. Male theologians throughout Christian history have frequently upheld Mary, the mother of Jesus, as the model of perfect womanhood. As Pope John Paul II puts it in his Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Mary is "the full revelation of all that is included in the biblical word 'woman' . . . [She is] 'woman' as she was intended to be in creation . . . Mary is the 'new beginning' of the dignity and vocation of women, of each and every woman."¹ Integral to any doctrinal discussion of Mary is a profession of her perpetual virginity. Christian literature concerning the preservation of Mary's virginity after the birth of Jesus can be traced back as far as the second century as evidenced by the *Protoevangelium of James* (c. 150) in which Salome, the midwife who doubts Mary's virginal integrity, suffers from supernatural burns to her hand as she tries to check Mary's body to prove her thesis. Presumably, this is a warning directed to the reader against entertaining the same doubts. Though the *Protoevangelium of James* cites Mary's virginity shortly after Jesus' birth and does not explicitly argue for Mary's life-long virginity,

Christian thinkers soon thereafter extend the trajectory of thinking in the Protoevangelium and explicitly advocate for Mary's perpetual virginity beginning with Origen in the third century, and Athanasius, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine in the fourth and early fifth centuries. The interest in Mary's perpetual virginity accompanies the growing phenomenon of Christian asceticism and, from very early on, Mary is cast as the highest model for vowed women virgins.²

The attraction to a life of Christian asceticism and, in particular, the profession of life-long virginity carries different meanings for women and men. Lisa Isherwood writes, perhaps with an overly generalizing tone, "While their Christian brothers were embracing celibacy in order to remain undefiled by the tainted touch of Eve, many Christian women were embracing it in order to avoid the crushing grip of patriarchy."³ Though it might not be true in every case that women chose celibacy in order to experience greater social freedom while men chose celibacy in hostility to female sexuality, it is true that the range of possible meanings for celibacy differed for women and men. Virginity could acquire a meaning of autonomy, and resistance to male control and conventional (patriarchal) social structures for women, whereas virginity afforded men relatively little more autonomy than they already experienced in their personal and spiritual lives.

Male theologians exhort Christian women who wish to remain unmarried to look to Mary as an exemplar of perpetual virginity. In this way, men have attempted to define female virginity, constructing and controlling its boundaries and its expressions. Paradoxically, however, virginity itself is characterized by a rejection of male control.⁴ As we will see, the authorship of virgin martyr legends in the Middle Ages and the reflections upon virginity by the Church Fathers simultaneously both exalt and circumscribe female autonomy and independence.

The doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity can be a powerful resource in the Catholic tradition. In this paper I aim to recover the revolutionary force of Mary's perpetual virginity and imagine how Christian women (and men) can imitate Mary today in a way that is both rooted in the tradition but also traverses new and uncharted territory. To that end, I will begin with an examination of the writings of Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo concerning Mary's perpetual virginity and vowed virgins who imitate her example. Then, I will discuss medieval virgin martyr legends of subverted rape as a dramatic enactment of the theoretical reflections of Ambrose and Augustine on the nature of virginity. Finally, I will end with contemporary feminist recontextualizations of Mary's perpetual virginity as a model for the virginal life. My hope is that I can formulate a positive definition of virginity to serve as an ideal for all Christian believers which affirms both the spiritual and physical aspects of virginity and yet resists overly restrictive delineations of virginal bodies.

Ambrose and Augustine on Virginity

I will examine the writings of Ambrose and Augustine on both the perpetual virginity of Mary and the nature of the virginal life to uncover Christian resources which can be used to proclaim powerfully-, first, that perpetrators of rape cannot destroy one's virginity and second, that the virgin woman is in a unique position to resist the oppressive tendencies of the patriarchal family structure for she is possessed by none but God.⁵ Though Ambrose and Augustine include abstinence from sexual activity in their definitions of virginity, both ultimately locate virginity in the will, with the intention to avoid a reduction of the virginal life to mere adherence to physical regulations. For both of these thinkers, a hypothetical classification of all women as either virgins or non-virgins would not clearly map onto a division of sexually active and sexually abstinent women. Virginity transcends a purely physical status and surpasses exclusively act-

oriented regulations. Additionally, the virgin transcends the gender roles of the day. For Ambrose in particular, the virgin is neither male nor female, but rather a third sex. Therefore, the virgin transcends both physical and sexual boundaries to arrive at a new state of purity, independence, and undivided devotion to God.

Ambrose of Milan, a 4th century bishop and doctor of the Church who was motivated by a desire to uphold the consecrated virginal life, exalts Mary as a perpetual virgin and a model of Christian discipleship.⁶ In *De Virginibus*, Ambrose writes, “Mary was such that her example alone is a lesson for all. . . . whoever desires its reward for herself may imitate the pattern.”⁷

What qualities of perfect discipleship does Mary model for believers? She models complete faith⁸ and courage⁹ but, most of all, she is a model of virginity itself. Ambrose explicitly defines the virgin as one who has not had sexual intercourse with a man.¹⁰ Yet, Ambrose is careful to indicate that virginity is not defined by physical activity (or rather, abstinence from particular physical activities) alone. Ambrose names other admirable qualities which Mary possesses distinct from virginity, yet related for he categorizes them under the umbrella term as “virginity of the mind,” indicating that all her virtues are related to the one, unified primary perfection of virginity. “What more chaste than she who bore a body without contact with another body? For why should I speak of her other virtues? She was a virgin not only in body but also in mind.”¹¹ Ambrose enumerates the qualities of virginity of mind as: careful speech, attentiveness to the poor, industriousness, love of reason, virtue, goodwill, etc. Ambrose muses that Mary’s virginity of mind is, in many ways, more laudable than the virginity of her body for “though the Virgin had other persons who were protectors of her body, she alone guarded her character.”¹² Others can aid or endanger the safety and integrity of the body, but it is the nature of the mind or the inner spirit that, for better or for worse, the self can exert more

control over its own workings. Yet, it is ultimately impossible to separate Mary's holiness of body from her holiness of mind since the purity of Mary's outward actions, even her outward beauty, is a reflection of a more fundamental beauty and purity of inner mind and heart.¹³

Mary's spiritual virtues find expression in bodily virtues, producing a physical-spiritual posture which Ambrose terms "holy virginity".

Mary, who is both virgin and mother, reverses our expectations about both the natural and the divine order, including not least of all the nature of virginity itself. We expect to be able to look at a pregnant woman who displays all the outward signs of sexual activity and determine that she is not a virgin. Ambrose asks, "For what two concepts could be more disparate than the Holy Spirit and a human body? Can anything be more unheard of than a virgin pregnant contrary to Law, to custom, to the maidenly modesty that is a virgin's greatest concern?"¹⁴ One presumes that pregnancy is incompatible with virginity. Not only must the pregnant woman have engaged in sexual activity to become pregnant in the first place, but it strikes Ambrose as (illuminatingly) incongruent that a virgin could be as intimately tied to her body as one who experiences the biological processes of pregnancy and childbirth. In addition, the virgin's concern for social modesty appears to contrast with pregnancy outside of marriage. Mary's example thwarts these assumptions.

According to Ambrose's own descriptions in some passages, the virgin is to be quiet, hidden, and afraid of others in order to preserve all modesty.¹⁵ Yet, in other passages Ambrose allows Mary as the virgin par excellence to challenge his presumptions concerning the placid nature of the virginal life. For example, Mary's visit to Elizabeth demonstrates that Mary's virginal modesty did not deter her from her mission to serve God and her neighbor courageously. In his Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, after having lauded the virginal modesty as the

tendency to remain alone and to stay at home, safe from the gaze of men and from the distractions of the world, Ambrose shifts his tone and praises the strength and conviction Mary possessed as she embarked on the journey toward Elizabeth.¹⁶ In the Visitation, Ambrose portrays Mary as one who transcends both her sex as a woman and her physical status as a virgin (for women, especially virgin women, are to stay hidden in the home “shun[ing] the gaze of men, avoid[ing] the public streets and crowded walks” so as to avoid predators)¹⁷ and leaves her home to serve another woman with bravery, suggesting a revolutionary aspect of holy virginity. Holy virginity transcends conventional sexual and physical boundaries producing an individual who is free, to the greatest extent, to serve God and neighbor.

Ambrose suggests that the virgin women transcend their sex by “laying aside womanish things . . . [and] renounc[ing] weakness. . . . [so that] their soul, which has no sex, might apply itself religiously to imitating the chastity of sinless Mary.”¹⁸ The virago, the virgin, is one who acts as a man (signified by the two parts of the word for virgin: “vir” and “ago”¹⁹) so that she can then occupy a sexual space that is paradoxically neither male, nor female²⁰. To be a perpetual virgin is, in a sense, to be a third sex.²¹

Transcendence of sexual boundaries provides the virgin with a unique freedom to escape the confines of patriarchal marriage and to love others in a heavenly way (i.e., free of possession), whereas the married woman is bound and burdened by care for her husband (see 1 Cor 8:34). Ambrose writes, “The bonds of wedlock are therefore good, yet they are bonds; the marriage tie is good, yet it is a tie, a tie to the world, she careth for things of the world, how she may please her husband.”²² Marriage and children commit one to earthly concerns, while virgins, since they are in a state of “renunciation of all that may wean them from their heavenly Spouse,”²³ are able to focus on heavenly concerns. Virgins resemble closely the angels who

“neither marry nor are given in marriage.”²⁴ Virgins are able to love their neighbors, just as the true mother who stood before King Solomon loved her son in 1 Kings 3. She preferred to give up her claim to her child rather than to see him killed. She represents true faith and stands as a model of the virtues of virginity because her love transcended possession.²⁵ Ambrose emphasizes less the stain of sexual activity upon the soul, and more the spiritual and social freedoms that come with resistance to marriage and family life within the context of a fallen society.

In *On Holy Virginity*, an apology for the virginal state, Ambrose urges social acceptance of women who freely choose virginity as an alternative to marriage. Ambrose asks in this treatise, “[M]ust our maidens be constrained to marry? The pagan priest used force to fill the number of the vestals; are we to use force against the profession of chastity?”²⁶ Ambrose indicates that virgins are perceived as threatening to the social order because they resist possession by an earthly man. “The world is alarmed for itself, as though marriages are to be no more and the human race is to be extinct.”²⁷ The revolutionary nature of virginity is feared by those who wish to maintain the status quo. Ambrose wishes to dispel those fears by portraying virgins as non-threatening to his contemporaries. Yet, Ambrose’s writings can have the opposite effect upon its readers in our own time by reminding us of virginity’s original radicality.

Augustine of Hippo, profoundly influenced by a personal relationship with Ambrose, also emphasized the significance of Mary’s perpetual virginity in modeling perfect Christian discipleship.²⁸ In response to the rape of Christian virgins during the sack of Rome in 410, Augustine takes up Ambrose’s broad definition of virginity as inclusive of qualities of “virginity of mind” and considers the question of whether the raped virgin is irreparably defiled. Augustine argues that the degree of holiness or unholiness of the will determines the ethical content of an

action, thus, prioritizing the integrity of the will over the actions performed upon the body.²⁹

One has no control over external forces, only over the internal will. “Chastity is a virtue of the mind, and its companion is the courage which enables it to endure any evils whatsoever rather than to have truck with evil. Now no-one who is great of soul and chaste has control over what happens to his flesh, but only over what his mind approves or rejects.”³⁰

If chastity could be taken away from one by force, Augustine argues, “then such chastity is certainly not a virtue of the mind, and will have no connection with those goods which govern the good life.”³¹ If one’s virginal integrity could be taken from one by force this would be a cheap and meaningless version of virginity. For virginity to possess any degree of holiness, it cannot be dependent upon circumstances outside of the control of the believer. A strong version of virginity must ultimately be a virtue of the mind. And, “if it is a good of the mind, it is not lost even when the body is taken by force.”³²

Like Ambrose, Augustine does not intend to completely disassociate mental and spiritual holiness from bodily holiness. Augustine would agree with Ambrose’s argument that inner holiness, i.e., virginity of mind, expresses itself outwardly in the actions one wills and, conversely, outward purity reflects inward purity. But, Augustine’s familiarity with situations of forced sexual intercourse prohibits him from arriving at the facile conclusion that any type of sexual activity is entirely incompatible with virginity. The holiness of the body cannot be deduced from the state of its individual parts: “For the holiness of the body does not lie in the fact that its parts remain undamaged . . . if the mind keeps its resolve, enabling the body too to be holy, the violence of another’s lust does not deprive the body itself of the holiness which steadfast continence preserves.”³³

Holiness of mind directly affects the holiness of the body, regardless of the actions performed by or upon the body. If one preserves a holiness of mind and yet the body is violated, one remains a virgin.³⁴ And, the reverse is also true: if one does not preserve a holiness of mind, but externally abstains from sexual intercourse, she also cannot be considered to be virginal. “The holiness of the mind remains, even if the body has been violated, and on the other hand, if the sanctity of the mind has been defiled, the body’s sanctity too is lost, even if the body remains virgin.”³⁵ Augustine affirms an underlying relationship of body and mind in which the mind or the will is clearly primary.³⁶ Augustine acknowledges rape as a real crime against the victim’s body, yet maintains that the body’s integrity cannot be taken from an outsider by force. Lack of full consent to a sexual act leaves one violated, but not defiled; attacked, but not conquered; wounded, but not destroyed.

Virgin Martyr Legends of “Circumvented Rape”

The virgin martyr tales of Agatha, Agnes, and Lucy in the *Legenda Aurea*, a 13th century collection of over 130 brief saints’ lives,³⁷ illuminate the continued development of the Church Fathers’ line of thinking in popular medieval Christian devotional and liturgical practices. understanding that virginity is fortified by the will and cannot be destroyed by sexual assault. These virgin martyrs’ lives can be characterized as what Kathleen Coyne Kelly calls stories of “circumvented rape”. This trope, common to virgin lives, always narrates “1) the threat of rape and 2) the prevention of rape, usually by miraculous means.”³⁸ Though the virgin is tortured and killed in the narrative, the rape is always prevented.³⁹ “[T]he consecrated virgin may lose her limbs or her life, but never her virginity. Virginity always outlasts the virgin.”⁴⁰ One could perhaps argue that the fantastical elements of protection against sexual assault in these stories dangerously romanticize the realities of sexual threats and suggest that if one was truly holy

enough, God would never allow one to experience rape. However, a more favorable interpretation can be offered: one can understand these stories to be dramatic enactments of the Church Fathers' teachings on the integrity of the virginal body as stemming from the integrity of the will rather than from the purity and intactness of its anatomical parts. These stories trade the philosophical and theoretical reflections of the Church Fathers for the symbolic and hyperbolic narrative form appropriate to memorable (and repeatable) preaching and imaginative prayer.

Voragine tells us that Agatha dies in 253. Her death is brought about by her refusal to submit to the desires of the consular official of Sicily, Quintianus, because she has taken a vow of virginity. Quintianus stretches her on the rack and orders his executioners to twist her breast for an extended period of time and then cut it off. Agatha responds to this treatment by insisting that her spiritual integrity produces a kind of pseudo-bodily integrity that cannot be violated. She says, "Impious, cruel, brutal tyrant, are you not ashamed to cut off from a woman that which your mother suckled you with? In my soul I have breasts untouched and unharmed, with which I nourish all my senses, having consecrated them to the Lord from infancy."⁴¹ Though Quintianus destroys her external breasts, she has a kind of inner breasts that are untouched, intact, and unharmed.

While in prison after this episode of torture, the apostle Peter appears to Agatha and restores her outward, mangled breasts so that they reflect the beauty and intactness of the inner breasts of her soul. Quintianus is angered by Agatha's healing and tortures her so badly that the earth erupts in a "tremendous earthquake" as if in protest of her treatment. The inhabitants of the town rise up against Quintianus, demanding that he stop his unjust actions so that ecological harmony could return to their community. Quintianus orders Agatha to return to jail, but she does not wish to go and gives up her soul to God, demonstrating her ability to exercise agency

even in death. The life of Agatha dramatically enacts the insights of the Church Fathers that virginity's power originates in a spiritual integrity which overflows into the bodily sphere, and not the reverse. Bodily violation does not affect a loss of spiritual integrity. Agatha demonstrates an inner holiness that is so strong and so intact that it spills over from the spiritual sphere into the bodily sphere affecting the healing of breasts, giving her control over the moment of her death, and even going so far as to bring about the trembling of the physical ground beneath her.

Agnes's death, at least 50 years later, is also provoked by resistance to the desires of a politically powerful man. The prefect's son wants her for a wife but she says that she is promised to Jesus instead. Jesus is the perfect spouse for "his love [is] chastity itself, his touch holiness, union with him, virginity."⁴² The prefect hears of his son's rejection and tries to make Agnes submit first by seduction and then by threats. She tells the prefect, "Do whatever you like, but you will not obtain what you want from me."⁴³ What he wants is to possess her, and he cannot possess her without her consent and active desire for his son. Because her will is immovable, he will never be able to obtain what he wants from her; she will remain virginal no matter what actions he takes upon her body.

The prefect strips her of her clothing and sends her to a brothel hoping that he can destroy her virginity. Agnes's confinement in the brothel ironically fails to defile her body, however, and instead purifies the brothel itself, turning it into a sanctuary. The prefect's son and some of his friends come to the brothel, expecting to have sex finally with her without any resistance, but the men are violently engulfed by the piercing light of the brothel and die. As punishment, Agnes is thrown into a burning fire. The flames do not hurt her, possibly signifying that the flames of lust cannot burn her virginal soul, and she is eventually killed by a dagger to the throat.

Postmortem she appears to other women and encourages them to become baptized and live as virgins as she did.

The account of Lucy's martyrdom, interestingly, links all three women together. Lucy's story resembles Agnes's because both involve threat of a brothel and both die after being stabbed in the throat. Lucy's story relates to Agatha's because it begins with postmortem communication with Agatha at her gravesite. Voragine explains in his etymological introduction to the story that "Lucy comes from lux, which means light. . . . Light also radiates without being soiled; no matter how unclean may be the places where its beams penetrate, it is still clean."⁴⁴ Thus the reader can conclude that Lucy's "beauty of virginity" remains pure, however unclean her external circumstances became. Lucy visits Agatha's tomb with her mother and sees a vision of Agatha. Agatha tells Lucy that she has the power to work healing miracles on her own and she need not ask Agatha for them.

Lucy is determined to remain unmarried and give away her dowry money to the poor. Her betrothed becomes angry, and turns her in to the consul Paschasius for being a Christian and acting contrary to imperial law.⁴⁵ Her impertinent responses to Paschasius's interrogations provoke him to threaten her with the whip so that she will stop talking. Lucy informs him that she cannot be silenced because she speaks the words of God, and the Holy Spirit dwells within her. Paschasius threatens that he will send her to a brothel so that her body will be defiled, and she will lose the divine Spirit within her. As if in perfect anticipation of Augustine's teachings on virginity, Lucy responds,

The body is not defiled . . . unless the mind consents. If you have me ravished against my will, my chastity will be doubled and the crown will be mine. You will never be able to force my will. As for my body, here it is, ready for every torture. What are you waiting for? Son of the devil, begin! Carry out your cruel designs!⁴⁶

And then Paschasius orders a crowd to gang-rape her and kill her. But, as the crowd approaches, she cannot be moved; not even a thousand men are able to move her. The consul submits her to many tortures, including piercing her throat with a dagger, but she still cannot be silenced.⁴⁷ She continues to speak the word of God without pause. She eventually elects the time of her own death, and even postmortem, her body is not moved. She is buried in that very spot in the year 304, and a church is built over her tomb. Kathleen Coyne Kelly comments, “Impervious to persuasion, rhetorical or otherwise, Lucy’s resolve is both spiritual and literal: she simply cannot be moved.”⁴⁸

In all of these stories, the rape is always circumvented. “Whatever else may be ripped and torn, the text does not narrate her loss of virginity (it does not take place ‘off stage,’ either. The violence against her serves as a metaphor for her potential violation without having it literally enacted.).”⁴⁹ This symbolizes that, though these women may have been actually raped, the rape can never accomplish what its perpetrators wish it to. Quintianus thinks that by mangling Agatha’s body, particularly her breasts, against her will, he can rob her of any sense of agency. Instead, Agatha affects the healing of her body and elects the moment of her death (perhaps the ultimate exercise of agency in a torture narrative). The prefect and his son think that by confining Agnes in a brothel they will be able to remove the holiness of her mind and fracture her focused devotion. Yet, the holiness within Agnes floods the brothel and turns the space into a place of prayer and light for all who are open to ‘honoring’ it. Paschasius also thinks that by sending Lucy to the brothel or by commanding a crowd to rape and kill her, he will be able to quiet the Holy Spirit speaking within and through her. Lucy, however, refuses to be moved to silence, both literally and metaphorically. One who does not consent to sexual intercourse always foils the plan of the attacker to some degree, because he can only exert

control over her body. Though experiences of sexual assault certainly have devastating psychological and spiritual effects in the victim, it is precisely the lack of consent, i.e., the feeling within the victim that the situation was one that ‘ought not to be’, which indicates that the rapist’s power is not totalizing. The very lack of consent which the victim fails to give him evidences the reality that he can neither possess nor destroy her inner integrity, he cannot make her desire him, and he cannot blot out the power of the Holy Spirit within her.

In all of these stories, these women suffer because they are vir-agos; they are biological women, i.e., not men, who do not act like women. They fail to cite both the male gender categories (insofar as their physical appearance communicates feminine beauty) as well as female gender categories (insofar as they refuse to marry and bear children). As Judith Butler argues, citation of gender binaries is necessary for the recognition of humanity. Those who do not cite the binaries are attacked physically and spiritually. This violence is rationalized because it is directed toward those who are considered to be other than human.⁵⁰

The Ambiguities of Consent

In her book titled *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*, Marcella Althaus-Reid argues that the portrayal of Mary as a model of perpetual virginity is painfully distant from the realities of many poor women’s lives. She explains,

[P]overty and virginity do not fit together in the lives of women. Poor women are seldom virgins, because poverty in Latin America means crowded conditions of violence and promiscuity, where girls get raped before puberty or married as adolescents as part of the few available economic transactions on offer, except for several forms of prostitution and sexual bondage. Women thus get pregnant before they know what their own sexuality is, before they can discover the divinity of lust in their lives.⁵¹

For this reason, “[Mary’s] virginity is the first thing that must go” with any contemporary, feminist Mariology.⁵² I wonder, however, whether it is possible to take seriously the very real

sexual politics which make it nearly impossible for so many women around the world to abstain from sexual activity, without disposing of Mary's perpetual virginity. I suggest we take a closer look at what constitutes virginity, before we determine both whether poor women in Argentina actually "are seldom virgins," and whether we cannot understand Mary as perpetual virgin to be a powerful model of Christian discipleship.

Upon first reading of Althaus-Reid's description of the sexual lives of poor women in Argentina as pervaded by violence, it appears that Althaus-Reid makes the simple mistake of failing to distinguish between consensual sex and nonconsensual sex, and this is why she cannot see the possible fit of poverty and virginity. But with a second reading, I wonder whether this blurring is intentional. Perhaps it is nearly impossible for these (and maybe all) women to clearly divide all sexual encounters into two boxes: one marked "consensual" and another marked "nonconsensual". Sexual violence doesn't always come in the dramatic form of rape and torture narrated in the virgin martyr hagiographies, or alluded to in Augustine's City of God. Sexual violence is only at times concentrated in intermittent and clearly identifiable moments of attack. Other times, however, sexual violence can be so insidiously threaded through the whole system of the sexual politics of a community that the will to resist unwanted sexual encounters is embedded and even obscured behind a will to survive. My intention is certainly not to relativize the trauma of sexual violence, which is more difficult to categorize, and neither is it to suggest that all sexual encounters contain some degree of violence. Rather, my aim is to point to the ambiguities of consent and indicate precisely how far Church Fathers' reflections on coercion, consent, and virginity may possibly reach.

Can the Church Fathers' insights say something important to the married women of Argentina who have been forced into marriages against their will and have never had the

opportunity to cultivate and experience full, enthusiastic consent in their sexual lives? Are they relevant to the woman living in low-income housing in Chicago who marries a man because she is afraid for her own safety to live and walk the streets of her neighborhood alone? Or, what about the woman who runs away with a boyfriend so that she can escape a household in which she is sexually abused by a sibling? These women trade (perhaps subconsciously) sex for protection and peace of mind. The Church Fathers' insights can perhaps also reach to the uneducated, single mother who seems to "choose" to be a sex worker so that she can make enough money to feed her children, but still be home at the times she needs to take her children to and from school. They can perhaps also reach to the woman who "chooses" under pressure to have sex with one who helps her in a time of great need, because she is convinced she must demonstrate her gratitude toward him. If we define consent positively, adopting a "feminist model of enthusiastic consent," which understands consent to be more the "presence of a yes" rather than the "absence of a no,"⁵³ the women in the above situations appear to lack full consent. Perhaps it is only the women in question who can ultimately sort through the ambiguities of consent in these situations, yet the point remains: if one actively cultivates the mental virtues of virginity, but lives in a situation in which one engages in sexual activity apart from full, enthusiastic consent for the purposes of survival/quality of life,⁵⁴ one can question whether she has truly lost one's virginal status on the grounds of the arguments of the Church Fathers alone.

A further question, however, arises from these reflections: does it make sense to think of enthusiastically consensual sex as the only activity which, in every instance, threatens virginal purity? Given that the living conditions of many make enthusiastically consensual sex a rare and precious experience for most women, and that enthusiastically consensual sex has the power to mediate God's presence in a uniquely sacramental way, it seems counterintuitive to exclude the

possibility of the coexistence of the virginal state and of this kind of purified, sacramental sexual experience. For many women, if this kind of sexual experience is to be experienced at all, it is usually only after much spiritual healing, courage, honesty, and clear communication about one's intentions and desires—interestingly, qualities that are very similar to those exemplified by the virgin martyrs. Therefore, should we not admit the possible concurrence of virginity and enthusiastically consensual sex?

To be clear, neither Ambrose nor Augustine believes that marriage and sex are sinful in themselves. They simply do not allow one to reach the heights of spiritual perfection which virginity allows.⁵⁵ What is it about sexual activity and marriage that is inferior to the virginal state according to the Church Fathers? Is it physical pleasure, or concentrated love for an individual? or, is it social bondage? For both Ambrose and Augustine, it is not sex itself that threatens intactness, but rather it is the social and legal burdens that come with the married state which can distract one from spiritual concerns.⁵⁶ These burdens are especially heavy for women, since patriarchal marriage and family structures take away so much of a female's freedom. Instead of spending her time in reading and prayer with a singularity of focus upon that which is good and holy, the married woman must take care of her children and serve a husband, bowing to his authority in the home. “[A] woman is bound, so long as her husband lives,”⁵⁷ while virginity, in contrast, represents “the ways of heaven unto the earth.”⁵⁸ Virginity is an enactment of life free from the effects of sin, and in particular, free from the curses of Eve to bear children in pain and desire a husband who lords over her (Gn 3:16).

The possible concurrence of virginity (as grounded in the Christian tradition of reflections upon women and virginity) and enthusiastically consensual sex, for which I wish to argue, would embrace the possibility of the sexually active virgin, but exclude the possibility of

the virgin who is bound to patriarchal marriage and family structures. This kind of virginity would not entail a resistance to sexual activity itself, but rather a careful consideration of and resistance to the boundedness which sexual activity may produce. This might result in abstinence from all types of sexual intercourse for some people (perhaps for many people) but it need not include sexual abstinence as a rule.

Holy virginity begins as a spiritual state and spills over on to into the bodily sphere. There is a very real relationship between the soul and the body, for the body symbolizes and enacts the virginal state of the soul. Because there is no decontextualized body, that is to say, there is no body which is not embedded within a complex matrix of cultural, historical, ecological, and physiological influences, there is not one singular, formulaic way for the body to symbolize the spiritual virginal state. The body is a polyvalent symbol, communicating different messages in different contexts as well as different (and sometimes contradictory) messages in the same context. Augustine and Ambrose stress that we cannot ascribe a singular meaning to the body which has never experienced sexual intercourse—some can be considered to be virginal, while others cannot. Similarly, we cannot ascribe a singular meaning to the body which has experienced sexual intercourse; Augustine and Ambrose carve out space for the body which has experienced sexual violence to continue to symbolize a virginal soul. I wish to extend this flexibility of interpretation to bodies which engage in consensual sexual intercourse.

Feminist Reflections on Mary's Perpetual Virginity

Elizabeth Johnson raises some flags of warning concerning the project of uplifting Mary as model of perpetual virginity for women. She argues that the positioning of Mary as a model for the vowed virginal life was originally an attempt to control Christian women who looked to

virginity as a socially liberating option. The virginal life afforded early Christian women with an alternative to the commodification of patriarchal marriage and the opportunity to join together with other women in community. Early Christian women fought for the opportunity to be virgins, or what Johnson explains, “in social terms, . . . [was the ability to] dispose of their bodies as they pleased by keeping them out of circulation.”⁵⁹ It is only in response to this free choice of women that male Christian thinkers began to reflect on the nature of virginity “in the effort to regulate their lives.”⁶⁰ One way male Christian thinkers attempted to regulate female virgins was to construct Mary a “silent, submissive, and obedient” model of virginity.⁶¹ Male theological reflection upon Mary’s virginity intended to co-opt women’s quest for independence. “Despite some success along these lines, the image of the virgin Mary did subversively signal that women could be valued as persons in themselves without being identified with a man.”⁶² One negative effect of male theological co-optation is to suggest that Mary is only “worthy of honor” because she is not “contaminated” by “sexual desire and activity”, underlying a “fundamental hostility . . . to women’s sexuality.”⁶³ Additionally, Johnson’s sustained historical examination of women living in first century Palestine highlights that Mary, regardless of whether she engaged in sexual activity or not, was a married woman living in a family compound who shared space with an extended family (or families) and participated in the duties of mothering the children of the family unit. She hardly lead a life separate from the demands of marriage and family life of the day. Therefore, to root women’s rejection of marriage and family in the example of Mary should give one pause.

Yet, Johnson highlights Mary as a model of autonomy, independence, intactness, and bodily integration in other ways. For example, Johnson emphasizes Mary’s courageous, self-determinative “yes” to God in the Annunciation. God’s message is delivered directly to Mary,

and she responds directly without consultation of a male authority. “The memory that this young woman’s decision is not a passive, timid reaction but a free and autonomous act encourages and endorses women’s efforts to take responsibility for their own lives. The courage of her decision vis-à-vis the Holy One is at the same time an assent to the totality of herself.”⁶⁴ Later in Luke, in the Visitation to Elizabeth, Mary finds comfort in the company of another woman who struggles with an “unexpected blessing” from God. This demonstrates that Johnson’s understanding of Mary’s autonomy is not one that stands over and against a notion of embeddedness in a community, rather Mary has an inner strength which once found, requires nourishment in communion with another who has discovered a similar strength in different circumstances. It is significant that Mary and Elizabeth are not identical. Elizabeth is advanced in age, while Mary is quite young. Elizabeth is married, and Mary is not. Elizabeth has struggled with infertility, while Mary will have to face suspicions of adultery. Yet, both now face the challenges of unexpected bumps in the road, confused about how to proceed, simultaneously full of fear and joy about the future, yet resolved to accept God’s gifts with courage.⁶⁵

The paradoxical titles of Mary as both mother and virgin and, moreover, the conjunction of Mary the mother of Jesus with subsequent women who have chosen not to marry and raise children in the Christian tradition, however, underscores my thesis that bodies can enact virginity in different ways. Many women, as virgins, reject marriage and children, as a means to express their autonomy and singularity of focus upon God. As a virgin, Mary embraced marriage and the daily trials and struggles of mothering the multiple children who lived with her on her family’s compound during her lifetime. Christian virgins can continue the tradition of imitation of Mary by adopting a diversity of lifestyles—i.e., lifestyles that differ from that which Mary adopted (in the same way that the early Christian virgin maintained lifestyles very different from that which

Mary lived) as well as lifestyles that differ from each other (some engaging in sexual activity and others not, some marrying and others not, some birthing and/or raising children and others not).

British feminist theologian Tina Beattie commends the mariological juxtaposition of seemingly oppositional titles virgin and mother. It is a “reconciliation of opposites without loss of distinction . . . [which] challenge[s] . . . social and linguistic values structured around binary opposites.”⁶⁶ Mary, as both virgin and mother, destroys our presumptions about concepts framed according to strict polarizations. The symbol of Mary enacts the powerful Christian message: dualistic language fails to capture the miraculous nature of graced reality; just as Jesus is both God or human and God is both three and one, so Mary is both virgin and mother.⁶⁷ A strict polarization of virginity and motherhood reduces the richness of the concept of virginity to a merely physiological reality, diminishing the theological significance of Mary as perpetual virgin to a “symbol of sexual abstinence rather than divine presence.”⁶⁸

Korean feminist theologian Chung Hyun Kyung similarly sees positive value in a critical understanding of Mary as a model of perpetual virginity apart from an ethic of sexual abstinence. Chung argues that teachings concerning Mary’s virginity are best understood as statements about Mary’s independence, her refusal to derive her value exclusively from her relationships to men, and an inner integrity rooted in “her true connectedness to her own self and to God.”⁶⁹ This is a kind of virginity that is not lost with sexual experience, but rather grows in direct proportion to accretions of all kinds of life experiences (including those of a sexual nature) as one ages.⁷⁰

The cumulative effect of a lifetime of effort toward an embodied expression of autonomy and spiritual integrity speaks to the power of an ideal of virginity which is perpetual rather than transitional. Beattie reminds us that in patriarchal societies, the hymen symbolizes the exchange of property (i.e., the bride’s body) between a bride’s father and her husband. “[T]he unruptured

hymen is only socially determinative when ruptured, and therefore it is a conceptual impossibility that defers meaning.”⁷¹ The breaking of the hymen represents the sealing of the marriage contract. The symbolic meaning of the perpetually unruptured hymen subverts the notion that the woman’s body is a piece of property to be traded in the marketplace. The perpetual deferral of the economic exchange threatens the idea that the exchange is immanent and necessary. Keeping in mind that Beattie resists a strict identification of perpetual virginity with a sexual abstinence, Beattie argues that, as a theological symbol, Mary must be perpetually virgin, if her virginity is to have any liberating potential for women.⁷² Transitional virginity further inscribes women within the patriarchal order, but perpetual virginity resists the commodification that a maiden’s virginity symbolizes once it is lost. The perpetual virgin stands in radical autonomy, surely embedded within a community of relationships, but given as property to no one.

Why “Virginity”?

If perpetual virginity is best defined as the embodied expression of a spiritual state of autonomy and holiness of mind which may or may not include engagement in sexual activity, have we so radically redefined virginity that we are not even talking about “virginity” anymore? Has virginity been so stripped of all its familiar definitions that it has become an empty term which could be more helpfully replaced with “autonomy” and “independence”, or “spiritual integrity” and “holiness”? Or, alternatively, as Delores Williams suggests, has the term virginity been so “ ‘scared to the bone’ with male handling” that it cannot be redeemed?⁷³ Why retain the word “virginity”?

First, if the complexities of this critical reformulation of perpetual virginity seem too ambiguous, consider the existing instability of virginity as commonly construed in popular (and

religious) culture. What constitutes virginity in the popular imagination? What constitutes female virginity loss? Is it the first instance of vaginal penetrative sex with a man? Does it make sense then to think of women who have engaged exclusively in sexual relationships with other women as virgins? Are women who have masturbated (alone or in the company of another) considered to be virgins? Should we consider the growing numbers of young Christian women who engage in pre-marital, oral and/or anal sex with the intention of preserving their virginity before marriage to be successful in achieving their aim?⁷⁴ An unambiguous definition of virginity is difficult to find.

Secondly, “virginity” as a concept must be carefully defined with an eye toward its potential as a liberating symbol for women because of its prominence in the Catholic tradition. The perpetual virginity of Mary is a defined doctrine of the Church⁷⁵ and the idealization of Mary as the perfect model of female discipleship is so frequently cited that it would be nearly impossible to replace virginity with a “new language and new adjectives,” as Williams suggests, without placing a great distance between oneself and the long tradition of the Catholic Church as well as the large community of women and men who claim a Catholic identity. As Beattie puts it, Marian symbols are so “deeply embedded in Catholic consciousness . . . [that] they will not lose their potency simply by being ignored or rejected.”⁷⁶ To place the language of Mary’s perpetual virginity aside and pick up a new vocabulary instead, would be to risk causing more harm than good. Because of the strong hold that the teachings and traditions concerning Mary’s perpetual virginity have upon the imaginations of Catholics, and because the status of Mary’s perpetual virginity as a defined doctrine of Church gives one no reason to believe that this hold will weaken, a sustainable feminist Mariology must directly engage teachings on Mary’s perpetual virginity. It must mine the tradition for liberating Mariological impulses and critically

bring those insights to the surface, so that they can be brought into conversation with contemporary feminist concerns. Marian symbols can be critically revised, as they have been revised throughout the whole of Christian history, but it would be virtually impossible to break radically with the tradition, wholly rejecting the teachings on Mary's perpetual virginity, without an ignorance of the hold that these teachings and traditions have upon the imaginations of Catholic Christians around the globe.

Thirdly, the term virginity signals a unity of independence and spiritual integrity, or autonomy and holiness, that none of these single terms can signify alone. Augustine and Ambrose give us an important insight when they caution that the unmarried woman who is not attentive to the poor, or does not have goodwill toward others, does not live up to the name virgin. The virtues of autonomy and independence alone can lead one to irresponsibly divorce oneself from one's community and shirk one's obligations toward justice. Conversely, the holiness of mind which leads one to care for the other also cannot alone make one a virgin. One must also resist the commodification of one's body and insist upon the independent value of one's own life and one's own thought processes, to the best of one's ability, if one is to claim virginal purity.

Finally, the term virginity points to a relationship of body and spirit. Whereas the terms independence, autonomy, holiness of mind and spiritual integrity certainly suggest intellectual, emotional, psychological, and spiritual aspects of virginity, they do not automatically suggest an embodied element. Yet, the relationship between body and soul suggested by the term virginity is not a relationship of strict identity. In the Christian tradition, spiritual virginity does not collapse neatly into categories of visible, bodily value. The Church Fathers resisted a facile reduction of proof of virginity to the physiological absence of the marks of coitus. They spoke

strongly against medical tests for virginity, insisting that virginity cannot be read simply from the body.⁷⁷ The body enacts the spiritual state of the virgin soul, symbolizing its purity and focused devotion upon God, but its signs are not formulaic. Ambrose and Augustine indicate that a ruptured hymen is an unreliable sign of the non-virgin status. In both the case of Mary as well as Augustine's discussion of virgins who survive rape, even pregnancy is an unreliable sign of the non-virgin status. I argue that engagement in fully consensual sex is also an unreliable sign of the non-virgin status. Bodies can enact the spiritual state of the soul in a multitude of ways, and each enactment is influenced by the particularities of the individual's personal history, social location, and practical options available to her. What is significant is that the body's enactment of the spiritual state of the soul is counted as integral to virginity, not that the body's enactment is prescribed in a narrow range of acceptable options.

Patriarchal control begins with casting the female body as an object to be controlled and exchanged by men. Traditional marriage norms commodify the female body in assigning economic worth to the ruptured hymen (as Beattie demonstrates). The pornography industry commodifies the female body by selling photographs of young women posed in vulnerable positions, ready to be seized sexually, and this style of photography trickles down through other forms of the media, such as advertising, television, fashion magazines, etc., in perhaps "softer" forms. The beauty industry commodifies the female body as a never-ending project in need of plucking, coloring, waxing, shaving, moisturizing, scenting, painting, and the buying of many commercial products. The heterosexual dating culture commodifies the female body, insofar as women feel obligated to exchange sexual acts for paid dinners and movie tickets. Resistance to patriarchy must then include an effort by women to reclaim their bodies as their own. As Lisa Isherwood puts it, "[I]t is in our bodies that we first lose our equality, and conversely . . . it is

through our bodies that we challenge systems.”⁷⁸ The hagiographic tradition provides us with models of Christian women who resisted patriarchy through their bodies. For us today, there similarly must be some element of embodiment in our resistance. Isherwood writes, “The challenge of our age is perhaps to live as subversively through the body as our sisters in faith attempted to do. We need to incarnate/enflesh counter cultural realities and to understand our bodies as sites of resistance to patriarchy.”⁷⁹ To connect our resistance with theirs in an extended tradition of Christian women seeking liberation, our resistance cannot be exclusively intellectual or psychological. It cannot involve only part of ourselves. Instead, we must involve our whole selves, the physical and spiritual elements of ourselves, in the search for liberation with the caution that we must be open to recognizing the body as a polyvalent symbol, capable of communicating the spiritual state of the soul in a multiplicity of ways.

Concluding Thoughts

In this paper, I argued for a positive definition of perpetual virginity as the embodied expression of an inner autonomy and holiness of mind in two stages: First, I searched the tradition for resources which recognize the possible concurrence of virginity and sexual activity, given that the sexual activity in question lacks full consent. Second, I pushed the tradition beyond itself to reach toward a new understanding of virginity which can admit the possible coincidence of virginity and fully consensual sexual activity, provided that the sexual activity to which one consents resists the oppressive elements of patriarchal social structures and aids in the cultivation of an inner holiness of mind. If the perpetual virginity modeled by Mary is primarily a negative concept, i.e., defined by absence, then the virginity can only coincide with non-consensual sexual activity. If virginity is understood defined positively as the presence of an embodied expression of holiness of mind and spiritual freedom, virginity can coincide with fully

consensual sexual activity which successfully resists oppression encoded in marriage and family social structures. Defining virginity positively in this way casts the virtue as a dynamic process, rather than a fixed state, and emphasizes that any achievement of the virtue must entail a “perpetual” refreshment of effort.

Notes

¹ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (August 15, 1988) 11.

² Origen upholds Mary as model of the virginal life in his *Commentary on John and Fragments on Matthew*. Athanasius does so in his *Letter to Virgins* and *De Virginitate* as does Jerome in his treatise *On the Perpetual Virginity of Mary against Helvidius* and in his letters to wealthy Roman women which persuaded them to consecrate themselves to virginity (Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: the Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999) 75-76, 104-05, 205-08; Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) 116-17). Ambrose and Augustine’s opinions on Mary and virginity will be discussed at length later in this paper.

³ Lisa Isherwood, *The Power of Erotic Celibacy: Queering Heteropatriarchy* (London: T & T Clark, 2006) 54.

⁴ Cindy Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl, “Introduction,” *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999) 6. Isherwood, 11.

⁵ Surely a fuller treatment of theological views of virginity in the early Church would include reflection on the writings of Origen, Athanasius, Jerome, and others, but for the purposes of this paper I have limited my reading to Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁷ Ambrose of Milan, *De Virginitas* from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 10, trans. H. de Romestin, E. de Romestin and H.T.F. Duckworth, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1896) revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/34072.htm>> II.2.15. Interestingly, Gambero points out that this passage from Ambrose is also referenced by Vatican II at the end of *Perfectae caritatis*, the decree on the adaptation and renewal of religious life (Gambero, 191).

⁸ Mary is the model of total perfection to the extent that “it would be impossible to perceive any unbelief in the words of Mary at the Annunciation” for that would suggest a divine reward of unbelief (Gambero, 197).

⁹ Ambrose writes, “[W]hile the men fled, she remained undaunted [before the Cross]” (Gambero, 198, qting Ambrose, *De institutione virginis*, 49).

¹⁰ Ambrose of Milan, *Expositio in Lucam*, trans. Íde M. Ní Riain (Dublin: Halcyon, 2001) II.1.

¹¹ Ambrose, *De Virginitas*, II.2.7.

¹² *Ibid.*, II.2.9.

¹³ Ambrose writes, “[T]he very appearance of her outward being might be the image of her soul, the representation of what is approved. For a well-ordered house ought to be recognized on the very threshold, and should show at the very first entrance that no darkness is hidden within, as our soul hindered by no restraints of the body may shine abroad like a lamp placed within” (*Ibid.*, II.2.7).

¹⁴ Ambrose, *Expositio in Lucam*, II.17.

¹⁵ See especially *ibid.*, II.8.

¹⁶ Ambrose writes, “Mary had, up to this moment, lived in the strictest retirement. Neither that, nor her virginal dread of appearing in public, nor the ruggedness of the mountain paths, nor the length of the journey could deter her from fulfilling her duty. Towards the heights the Virgin hastens—the Virgin who thinks only of rendering service and is forgetful of the trouble to herself. Her strength lies not in her sex but in her love. She leaves her house and sets forth” (*Ibid.*, II.20).

¹⁷ Ambrose of Milan, *On Holy Virginity*, trans. Albany J. Christie (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1843) 13. See also Ambrose, *De Virginitas* II.2.9.

¹⁸ Ambrose, *Expositio in Lucam*, II.28.

¹⁹ Carlson and Weisl, 12.

²⁰ Because “the sexes of our souls are not different,” (Ambrose, *On Holy Virginity*, 15) both men and women are able to meet in this sexual space.

²¹ Sarah Salih explains, “Anatomically female persons who do not marry are not part of the cultural category of ‘woman.’ . . . The very rigidity of gender *roles* paradoxically ensures a fluidity of gender *identity*. The bearing of children is so fundamental to

the construction of 'woman' that virgin women need to be recategorized" (Sarah Salih, "Performing Virginity: Sex and Violence in the Katherine Group" *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999) 99). One should note, "The virgins should not be understood as a mixture of male and female but as a separate category altogether. The rejection of heterosexual relationships, a standard element of the virgin martyr legend, allows the binary opposition of male and female required by the heterosexual hegemony to be broken down, and a third gender, 'virgin,' to be produced. Virginity constitutes a 'culturally consistent gender,' in which the virgin's desire is directed towards God and her body is whole and impenetrable" (Ibid., 100).

²² Ambrose, *On Holy Virginity*, 6.

²³ Ibid., 20.

²⁴ Ibid., 5. See Mt 22:30.

²⁵ Ibid., 1.

²⁶ Ibid., 3.

²⁷ Ibid., 7.

²⁸ Gambero, 228. Yet, Augustine takes it a step further than Ambrose and proclaims that Mary made a vow virginity before the event of the Annunciation. Gambero explains, "In the West, Augustine appears to be the first Father of the Church to have expressed the conviction that Mary made a vow of virginity" (221).

²⁹ He writes, "[T]he virtue which governs our moral life emanates from its abode in the mind to govern the limbs of the body. Moreover, the body becomes holy through the exercise of the holy will" (Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, trans. P.G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2005) I.16).

³⁰ Ibid., 1.18.1-2.

³¹ Ibid., 1.18.3.

³² Ibid., 1.18.4.

³³ Ibid., 1.18.5,6.

³⁴ Interestingly, Augustine assumes that no other holy virgin can be a physical mother in *Of Holy Virginity* from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 3, trans. by C.L. Cornish, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887) revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1310.htm>> 5, but this is not consistent with his teaching about raped women.

³⁵ Augustine, *City of God*, 1.18.8.

³⁶ See also Augustine, *Of Holy Virginity*, 8: even as no one makes an immodest use of the body, unless the sin have been before conceived in the spirit, so no one keeps modesty in the body, unless chastity have been before implanted in the spirit." For Augustine, it is not physical virginity itself which is holy, but the spiritual qualities which make physical virginity a possibility.

³⁷ The *Legenda* is catalogued according to the liturgical calendar by the Dominican priest and archbishop of Genoa, Jacobus de Voragine. Voragine derived the lives from a variety of sources ranging from the second century to the thirteenth. The *Legenda* is said to have been so widely read in the late Middle Ages that it was second in popularity only to the Bible. Most scholars believe that since the work was written in Latin its original purpose was to serve as a resource book for clerical preaching. Later, however, with the "trend in the thirteenth-century Church . . . to direct the faithful to the Book and to books, perhaps in order to bring about a more binding contact between laity and clergy," the *Legenda* was copied and translated into many languages and became a book for private devotion and reading among the literate laity. The sheer popularity of the *Legenda Aurea* speaks to its enormous impact on the lay person's experience of the liturgy and her devotional practices (Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) xiii-xvii).

³⁸ Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2000) 42.

³⁹ Coyne Kelly writes, "[S]o far as I have been able to determine, there are no extant saints' lives in which a virgin is actually raped by a roman consul or in a brothel; I have never read a narrative which describes rape, or says that a rape was committed . . . It is possible to argue that rape is 'represented' in hagiography through a rhetoric of silence, if not displacement and substitution, but the fact remains that there are no direct narratives of rape in hagiography" (43).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 42.

⁴¹ Ibid., 155.

⁴² Ibid., 102.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Coyne Kelly offers three possible interpretations for Lucy (and Agnes's) death by stabbing in the throat. First, "what cannot be violated by the act of rape is penetrated by a phallic weapon." In late antiquity the throat was thought to be symbolic of the neck of the uterus, so that vaginal penetration is simulated symbolically. Second, stabbing in the throat is an attempt to

silence the impudent virgin. Coyne Kelly suggests that this effort is successful. Though death protects the virgin from rape, she is no longer able to speak. But, Coyne Kelly misses that in both Lucy and Agnes's stories the stabbing in the throat does not silence them. Agnes continues to communicate postmortem and Lucy continues to speak in the interim between her stabbing and the moment she elects to give up her spirit to death. Third, death by the sword, rather than by hanging, was thought to be an honorable and manly death and perhaps this type of death is meant to be suggestive of the *vir-ago*'s successful performance of manliness (Coyne Kelly 57-58).

⁴⁸ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁹ Carlson and Weisl, 8.

⁵⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁵¹ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000) 49.

⁵² Ibid., 75.

⁵³ (Jaclyn Friedman and Jessica Valenti, eds, *Yes Means Yes!: Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World Without Rape* (Seal Press, 2008) 14, 30.

⁵⁴ I borrow the term "survival/quality of life" from Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

⁵⁵ See Ambrose, *On Holy Virginit*y, 6 and Augustine, *Of Holy Virginit*y, 14-15, 18.

⁵⁶ Ambrose writes, "Though in marrying she sin not, yet she shall have trouble in the flesh; sharp are the pains of child-birth, and wearisome the bringing up of children. . . . [and she] careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband" (Ambrose, *On Holy Virginit*y, 6). And Augustine seconds, "[V]irgin is with good reason set before a married woman, who neither sets herself forth for the multitude to love, whereas she seeks from out the multitude the love of one; nor, having now found him, orders herself for one, taking thought of the things of the world, how to please her husband; but has so loved Him of fair beauty above the sons of men, as that, because she could not, even as Mary, conceive Him in her flesh, she has kept her flesh also virgin for Him conceived in her heart" (Augustine, *Of Holy Virginit*y, 11).

⁵⁷ Augustine, *Of Holy Virginit*y, 18.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 54.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2004) 29.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 30.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 257.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 260-61.

⁶⁶ Tina Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate: A Marian Narrative of Women's Salvation* (London: Continuum, 2002) 87.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 126.

⁶⁸ Ibid. Johnson also sees promising potential in resisting a reduction of Mary's perpetual virginity to strict sexual abstinence. Scholars examining ancient virgin mythologies have discovered that a "virgin goddess might engage in sexual activity or she might not, but her virginity was not thereby affected so long as she remained one-in-herself. . . . More than a biological reality, being a virgin indicates a state of mind characterized by fearlessness and independence of purpose. Whether wife or mother, the virgin retains an inner autonomy" (Johnson 31). These insights, coupled with a fresh look at the insights of the Christian tradition casts the perpetual virginity of Mary in a "strangely liberating" light. Mary can be seen anew as a "woman whose worth is not dependent on a man; a woman whose yes to God's invitation was at the same time an assent to the totality of herself; a woman who acted with integrity from her own center. Saying that she is perpetually virgin encourages women to relate to the world with freedom all their life long" (Johnson 32).

⁶⁹ Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990) 77.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Beattie, 176.

⁷² Beattie explains, "Virginity acquires patriarchal significance when it is lost. The ruptured hymen becomes retrospectively a sign not of the woman's integrity and independence, but of her commodification. The virgin daughter has been preserved intact by her father, in anticipation of the transaction by which her body will pass into her husband's possession. So only perpetual virginity symbolizes the recreation of woman in a way that is outside the domain of phallic signification. If Mary is a virgin only for as long as it takes to produce God's son, and after that she becomes Joseph's wife in a sexual relationship, then retrospectively Mary will be seen to have been nothing more than an object of exchange between God the father and Joseph her husband. Her virginity does not have intrinsic value for her own personhood but only in functional terms as part of the necessary apparatus of the incarnation" (Ibid., 178).

⁷³ Williams, 181.

⁷⁴ Laura M. Carpenter, "The Ambiguity of 'Having Sex': The Subjective Experience of Virginity Loss in the United States" *The Journal of Sex Research* 38, no. 2: 127-139. See also "Study Reports Anal Sex on Rise Among Teens" *ABC News*, 10 Dec 2008 <<http://abcnews.go.com/Health/story?id=6428003&page=1>> and Lisa Remez, "Oral Sex Among Adolescents: Is It Sex or Is It Abstinence?" *Family Planning Perspectives* 32, no. 6 <<http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/3229800.html>>

⁷⁵ In *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, the German seminary manual originally published in 1955 categorizing major teachings of the Church according to grades of theological certainty, Ludwig Ott categorizes Mary's perpetual virginity as a "De Fide" doctrine—(i.e. a teaching of the highest grade of theological certainty, given only by the "solemn judgment of faith" by a Pope or a General Council) on the authority of the Fifth General Council in 553 (Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, ed. James Canon Bastible, trans. Patrick Lynch (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1955) 9, 203-207). Similarly, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms the perpetual virginity of Mary citing Denzinger-Schönmetzer's *Enchiridion Symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*,⁷⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, and the St. Augustine (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1994) 499-501, 510).

⁷⁶ Beattie, 83.

⁷⁷ Coyne Kelly, 33-35.

⁷⁸ Isherwood, 74.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

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