

# ENQUIRE WITHIN

**Question:** *During the Christmas season, I was struck particularly this year by the emphasis on the virginity of Mary, the mother of Jesus. How important is this to the story and what does it say about the Church's subsequent attitudes to human sexuality?*

## Answer:

I agree it raises interesting issues both for theology and for issues in human sexuality.

In theology, the early thinkers were quite clear about the issue. If God were to be incarnated as a human being, then the woman who became his mother must have no sexual record prior to this which might muddy the waters about his conception. They rifled through the Old Testament and found a reference in Isaiah to a virgin who conceives and bears a son. They then proposed this text as a prophetic statement about the birth of Jesus. This bit of religious borrowing does not bear too much examination, but let that pass.

It is fair to say that the promotion of Mary as the virginal mother of Jesus has become so central to the Christmas story that it would be impossible to go back and consider other options. So many Christmas poems and carols maintain her as both "maiden and mother" and there is indeed, something very touching about a young woman having a baby in such mysterious and difficult circumstances.

In the Roman Catholic Church it is also an article of faith that Mary continued in a perpetual state of virginity, despite the Gospels recording that Jesus had brothers. This idea leads eventually to the elevation of Mary to a very central role in salvation indeed, and not all Christians agree.

The Church seems to have been in two minds about sex over the centuries. On the one hand, it proposed that for those with a vocation, the

life of sexual abstinence was a high path. And for those who married and propagated the human race through sexual unions, there was also a special place to find.

In a way, this is a bit of a winner! Those in the religious orders could model themselves on the virginity and innocence of Mary and regard their own abstinence as a holy calling, a calling heard by none other than the Mother of God. Those in normal life could model themselves on her motherhood and go for as many as

possible, feeling that their sexual activities were sanctified by the Mother of God as well!

However, this feels to many like the presenting problem of a deeper ambivalence about sexuality. We have evidence in the writings of St. Paul, St. Jerome and St. Augustine, for example, that sexual activity is deeply embedded with human sinfulness and the original sin of Adam. Some of the Church's writings on sex

tend towards the view that sexual activity is inevitably sinful and that abstention is the higher calling, the purer path. This in turn has led many individuals to feel negatively about their own sexual activities and feelings. This negativity is a thoroughly bad thing and the fact that any of it stems from Christian thinkers is very regrettable.

Perhaps this negativity about sex is what underpins our current and horrible debate about homosexuality? If Christians can feel bad about heterosexual sex, they will certainly have deep problems about homosexual acts.

Time to try and come clean about sex, I believe!

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