

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

CATHOLIC APOLOGETICS 101

Did Jesus Have Brothers and Sisters?

“Why does the Catholic Church teach that Mary stayed a virgin her whole life when the Bible states that Jesus had brothers and sisters?”

Many Fundamentalists argue that the inference made in the Gospel of Matthew, “and [Joseph] did not know [Mary] *until* she brought forth her *firstborn* son,” clearly implies that Jesus had brothers and sisters, or at the very least, Mary and Joseph had marital relations after Jesus was born. However, the Greek word being used for “until” in this passage, ἕως, does not have the same narrow meaning as it does in English. When Matthew wrote that Mary and Joseph did not have marital relations *until* Jesus was born, he linguistically **does not** imply that they had them afterward either.

The fact that this particular passage states that Jesus was a “firstborn” son also does not provide proof for the Fundamentalist position, since the first son born of any woman was given this title whether she ever had more children or not. This title, “firstborn son,” comes from ancient Mosaic Law and had nothing to do with whether or not the parents continued to have children (Ex. 34:20).

While it is difficult for all of us living in the 21st century to conceive of a man and woman living together in love and not having sexual relations, it was not impossible for the people of 1st century Israel. The Church answered the question about Mary’s virginity and Jesus’ “brethren” more than 1600 years ago, when Saint Jerome wrote his treatise called *On the Perpetual Virginity of the Blessed Mary*. He not only used the Scriptural arguments listed below, but cited earlier Christian writers, such as Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, and Justin Martyr. Hence, the Catholic Church’s teaching stands upon the witness of the Bible as well as the witnesses of the earliest Christians.

Here are four basic observations that support the fact that Jesus did not have siblings:

- 1) On several occasions Jesus is called the son of Mary, but none of the other “brethren” are.
- 2) There are two people, James and Joseph, who *are* mentioned as “sons of Mary” (Mt 27:56), but it is very clear that the Bible is referring to a different “Mary” (as shown in Mark 15:40).
- 3) Jesus would have never entrusted his mother to John (John 19:26-27) if Mary had other sons to take care of her.
- 4) The Greek word for “brethren,” ἀδελφος, has a much broader meaning than just “brother.” Since ancient Hebrew had no word for cousin, the Greek Old Testament translation used the word “brethren.” Following the Old Testaments lead, the New Testament also used the word ἀδελφος to describe other familial relationships other than an actual brother. Similarly, Saint Paul used this word to describe all Christians as brothers and sisters of Christ.