Erasmus' Use of Scripture in
De Vidua Christiana*

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In the summer of 1526, on the plains of Mohacs, the young King Louis of Hungary was ingloriously drowned while fleeing the disastrous rout of his army by invading Turkish forces. He left behind him a twenty-one year old widow, Mary, grand-daughter of the late Emperor Maximilian I, and sister to the reigning Emperor Charles. Theirs had been a close marriage, despite the fact that it had been arranged while Mary was only six months old, and Louis was not yet born. Nonetheless,

a great love was sparked between them, and they divided their days between carefree frolics in the open country near the palace, where they loved to ride and hunt like happy children, and desperate attempts . . . to mobilize the Hungarian nobility against an impending Turkish invasion.¹

The heroic endeavors of the two notwithstanding, the Hungarian and Bohemian armies were manifestly ill-prepared for the onslaught of the Turks, resulting in the carnage at Mohacs and the early widowhood of Mary.

In the months following the death of her husband, two significant events occurred in Mary's life. One was a vow she undertook not to remarry, the other her growing interest in Lutheranism (Luther had earlier dedicated four commentaries on psalms to her). That Mary never formally professed herself a Lutheran despite great interest in the movement was due to the influence of both her brother Ferdinand and her court preacher Johann Henckel, and it was through the latter's agency that Erasmus (whom Henckel admired) was urged to address the young queen—whose tastes had lately turned from “...hunting and riding to the consolation of books”²—on the subject of Chris-

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tian widowhood. Erasmus happily complied with Henckel’s suggestion, and in 1529 he forwarded to Mary his treatise *De Vidua Christiana* (On the Christian Widow).

While the work itself surely cannot be called one of Erasmus’ greatest efforts—Roberts calls it “... overwritten and sententious. ...” and “… somewhat turgid in conception. ...”3—there are a number of interesting aspects in it that deserve investigation; one of these is the way Erasmus makes use of Sacred Scripture. Indeed, Scripture plays such a major role in the work that it is possible to consider it as an extended commentary on both narratives of widows in the Bible and Saint Paul’s teachings concerning the widows of the early Christian community. This paper will follow the structure used by Erasmus in the work by looking first at his commentary on the widows of Scripture, focusing on the women he has chosen to hold up as examples, the virtues they exemplify, how his comments in *De Vidua* differ from his writings on the same figures in the Paraphrases of the New Testament, and by briefly mentioning the scriptural widows he has chosen not to include in his work (and offering some tentative explanations for their absence). Secondly, Erasmus’ treatment of the injunctions Saint Paul gave to widows will be summarized, and compared with his paraphrases of the Pauline Epistles to see if there is any notable difference in content or emphasis. Finally, a conclusion will draw these two sections together, illuminating both the scriptural virtues that Erasmus commended to widows, and the manner of life that he counselled as befitting their station.

That Erasmus would turn to Scripture for material in offering counsel to Mary is hardly surprising, considering it was the basis of his own piety and spirituality. He characteristically praises the “... words of divine Scripture, which, like an extremely rich vein of precious metal, will give back the most valuable treasure the further one penetrates them.”4 And in the first major section of this work it is the scriptural widows of both the Old and New Testament on whom he concentrates, proposing them as models for Mary, and all Christian widows, to imitate:

You will not find your widowhood distasteful if you consider what outstanding models you have, and how great is the worth that the Lord has placed upon you. Nothing remains but for you to respond with the piety

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