

MARY, MOTHER OF JESUS, MOTHER OF THE CHURCH (C 487-511, 963-975, USC Ch. 12)

Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word. (Lk 1:38)

What the Catholic faith believes about Mary is based on what it believes about Christ, and what it teaches about Mary illumines in turn its faith in Christ. (C 487)

In this article we will look at:

- Mary in Scripture
- Mary as “Woman of Faith” and “Model Disciple”
- Mary, Mother of the Church
- Four Marian Doctrines
- Veneration of Mary

The Vatican Council II document on the Church, called *Lumen Gentium* (“Light to the Nations”), ends with a chapter on Mary. This is to highlight Mary’s role in our salvation and in our Church family. When we Christians understand more clearly Mary’s unique role in God’s place of salvation, we will also have a better grasp of the role that God wants her to play in our spiritual lives so that we can honor Mary as God intends us to. The only reason we honor Mary is because God honored her in a very unique way when he chose her to be the Mother of God Incarnate, Jesus Christ.

Mary in Scripture

While the Bible does not mention Mary a lot, it does place her at some critical points in Jesus’ life, beginning with his conception by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary. At the end of the Annunciation story, Mary uttered her *Fiat*, “Let it be done unto me” (Lk 1:38). At that moment, she said ‘yes’ to being the Mother of the Messiah, the Incarnate Word of God. She also said ‘yes’ to playing an important role in the story of our salvation.

Having reflected on the wondrous thing that God was doing in her, Mary responded with her beautiful prayer called the *Magnificat* (Lk 1:46-55) in which she proclaimed “*all generations will call me be blessed.*” Mary fully understood that her greatness was *not* due to *her* great deeds, but rather to what she allowed *God* to do in and through her. True sanctity is not us doing great things for God. Rather, it involves us allowing God to do his work in us.

Because of Mary’s ‘yes,’ she also shared in the sufferings of her son beginning with her giving him birth in an abandoned stable, then fleeing with her

husband from the murderous threats of Herod, living as an immigrant in a foreign country and, finally, accompanying Jesus through his passion and death. We can only imagine how painful these events were for Mary.

During her life, Mary, among other things, had to cope with the experience of being an unwed mother, a refugee, a widow and single parent, and the mother of an innocent son who was executed as a criminal. Meditating on the trials and tribulations of Mary should bring her closer to us. When we consider that Mary, from among all women, was the one chosen to be Mother of Jesus, and when we consider the completeness of her ‘yes’ to God, we should have no problem honoring her.

Pause: What strikes you most about the trials and sufferings of Mary?

“Woman of Faith” and “Model Disciple”

Over the centuries, many titles have been given to describe Mary’s role in Christianity. In recent decades, the titles “Woman of Faith” and “Model Disciple” have been used a lot. Mary is called “Woman of Faith” because in and through all the trials of life, she never doubted God. She *trusted* that God would be faithful to her. At the Annunciation, Mary was called to trust that she would conceive a child through the power of the Holy Spirit. If Mary could trust God on that word, she could trust him on anything she did.

The Church also presents Mary to us as *Model Disciple* because she was totally open and responsive to God’s Word. It has been well said that long before Mary conceived Jesus in her womb, she had conceived him in her heart. Mary is *Model Disciple* because she trusted God when it was not easy to do so. When nearly all of Jesus’ disciples had fled in fear, Mary remained faithful to him all the way to Calvary.

Mary, Mother of the Church (C 963-965, USC p. 146)

The Catechism (964) states: “*Mary’s role in the Church is inseparable from her union with Christ and flows directly from it.*”

Just as the Israelites called Abraham “our Father in the Faith,” so does the Church call Mary “our Mother in the Faith.” When Jesus was dying on the cross, he looked at John (the symbol of all disciples) and said: “*This is your Mother*” (Jn 19:27). At that moment,

Jesus made Mary the spiritual Mother of all believers, the Mother of the Church. St. Augustine says that Mary “*is clearly Mother of the members of Christ...for she has cooperated with love in the birth of the faithful in the Church, who are members of its Head.*” In giving Mary to us as our spiritual Mother, Jesus is saying to us individually and as a Church: “Here is the model disciple. If you want to learn how to hear and respond to my word, look at Mary. She will teach you and help you to make yourself totally available to God. She will teach you fidelity, obedience, compassion and prayerfulness.” Catholics affectionately call Mary “Our Blessed Mother.”

Pause: As you ponder Mary in Scripture, what can you learn from her about being a disciple of Jesus?

Four Marian Doctrines

Very few Christians should have a problem with anything that we have written thus far. The problem that most, if not all, Protestants have with Mary, is connected with certain beliefs that Catholics hold about her which are not stated *explicitly* in the Bible, and with the veneration we give to Mary. Let us now turn to the four doctrines Catholics hold about Mary.

The Immaculate Conception (C 490-94, USC p. 143). The Catechism (491) states: “*The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of Almighty God, and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from the stain of original sin.*” This Church dogma was proclaimed by Pope Pius IX in 1854.

The Catholic Church also believes that Mary, due to her total cooperation with God, remained free of all *personal sin* during her life on earth. As we pray on her feast day, “Father, you let her share beforehand in the salvation Christ would bring by his death and kept her sinless from the first moment of her conception.”

The biblical support for this doctrine is found in Angel Gabriel’s greeting to Mary: “Hail, full of grace” (Lk 1:28). Mary was not just graced like the rest of us. She was “full of grace,” i.e., she was totally free of sin and totally full of God. Her union with God was never spoiled. The Church reasons that it was only fitting that the one who housed the sinless Savior of the world would, by the grace of God, be free of all sin. “In preserving Mary from original sin, God was choosing a perfect door for a perfect God to enter an imperfect world” (Peter Kreeft).

As we reflect on the immaculate conception of Mary, three other things need to be noted:

- Even though Mary was conceived free from original sin, and even though she remained sinless throughout her life, this does not mean that she had no need for God’s saving grace. She did. The Catechism (491) states: “*Through the centuries, the Church has become ever more aware that Mary, ‘full of grace’ through God, was redeemed from the first moment of her conception.*” We might say that just as Jesus was conceived in a most unusual way, Mary was saved from original sin in a most unusual way.
- Even though Mary did not sin, she could have. She could have said ‘no’ to the angel Gabriel and she could have said ‘no’ to God in other ways.
- Even though Mary was conceived free from original sin, she was not preserved from experiencing the effects of original sin, namely, the experience of suffering and death (followed by her assumption into heaven), living in a world where there was evil and temptation. Just as Jesus was tempted to do evil, we can assume that Mary also experienced temptation. We have seen above some examples of the sufferings of Mary.

A striking confirmation of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception happened in 1858, four years after the dogma was declared infallible. It happened when Mary appeared to a young, uneducated girl named Bernadette Soubirous in Lourdes, France. When Bernadette asked the strange lady her name, Mary responded, “I am the Immaculate Conception.” Hundreds of medically verified miracles and many other healings have happened in Lourdes. The Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception on Dec. 8th.

Pause: Do you have any questions or comments on this Marian belief?

Assumption of Mary into heaven (C 988). “*A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars*” (Rev 12:1).

The Catechism (966) states: “*The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is a singular participation in her Son’s Resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians.*” This Church dogma was defined by Pope Pius XII in 1950 in which he declared: “*Having completed the course of her earthly life, Mary was assumed body and soul to heavenly glory and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, so that she might be more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of lords and conqueror of sin and death.*”

The above words mean and affirm that at the end of her life on earth, Mary experienced immediately the resurrection of the body that is promised to all faithful followers of Christ. We can say that Mary's Assumption flows from and completes her Immaculate Conception. If Mary was preserved from original sin by the unique gift of God, then it is only fitting that when her life on earth was finished, she would be taken to heaven.

As with the Immaculate Conception, the Church reasons that it is only fitting that the body that bore the Savior of the world should not suffer decay when her life on earth was completed. Mary's Assumption into heaven foreshadows what we all hope to experience one day. The Church celebrates the *Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary* into heaven on Aug. 15th.

Mary, Perpetual Virgin (C 496-507). All Christians believe in the virgin birth—that Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus. But not all Christians believe that Mary *remained* a virgin all her life. One reason for this is that there are references in the Bible to the brothers and sisters of Christ. (We addressed this issue in Article 5.) Even though there is no reference to the perpetual virginity of Mary in the Bible, it has always been held in sacred Tradition. The liturgies of the East and West from the early centuries of Christianity affirm Mary as “ever virgin.” The founders of Protestantism (Luther and Calvin) believed that Mary remained a virgin all her life.

“God’s one purpose for Mary was to be the Mother of his Son. That was the divine goal. For that she was conceived, born and lived. Her undivided heart and body were meant for God alone” (Fr. Al McBride). Mary’s perpetual virginity should not be seen as a put-down on sex. After all, God created sex. Only something good and beautiful could be offered up to God in sacrifice. Some writers point out that Mary’s physical virginity is an outward sign of her *spiritual virginity*, a phrase used to describe a life totally open and totally consecrated and devoted to God. Only with the eyes of faith can we begin to appreciate Mary’s perpetual virginity.

Mary, the Mother of God (C 495). As the early Church continued her reflection on the scriptures and on Mary’s role in our relationship to Jesus, she concluded that since Mary is the Mother of Christ, human and divine, she could rightly be called *Theotokos*, the Greek word for “God-bearer” or Mother of God. The Council of Ephesus (431 AD) which solemnly declared Mary to be the Mother of God, was careful to state that Mary is the Mother of God “according to the flesh,” to clarify that Mary is *not* the source of Jesus’ divinity.

Mary’s cousin Elizabeth, inspired by the Holy Spirit, was perhaps the first person to recognize Mary’s special privilege. When Mary visited her cousin, Elizabeth, she greeted her with these words: “How does it happen that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Lk 1:43). The Church celebrates the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God, on Jan. 1st.

We look to Scripture and Tradition. In article two in this series, we learn that the Catholic Church looks to both Scripture *and* Tradition for the source of her beliefs. We note that there is nothing in Scripture to support the *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) stance which maintains that “as Christians, we should *only* believe what is explicitly stated in the Bible.” We also acknowledge that for the Catholic Church, a belief is only “non-scriptural” if it contradicts what is stated explicitly in the Bible.

Pause: Do you have any questions or comments on the above three Marian beliefs?

Veneration of Mary (C 971, USC p. 146)

“The Church rightly honors Mary with special devotion.... This devotion differs essentially from the adoration given to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (C 971).

Catholics venerate Mary because she is the Mother of God. We honor her because God honored her. When we kneel before statues of Mary or carry her in a religious procession, we are *not* worshipping her. Rather, we are honoring and showing our affection for the one who is closest to Jesus, the one who was most faithful to him.

The heart of Marian spirituality is not in the reciting of particular prayers in honor of Mary, but in “doing what Jesus tells us to do” (Jn 2:5). True devotees of Mary are those who listen to God’s Word and act on it.

Seeking Mary’s intercession. Catholics often ask Mary, as their spiritual Mother, to pray for them. Non-Catholics have a problem with this because they look upon Jesus as their *one and only intercessor* and *mediator* before God. In 1Tim 2:5-6, Paul says: “*There is only one mediator between God and the human race, Christ Jesus....*” Catholics understand that God *alone* grants us blessings and graces. But just as *all* believers share in the priesthood of Jesus (1Pet 2:5), all can share in his intercessory and mediatory role.

On behalf of one another, we join our prayers of intercession to those of Jesus. If we do not hesitate to ask our sinful brothers and sisters on earth to pray for us, why would we hesitate to ask Mary, the preeminent

member of our community, to intercede for us. *Lumen Gentium* (60) states: “*The maternal duty of Mary toward people in no way obscures or diminishes the unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows His power. For all the salvific influence of the Blessed Virgin on humankind...flows forth from Christ, rests on His mediation, depends entirely on it, and draws all its power from it.*” Without her connection to Christ, Mary is nothing. But because she is so very intimately close to him, her prayers on our behalf are very powerful. Due to Mary’s intercession, Jesus performed his first miracle (Jn 2:1-12).

Finally, when you hear Catholics speak about “praying to Mary,” translate that to mean “asking Mary to pray for us.” In the ‘Hail Mary’ prayer, we say: “Holy Mary, pray for us sinners.” In singing the praises of Mary, we are singing the praises of God who did great things in her. We should never think that God is in any way slighted because we love and venerate his Son’s Mother.

Pause: How would you describe your relationship to Mary? Do you seek her intercession? Do you have a problem with the way Catholics venerate Mary?

The Rosary. In his spiritual classic *True Devotion to Mary*, St. Louis de Montfort writes: “*The holy rosary is a gift come down from heaven, a great present that God gives to his most faithful servants. God is the Author of the prayers of which it is composed and of the mysteries it contains.*”

In his *Apostolic Letter on the Rosary* (Oct. 2002), the late Pope John Paul II shared with us his special love for the rosary when he wrote: “*The Rosary has accompanied me in moments of joy and in moments of difficulty. To it I have entrusted any number of concerns; in it I have always found comfort. The Rosary is my favorite prayer. It is marvelous in its simplicity and its depths*”(#2). During her many apparitions to us on earth, our Blessed Mother has encouraged us to pray the Rosary. The exhortation alone should be reason enough for us to seek to develop a love for this form of prayer.

The Rosary is a *Christ-centered* and *biblically-based* prayer to help us worship Christ and honor Mary. We say that the Rosary is Christ-centered and biblicallybased because we meditate on events in the life of Jesus. (For commentary on the “Hail Mary” prayer, see USC p. 470.)

Statues and medals of Mary. For Catholics, statues, images and medals of Mary are visible reminders of someone very special in our spiritual lives. If we can

carry pictures of loved ones in our wallets and place them on the walls of our homes and offices, surely it is okay for us to have visible reminders of the most perfect Christian who ever lived. If we lay wreaths before our national heroes, surely it is right for us to lay a wreath or bouquet before Mary, the Mother of our Redeemer. Catholics kneel and pray before statues as a mark of respect. But we do not worship statues, nor do we believe that statues have any spiritual power in or of themselves.

A concluding word. After Joseph found out that Mary was with child, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and told him not to be afraid to take Mary into his home (Mt 1:20). Neither should we hesitate to take Mary into our homes and hearts and to ask her to befriend us and pray for us as we seek to follow in the footsteps of her son, Jesus.

Pause: Are you familiar with the Rosary? If you pray the Rosary, what motivates you to do so? If you do not pray the Rosary, why not?

Suggestion for Action

If you do not have a relationship with Mary, pray to learn the steps to develop such a relationship.

————— Meditation —————

Gracious God, in Mary you have given us a model of true holiness. Hers was a loving heart, one rich in hospitality and prayerfulness. She responded fully to the call to be the Mother of your Son and she was faithful to the end. Though at times her heart ached, she never allowed bitterness to reside there. Help us to be warmhearted people, a family committed to hospitality and service. Grant this through Mary’s intercession. Amen.

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