



Mary, The Mother of God January 1, 2012 B

CATHOLIC BELIEFS ABOUT MARY

Over the years, few Catholic beliefs have caused Protestants and prospective converts problems more than our beliefs about the Mother of Jesus.

The only reason the Catholic Church honors (not worships) Mary is because *God* honored her in a unique way by choosing her from among all women to be the mother of his divine Son, Jesus.

Four Marian Doctrines

In fairness to our Protestant brothers and sisters, they do not usually have a problem with us honoring Mary. What's at issue are the four doctrines held by the Catholic Church about Mary, as well as Mary's intercessory role in our prayer life. These four doctrines are (1) the Immaculate Conception (our belief that Mary was conceived without original sin and remained sinless all her life); (2) Mary's assumption into heaven immediately after she died; (3) Mary's perpetual virginity; and (4) Mary, the Mother of God (today's feast). These beliefs about Mary are refuted by Protestants because not one of them is stated *explicitly* in Scripture.

The first thing that should be mentioned is that the Catholic Church is not a *sola scriptura* (only scripture) church—one whose beliefs are solely based on what is *explicitly* stated in Scripture. When it comes to her beliefs, the Catholic Church looks to both *Scripture* and *Tradition*. [For more on what is meant by *Tradition*, go to our website and read my Catechism article 2.] For Catholics, a belief is only non-scriptural if it *contradicts* what is stated explicitly in the Bible. While certain Catholic beliefs about Mary are not stated *explicitly* in Scripture, there is nothing in Scripture that contradicts Catholic Marian beliefs.

We may ask or wonder why it took the Church so long to finally define some of her beliefs about Mary. It seems the Holy Spirit moves very slow. It took the church hundreds of years to decide on which sacred writings should and should not be included in the New Testament. It took over 1,000 years to establish the number of sacraments. Catholics believe that the Holy Spirit was guiding the Church through its deliberations in selecting the 27 books of the New Testament and in deciding on seven (and not nine) sacraments. Indeed, it was the Holy Spirit guiding the Church through all the heated debates concerning the four above-mentioned Marian beliefs.

Immaculate Conception. The dogma or doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was not officially defined by the Church until 1854, although the belief certainly existed in the minds and hearts of the faithful for many centuries prior to that. In the fourth century, St. Ephrem wrote:

*You, Jesus, and your Mother alone
are beautiful in every way.
In you no stain,
in your Mother no spot.*

Despite early beliefs about Mary's holiness, the doctrine that she was conceived free of original sin was hotly debated by saintly theologians in the Middle Ages. But Rome finally came to a conclusion, and in 1854 officially declared the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception. Four years later, Mary appeared to Bernadette at Lourdes, France. When Bernadette asked Mary who she was, she answered, "I am the Immaculate Conception." This was like a heavenly affirmation of what the Pope had declared four years earlier. It has been the belief of the Church from the earliest times that it was only fitting that she who conceived our divine sinless Savior should herself be free from all stain of sin. The angel Gabriel only confirmed Mary's sinlessness when he addressed her as "full of grace." One could not be full of grace unless one was free of all sins.

While Mary is not our sister when it comes to sin and disobedience to God, she is our sister in suffering temptation. Just as Jesus was tempted by the devil to disobey God, we can assume Mary was also tempted. And just as we experience suffering here on earth, so did Mary. Mary's holiness was a hard-won holiness which could only be gained through constant and total cooperation with God's grace.

The Assumption. This belief affirms that when Mary's life was completed here on earth, she was taken body and soul into heaven. As with Mary's 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, Perpetual Virgin (C 496-507). All Christians believe in the virgin birth, i.e., that Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus. However, not all Christians believe that Mary *remained* a virgin all her life. Even though there is no reference to the perpetual virginity of Mary in the

Bible, this belief has always been held in sacred Tradition. The liturgies of the East and West from the early centuries of Christianity recognized 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* which describes 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*, Greek for “God-bearer” or Mother of God. The Council of Ephesus (431AD) 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 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, Mother of God, on January 1st.

Veneration of Mary

The *Catechism* states: “*The Church rightly honors Mary with special devotion.... This devotion differs essentially from the adoration given to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit*” (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). The 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. Vatican 2 document *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 very 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.

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.

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.

Have a blessed week,

Le Saran