



THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

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“Queen of Heaven, rejoice, alleluia. For He whom you did merit to bear...Has risen, as he said, alleluia.”

-Regina Caeli, c. 12th century

“And a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars...”

-Rev. 12:1

"You alone and your Mother are more beautiful than any others, for there is no blemish in you nor any stains upon your Mother. Who of my children can compare in beauty to these?"

-St. Ephraim the Syrian, *Nisibene Hymns* 27:8 (A.D. 361)

A Uniquely Catholic Devotion

Christians of the Catholic faith are unique among other Christian bodies for their singular devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Though the Greek Orthodox and the Russian Orthodox also venerate her, only the Catholic Church has taught definitively on such topics as her Immaculate Conception, her Assumption and her Perpetual Virginity.

Prophesied in the Old Testament

Immediately after the Fall of man, God promised a coming Redeemer, a Seed, who would destroy the evil one (Gen. 3:15). From here on out, the serpent would make war against the woman and her offspring, until the Woman should come who, through her Seed, would crush the head of the serpent.

Mary is this woman prophesied, and the Seed is Christ.¹ The Old Testament is full of symbols of Mary: Sarah, Hannah, Ruth and Bathsheba all prefigure Mary in certain ways. Especially noteworthy are Jael, the woman of Thebez, Judith and Esther, all of whom struck down their more powerful male aggressors by destroying their heads, as was prophesied of Mary in Genesis 3:15.

A Firm Place in Catholic Tradition

Since the beginning of the Church, devotion to Mary has been a central mark of both the Latin and the Greek churches. Here are a few quotes from the Church Fathers attesting to Marian devotion in the first centuries of the Church:

- "In heaven", St. Ambrose tells us, "she leads the choirs of virgin souls; with her the consecrated virgins will one day be numbered."

¹ Theologians of different periods have attributed the Seed to both Mary and to Jesus. Either one is fitting.

- St. Jerome (Ep. xxxix, Migne, P. L., XXII, 472) already foreshadows that conception of Mary as mother of the human race, which was to animate so powerfully the devotion of a later age.
- St. Augustine in a famous passage (De nat. et gratis, 36) proclaims Mary's unique privilege of sinlessness.
- In St. Gregory Nazianzen's sermon on the martyr St. Cyprian (P.G., XXXV, 1181) we have an account of the maiden Justina, who invoked the Blessed Virgin to preserve her virginity.
- In St. Ephrem's hymns on the Nativity (6) we read: "Blessed be Mary, who without vows and without prayer in her virginity conceived and brought forth the Lord of all the sons of her companions, who have been or shall be chaste or righteous, priests and kings. Who else lulled a son in her bosom as Mary did? Who ever dared to call her son, Son of the Maker, Son of the Creator, Son of the Most High?"
- Similarly in Hymns 11 and 12 of the same series, Ephrem represents Mary as reflecting thus: "The babe that I carry carries me, and He hath lowered His wings and taken and placed me between His pinions and mounted into the air, and a promise has been given me that height and depth shall be my Son's..."

Devotion to her increased during the early and high Middle Ages. The late Middle Ages and early modern period gave us the writings of St. Louis de Montfort and St. Alphonsus Ligouri, two of the best Catholic writers of Marian spirituality. The proclamation of Mary's Immaculate Conception in 1854, along with the apparitions of Lourdes (1858) and Fatima (1917) ensured Mary's continued veneration by the Catholic faithful of the world of all generations, thus truly fulfilling her prophecy that "all generations shall call me blessed" (Luke 1:48).

The Four Marian Dogmas

There are four dogmas that are formally taught regarding the Blessed Virgin Mary. These are her Divine Maternity, her Immaculate Conception, her Perpetual Virginity and her bodily Assumption. These dogmas exist not because Mary is an end in herself, but because of her unique relationship to Jesus, her Son. These dogmas act as a hedge to safeguard the dogmas we believe about Christ. There are many other beliefs about Mary in the Catholic Church that enjoy various degrees of authority. Some, like the doctrine of Mary as the Mediatrix of All Graces, enjoy a very high level of authority while others, like the belief in the promises of the Miraculous Medal or that Mary appeared in Knock, Ireland or, are of less authority. The four dogmas covered here are the ones that all Catholics must adhere to.

Mother of God

Mary's divine maternity is the dogma from which all of the Marian dogmas and devotions flow; as a human being, she is exactly like us, but as the chosen mother of the Word Incarnate, she is utterly unique. The Motherhood of Mary was formally taught by the Council of Ephesus (431),

at which the heretic Nestorius was condemned and Mary was proclaimed *Theotokos*, the “God Bearer.” In the Latin Church, she is invoked universally under the name “Mother of God” from which all her other honors flow.

“Mother of God” is a phrase often misunderstood. It does not mean that Mary is before God, that she somehow created God, or that she gave birth to the Trinity, nor is she the source of God’s power. The phrase means that she was the mother of Jesus, who was a Divine Person. Inasmuch as, by the union of Christ’s divine and human natures, she gave birth to Christ it can truly be said that she gave birth to God because Christ is God and she is truly His mother.

Immaculate Conception

The phrase Immaculate Conception refers to the truth that Mary was conceived without original sin. Also implied in this teaching is its consequent, that she committed no actual sin during her life. The doctrine was defined by Pius IX in the bull *Ineffabilis Deus* of 1854, in which he stated that:

"We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful."

Because this doctrine is often misunderstood, it bears some delving into.

First, this grace was given to her “from the first instance of her conception.” There was never a time when Mary was tainted by sin. As Christ, though born of woman, was immune from the effects of original sin because of His unique role in the redemption of mankind, this prerogative was also extended to His mother, who had a similar, but relative role.

Second, this Immaculate Conception is “a singular grace and privilege”; this explicitly affirms that Mary did not earn this grace: it would be impossible for her to do so since it was given to her from her conception and also because no human could merit such a grace; it had to be a divine gift.

Third, it was given “in view of the merits of Jesus Christ.” This grace was given both in anticipation of the merits of Christ (Mary, like everybody else, is saved by Jesus death on the cross) and to befit the birth of the Divine Word, who is Christ. *Ineffabilis Deus* states the reason for this privilege is her divine maternity:

"And indeed it was wholly fitting that so wonderful a mother should be ever resplendent with the glory of most sublime holiness and so completely free from all taint of original sin that she would triumph utterly over the ancient serpent. To her did the Father will to give his only-begotten Son -- the Son whom, equal to the Father and begotten by him, the Father loves from his heart -- and to give this Son in such a way that he would be the one and the same common Son of God the Father and of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It was she whom the Son himself chose to make his

Mother and it was from her that the Holy Spirit willed and brought it about that he should be conceived and born from whom he himself proceeds."

Though not defined until 1854, this doctrine has always been believed and taught by the Church. One example out of many is this text from St. Augustine (c. 410 AD), who wrote: "Having excepted the holy Virgin Mary, concerning whom, on account of the honor of the Lord, I wish to have absolutely no question when treating of sins—for how do we know what abundance of grace for the total overcoming of sin was conferred upon her, who merited to conceive and bear him in whom there was no sin?—so, I say, with the exception of the Virgin, if we could have gathered together all those holy men and women, when they were living here, and had asked them whether they were without sin, what do we suppose would have been their answer?" (*Nature and Grace* 36:42 [A.D. 415]). There are many other examples of early belief in Mary's sinlessness as well; in Greek tradition, she has always been called the *Panagia*, the "All-Holy"; St. Proclus says that "she was formed without any stain."

Perpetual Virginity

The perpetual virginity of Mary refers to the truth that Mary remained a Virgin before, during and after the birth of Jesus. This belief has always been held by the Catholic Church (in the Latin West and the Greek East) and was not seriously challenged until after the Reformation in 1517. Even many of the Reformers (Luther, Calvin, Zwingli) believed in the perpetual virginity and held it as a biblical teaching. Her perpetual virginity flows from her dignity of bearing the Incarnate Word in her womb.

Here are some patristic commentaries on the perpetual virginity:

St. Hilary of Poitiers (c. 354 AD)

"If they [the brethren of the Lord] had been Mary's sons and not those taken from Joseph's former marriage, she would never have been given over in the moment of the passion [crucifixion] to the apostle John as his mother, the Lord saying to each, 'Woman, behold your son,' and to John, 'Behold your mother' (John 19:26–27), as he bequeathed filial love to a disciple as a consolation to the one desolate" (*Commentary on Matthew* 1:4).

St. Athanasius (c. 360)

"Let those, therefore, who deny that the Son is by nature from the Father and proper to his essence deny also that he took true human flesh from the ever-virgin Mary" (*Discourses Against the Arians* 2:70).

St. Augustine (c. 410)

"It was not the visible sun, but its invisible Creator who consecrated this day for us, when the Virgin Mother, fertile of womb and integral in her virginity, brought him forth, made visible for us, by whom, when he was invisible, she too was created. A Virgin conceiving, a Virgin bearing,

a Virgin pregnant, a Virgin bringing forth, a Virgin perpetual. Why do you wonder at this, O man?" (*Sermons* 186:1 [A.D. 411]).

"Heretics called Antidicomarites are those who contradict the perpetual virginity of Mary and affirm that after Christ was born she was joined as one with her husband" (*Heresies* 56 [A.D. 428]).

The other "brethren of the Lord" mentioned in the Gospels have always been held to have been other relations of Jesus, perhaps cousins. For more information on the "brethren of the Lord" controversy with Protestants, see the hand out "Brethren of the Lord."

Bodily Assumption

The fourth Marian dogma is that of her bodily assumption, celebrated by the Church on August 15th. This dogma was defined by Pope Pius XII in 1950 in the encyclical *Munificentissimus Deus*. The Assumption, as defined by the encyclical, means that "the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory" (*MD* 44).

The fact of Mary's Assumption comes from the reality of her sinlessness. Sin is what leads to death, and bodily assumption into heaven is always a sign of closeness to God (as with Enoch and Elijah in the Old Testament). Since Mary, like Christ, had no sin, it was unnecessary for her body to suffer decay in the tomb. As Psalm 16:10 says, "you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see corruption." Though this verse applies specifically to Christ, it can apply relatively to Mary as well, who, like Christ, had no sin.

Thus St. John Damascene taught: "It was fitting that she, who had kept her virginity intact in childbirth, should keep her own body free from all corruption even after death. It was fitting that she, who had carried the Creator as a child at her breast, should dwell in the divine tabernacles. It was fitting that the spouse, whom the Father had taken to himself, should live in the divine mansions. It was fitting that she, who had seen her Son upon the cross and who had thereby received into her heart the sword of sorrow which she had escaped in the act of giving birth to him, should look upon him as he sits with the Father. It was fitting that God's Mother should possess what belongs to her Son, and that she should be honored by every creature as the Mother and as the handmaid of God." (*Encomium in Dormitionem* n. 14)

Note that the dogma of the Assumption does not address the question as to whether or not Mary actually died or was assumed alive like Enoch. An early tradition says that she did indeed suffer death, in order to be conformed to the image of her Son. It is important when speaking of the Assumption to note that never has any city or Church in Christendom claimed to be the final resting place of her bones.

Marian Devotion

Marian devotion is an integral part of Catholic spirituality. While no one is forced to pray to Mary or to have Marian devotions, they are so central to Catholic spirituality that one would

miss out on some of the Church's richest treasures by neglecting her. St. Louis de Monfort suspected the orthodoxy of anybody who refused to practice Marian devotions. St. Alphonsus Ligouri stated that refusing to participate in Marian devotion was a sign of weak or superficial spirituality. It is in fact the case that almost all heresies, modern and ancient, reject devotion to Mary.

Marian devotion is essentially Christocentric in character, as its end is closer union with Christ, a better understanding of the mysteries of the faith, and a deeper appreciation of the acts of the Blessed Trinity in salvation history. Pope John Paul II in *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (2002) taught that Marian devotion is "a devotion directed to the Christological center of the Christian faith, in such a way that 'when the Mother is honoured, the Son ... is duly known, loved and glorified'" (*Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, 4). Pope Paul VI likewise taught that all authentic Marian prayer ought to be Christocentric and Trinitarian (*Marialis Cultus*, 24 [1974]).

Because Mary is eminently holy, she is closest to God and has a unique proximity to Him, unlike any other creature. In theology, devotion to a saint is called *dulia*; it is finite and relative to God, who is the cause of the saints' holiness; devotion to Mary is called *hyperdulia* in order to distinguish it from the reverence due to the other saints. Devotion to her is unique, not just in degree, but also in kind (by the way, the adoration due to God alone is called *latria*. To give this adoration to anything else constitutes idolatry).

Devotion to Mary is particularly appropriate to the modern world, especially when offenses against chastity are so prevalent. As the Ever-Virgin full of grace and model of all virtues, she is especially useful in temptations against chastity. Aside from the name of Jesus, no name is more detested by the devil than that of Mary.

Some common Marian devotions are the Rosary², the Angelus, the oft-abandoned practice of May Crowning, enrollment in the Brown Scapular, the Memorare, the Miraculous Medal, the Litany of Loreto and the Total Consecration of St. Louis de Montfort. This list is far from exhaustive.

Marian Apparitions

Ever since the early modern period, apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary have increased around the world. A Marian apparition is an event in which the Virgin Mary is supposed to have supernaturally appeared to one or more persons, (though not always devout persons) in various settings. They are often named after the city or place where the apparition took place (Lourdes, Fatima, Knock) and may have occurred only once or over a period of time. In evaluating apparitions and their messages, we must remember that they are private revelation and not on par with the public teaching of the Church.

Some of the more famous apparitions that have been approved by the Church include but are not limited to:

Guadalupe, Mexico (1531)

² We will have a separate class on the Rosary later in the year.

La Vang, Vietnam (1798)
Paris, France (1830)
La Sallete, France (1846)
Lourdes, France (1858)
Knock, Ireland (1879)
Fatima, Portugal (1917)
Zeitoun, Egypt (1968-1971)
Akita, Japan (1973)

Whether or not a Marian apparition is approved or not, it can certainly be said that claims of Marian apparitions have increased in the past century. Note that in saying an apparition is “approved”, the Church does not affirm the truthfulness of everything the apparition claims – to say an apparition is approved means that there is nothing contrary to faith or morals in the apparition and that the apparition appears to be of a supernatural character. The Church never uses the content of private revelations to establish public doctrine.

Protestant Objections

Mary is one of the biggest issues separating Protestants and Catholics. Protestants, who typically do not believe in the communion of the saints, believe that devotion to Mary, and to any saint at all, constitutes idolatry, which is prohibited by the 1st commandment. Thus, they not only disagree with the Catholic position, but believe that Marian devotion is actually sinful. This is why they attack Marian devotion so fervently and will not be reconciled to Rome so long as they cannot see the place of Mary in the Church’s life.

To the Catholic, Mary is but a means to an end, a path that leads one to the presence of Jesus more surely. She is not an end in herself. Nevertheless, she did (and does) participate in our salvation in a unique way and as such deserves a special type of honor (*hyperdulia*). The Protestant objection to Mary must be fully understood; indeed, it is one of the principal reasons why Protestants distrust the Catholic Church. Catholics must understand the proper role of Mary in the Church and be familiar with the standard Protestant objections to Marian devotion. Specific arguments explaining the intercession of Mary and the saints will be covered in later classes.

Memorare (St. Bernard of Clairvaux, 1090 – 1153)

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help, or sought thine intercession was left unaided.

Inspired by this confidence, I fly unto thee, O Virgin of virgins, my mother; to thee do I come, before thee I stand, sinful and sorrowful. O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my petitions, but in thy mercy hear and answer me.

Amen.

For Further Reading: Genesis 3; Luke 1; Canons of the Council of Ephesus, available at the Fordham University medieval sourcebook, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/ephesus.html>; Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, 1854; Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus*, 1950; Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus*, 1974; John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, 2002; St. John Damascene, *Encomium in Dormitionem Dei Genetricis Semperque Virginis Mariae*; St. Louis de Montfort, *True Devotion*; St. Alphonsus Ligouri, *The Glories of Mary*; Scott Hahn, *Hail Holy Queen*; Bishop Fulton Sheen, *The World's First Love*; Karl Keating, *Catholicism & Fundamentalism*