

A CATHOLIC



UNDERSTANDING OF MARY

Who is Mary of Nazareth? What do Catholics believe about her? How should we interpret doctrines of faith that are connected in some way to her? Why and how do we relate to her as an intercessor?

MARY was, of course, an historical figure, Miriam (her Hebrew name) the mother of Jesus of Nazareth, but the New Testament portraits of her are quite meager. Luke has an extended meditation on her experience of becoming pregnant. Matthew almost nothing about her; Paul even less. All the gospels point to some contact with Jesus during the period of his adult public preaching., and she was in the circle of disciples after the Resurrection who experienced the outpouring of God's Spirit. How are we to interpret, then, the huge significance the Catholic Tradition gives to Mary through its spirituality, liturgy, and theology?

In Mark's gospel Mary is with other members of Jesus' family who try to see him out of concern for his well-being. They are worried about him. In reply, Jesus uses the occasion to teach: *"Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of God is brother and sister and mother to me."* [Mark 3:35]. Even family relationships, including mother to son, gain their full meaning only when they are at the service of the reign of God, which breaks into our lives fully, only through our encounter with Jesus.

In the Gospel of Luke, this same scene with Jesus and the crowd highlights how Mary is the model disciple. Luke tells us the stories of Jesus' conception and birth through Mary's experiences. She is the one who says, upon learning of her pregnancy, *"Let it be done to me according to your word."* This is Mary's "Yes" to her role in salvation. Thus, when Luke depicts the scene where the family comes to see Jesus and Jesus emphasizes the preeminence of doing the will of God, we already have experienced Mary as the first and model disciple to do exactly that.

In John's gospel Mary takes on an even greater symbolic role. At the wedding feast at Cana, she tells the waiters to *"Do what he [Jesus] tells you,"* even after Jesus seems to reject her intercession by saying *"Woman, what has your concern to do with me?"* [John 2:1-11]. Mary both acts as intercessor and points to her son, not herself, as

the focus. And Jesus, because of her intercession, goes against his initial desire in order to do as she wanted. Then, at the cross, Mary is with the other faithful women disciples when Jesus says, “*Woman, behold your son; son, behold your mother.*” [John 19:26-27]. These words are spoken to Mary and the “beloved disciple,” and forever connect Mary as Mother to the community of disciples, the Church, and they play a very large role in continuing that trajectory of the importance of Mary for the Church in the centuries to come.

Further development of Mary’s role in the Church’s life takes place after the biblical period. The second century *Protoevangelium of James* and later writings purport to tell the story of her birth and death and fill in some details about her life (such as the names of her father (Joachim) and mother (Anna)). Popular devotions to her arise within cultures that, in pre-Christian times, had a great emphasis on a “Mother Goddess” figure, leading to a Christian theology and spirituality which focuses on Mary’s unique, exalted status. But the doctrines and liturgical celebrations that are core to our Catholic understanding of Mary arise because of theological concerns, centered on safeguarding a proper understanding of the saving significance of Jesus Christ for humanity.

TEACHING ABOUT MARY

“**BLESSED VIRGIN**” is the most common title given to Mary. It refers first and foremost to the fact that Mary was a virgin prior to the birth of Jesus and echoes the language of the angel Gabriel and Elizabeth, both of whom call the young woman “*blessed*” [Luke 1:28,42]. Mary is named “Blessed” because Jesus’ conception was graced in a special way. This teaching tries to safeguard the uniqueness of Jesus’ unity of divine and human natures. Jesus was “son of Mary” and therefore fully human, but also “Son of God” and therefore fully divine. Calling her the “Blessed Virgin” is to focus us on the question of our salvation. Though fully human, his conception and personhood come through being the Word of God,. in Christ we

do not have simply a human hero and savior but a divine Savior that can bring true salvation to all humanity.

Even in the early Church the virginity of Mary was often understood to extend throughout her lifetime (“ever-virgin”) and this has shaped the Catholic interpretation of certain biblical texts. In passages which talk about Jesus’ brothers and sisters, the Catholic Church has interpreted the relationship to be a lesser bond of kinship (the same word at times can be translated as “cousin,” for example), or as step-brothers and sisters who were children of Joseph by some previous, unattested marriage (common interpretation in the Eastern Church).

Because devotion to Mary as “ever-virgin” has inspired countless lives of consecrated virginity, and because of its acceptance in both the eastern and western parts of the Church from early on, this understanding remains important to Catholic teaching. However, it is not as close to the core of the Christian faith as is the teaching on the virginal conception of Jesus. The Church’s teaching on the “hierarchy of truths” allows us to both affirm Mary’s perpetual virginity and at the same time not make that teaching into a stumbling block to greater unity with those Christian communities—mainly those Christians whose identity is rooted in the Reformation—who understand Jesus’ brothers and sisters to be Mary’s children as well.

“MOTHER OF GOD” is another title that attempts to safeguard our understanding of Jesus’ unique divine-human nature. In 431 at the Council of Ephesus the Church declared it was proper to call Mary not merely the “Christ- or Messiah-bearer” but also *Theotokos*, “the God-bearer.” This ancient title comes into our language as “the Mother of God,” and we celebrate this feast every January 1st. But notice how carefully worded that understanding is. It does not understand Mary to be, literally, “God’s mother”. That would be heresy. It means she is the “Mother or Bearer of the Divine One,” Jesus Christ. And, whatever pertains to Mary can, in hope, be analogously applied to all Christians. Each of us has the potential to be “God-bearers” in our own way: to give birth to God’s Word in our

hearts and lives so as to make manifest in all we do, Jesus Christ as God's Son.

The **"IMMACULATE CONCEPTION"** is a dogma of faith which states that Mary was "free from original sin" from the very first moment of her existence. At first this looks like an odd doctrine. Why worry about this at all? There is no direct biblical statement of it. Passages like Luke 1:28 (Mary as "*favored*" or "*full of grace*") have since been interpreted as compatible with the doctrine, but there are other acceptable interpretations of these passages as well.

To understand a Marian doctrine we should always ask: what does it safeguard about Jesus and what does it help us understand about ourselves as disciples? What the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception safeguards about Jesus is that his redeeming grace effects salvation for all who are saved, not just for Christians, and because God's grace is greater than human sin, that grace will ultimately triumph. Humans are powerless to escape the reality of Original Sin and its effects on our own. To be born into the world is to be born into a situation of needing salvation. Affirming the doctrine that Mary is "free of original sin" in virtue of her role in the history of salvation, as the mother of our Savior, is to affirm that all the negative strands of human history, the brokenness and harm caused by the reality of Original Sin and its consequences from the beginning, are not more powerful than the saving grace of God. God shows through this reality of Mary that for every human being God's grace is more original than sin, and that within our human history—not apart from it or after death—that grace can triumph. The "ordinary" way we will be invited into that saving grace is through baptism into Christ. But what the doctrine helps us understand is that salvation, however one comes to it, is always a gift from God, not our own doing, and is always connected to the saving grace of Jesus Christ at work in our human history. We celebrate this feast on December 8th every year.

The **“ASSUMPTION OF MARY”** is celebrated on August 15th and states that Mary has achieved her final, definitive, resurrected state (“body and soul”). In other words, Christ’s resurrection is already full and complete not just for him alone but at least for one other—Mary. With this dogma the Church is taking all the New Testament testimony about disciples sharing in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and affirming not only that it is a sure and certain hope but that the fullness of that hope has already taken place in at least one person, Mary. Our own hope to one day share in Jesus’ resurrection is not in vain. The resurrection of Jesus is not just for him alone but for who are united to him. Whether that takes place for us immediately at death or at the end of time in the final resurrection is not answered by this dogma. Either view is compatible with a Catholic understanding. Nor does the dogma specify what that “resurrected body” will look like. What is proclaimed is that God’s raising of Jesus Christ from the dead breaks open all of time and space so that death does not have the final say. That means we can even now offer our bodily existence for the sake of the kingdom of God, trusting in hope that we, too, will be given the gift of a resurrected life.

MARY AS INTERCESSOR. There is something about the virgin-mother image that captures both the mystery of God uniquely at work and the accessibility of a loving mother who cares deeply for us. Mary as intercessor—bringing our prayers before her son Jesus who will not refuse a mother’s request—is a powerful image that has long been sought out in Christian prayer. The very popular and widespread prayer-form called the Rosary builds precisely on this relationship to one another in Christ and in asking Mary to pray for us. Other popular Marian devotions such as the one connected to our Mother of Perpetual Help do the same.

Some of the most popular sources for seeking Mary as an intercessor come from various “apparitions” of Mary—religious experiences of individuals or groups that get connected to specific times and places. The most influential of these have become destinations for hundreds

of thousands of pilgrims each year. For example, we have Our Lady of Lourdes in France, where people pray and seek healing in the spring of water that Bernadette discovered while having apparitions of Mary, imaged as Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. In Ireland Our Lady of Knock has been the destination of countless pilgrims, as has Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal, and many others as well. In the Americas the most influential image of Mary, also connected to an apparition, this time to a young native Mexican Juan Diego, is that of Our Lady of Guadalupe. We celebrate that feast on December 12 each year. Pope John Paul II declared her “patroness of the Americas.”

Granted that some people can be quite superstitious and some even misunderstand that all prayer is ultimately addressed to God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, nevertheless the devotion to Mary has been a powerful motivator of faith in numerous cultures and across the centuries. That may be why so many claim an “appearance” of Mary to them over the years. Officially approved apparitions are never matters of doctrine, but they can be authentic manifestations of God’s goodness. No Catholic has to believe in them or use them in his or her own devotion. And, such private revelation is always tested against the authentic Tradition of the Church that comes to us from Scripture and the teaching of the Church. But even though no one needs to use these in their own prayer, we should not minimize the strength that can come from such intercessory prayer. Just as asking fellow Christians to pray for us does not take away from Jesus’ unique intercessory role, neither does turning to the communion of saints to ask for help, and to the pre-eminent saint, Mary.

Such popular piety is at the heart of what leads to various other titles of Mary: Queen of the Universe, Our Lady of Good Counsel, Our Lady of Sorrows, and so on. In fact, turning to Mary for intercession can greatly deepen our own intercessory prayer for others. In addition to the rosary, various litanies to the Blessed Virgin have been composed over the years and many feast days dedicated to her honor. In the Church the months of October and May are traditionally times of

special prayer to Mary. Very clearly, Mary as Intercessor plays a large role in Catholic life, art, symbol, and prayer.

CONCLUSION

Every Marian dogma safeguards some aspect of Jesus' unique role and points to a truth about our own discipleship. To appreciate that unique role of Jesus and to see Mary as our "sister in faith" is the common starting point. In addition, we as Christians are invited to and can benefit by relating to Mary as our "Mother in faith," ever-ready to intercede on our behalf.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

What do you think Mary experienced as a mother while Jesus was preaching and healing? When he was arrested, tried and crucified? After the news that he is risen? When she was filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost?

Even though the gospels do not portray Mary embracing the body of her son, after it was taken down from the cross, what does that Pieta image evoke in you? Are there any other images of Mary that are important to you or move you deeply? Why? Does it matter that the New Testament is mostly silent about Mary?

When you ask someone to pray for you, does that include Mary and the communion of saints? If not, why not?

Pray for one week, including asking Mary's help as intercessor for something or someone that is in great need, or pray a rosary for that person or need. At the end of the week, reflect on your experience of praying in that way.

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