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Marian Mariology

CHAPTER 45



The veneration of Mary, when properly understood, permeates the entire life of the Church; it is a dimension of dogma and of piety, of Christology and of ecclesiology. This dimension needs to be made explicit today in connection with the problems of humanity. Mariology expresses something fundamental to the Christian life itself, to the Christian experience of the world.

Sound Mariology has always been understood in Christological terms. If the Gospel revealed nothing more than the fact that Jesus Christ, God and man, was born of Mary, this alone would be sufficient for the Church to love her and to draw theological conclusions from pondering this relationship of Mother and Son. We need no other revelations. Mary is a self-evident and essential *datum* and dimension of the Gospel.

Chapter one centers on Catechesis flowing from Byzantine Marian spirituality with commentary by Brother John M. Samaha, S.M. Chapter 2 discusses Mariology today with commentary by Rev. Professor Michael Lapierre, S.J. The remaining chapters are commentaries on various Marian topics by Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J. (1914– 2000).

Chapter 45

Doctrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary In life and in death, the Mother of the Redeemer

by Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J.

We really ought to first understand who the Blessed Virgin Mary is and what her role in our lives ought to be, and then, building on that dogmatic foundation, allow our fervent piety free range.

The Blessed Virgin Mary is a subject that believing Catholics like to hear and then to speak about. As believers, there are two sides to all of us: the side of faith and the side of piety, which together engage our minds and our affections. As Catholics, it is right that our affections assert themselves, since we really love and care about Mary. We have been accused of mariolatry, of exaggerating our devotion to Mother Mary, detracting from our worship to her Son. For this reason let us look at the true doctrine about Mary which was a strong and clear provision of the Second Vatican Council. There are five principal doctrines in the Catholic Church about Mary. Let us study them as they arose in the Church's history in answer to the needs of the faithful in their opposition to heresy.

Pope Pius IX was an epileptic and was not allowed to say Mass without an assistant priest in case of an attack. This future Pope prayed to Mary for deliverance from his illness and she granted it, for which he desired her greater glory and praise. And so his declaration of her 'Immaculate Conception' was a fulfillment of his desire, as well as an honor for his Queen. He had no more epileptic seizures and no more embarrassing need for constant assistance when saying his Mass. His prayers were answered and he considered it a privilege to enhance Mary's honor when he became Pope. Mary's big day was his joy and reward too. Most of the miracles of the Catholic Church have been at Mary's shrines, even Christ's first miracle at Cana was at Mary's request. Mary was also preserved from ever committing any actual sin. Nor did any sinful tendencies burden her as they do other mortals. Mary was immaculate from conception.

The Bodily Assumption of Mary into Heaven

This doctrine too, is no recent development; but it was infallibly declared on November 1, 1950. For nine weeks before the announcement, the Vatican radio had been broadcasting conferences on Mary's Assumption. This belief of Mary's bodily Assumption goes back to the early Christian centuries. St. Gregory, in the sixth century, and many others wrote of Mary's Dormition and Assumption. It is Mary's greatest title in the Eastern Church. It was on the grounds of tradition that it was declared a dogma by Pope Pius XII. The world had long been waiting for it. First, the Pope said that it was Mary's freedom from sin. As the dissolution of the body results from sin, Mary's exemption from sin (sinless and; immaculate) made it fitting that her body be immune from decay and immediately taken into heavenly glory. Second, Christ's body originated from Mary's; the flesh of Jesus is the flesh of Mary. So it was fitting that Mary's body should share in the glory of her Son. Third, Mary shared in her Son's sufferings. Thus it was fitting, thought Pius XII that Mary should share in the glory of her Son, body and soul, in Heaven. On the Feast of All Saints, Mary, the Queen of all Saints, was declared to be in Heaven, body and soul.

Such is the doctrinal review of what should prompt our devotion to Mary and on which our devotions to her are and should be based.

End

Mary Ever Virgin

The earliest opponents of Mary's virginity were the Jews of the first century. About 90 A.D., the Jewish Sanhedrin had a meeting in Asia Minor at which the Pharisees decided to change the Greek translation of the, by then, Old Testament. Which included the section of Isaiah where the prophet foretells the virginal conception of the Messiah. The Pharisees changed the term, "parthenos" which means in classical Greek, 'an undefiled virgin', to read 'naonis', which simply means a young woman who, without further comment, may not be an undefiled virgin.

That, like other changes, was unwarranted by the Hebrew Text. Julian, the apostate Emperor and many other early pagans denied Mary's virginity. The Gnostics claimed that Jesus' conception was by natural intercourse. In fact, one of the disputed texts of the Catholic Bible in the 16th century, unearthed by Calvinists, was the manuscript known as the Bezae Codex, which declared that Joseph was the natural father of Jesus. It is true that when you want something true or false told, you can always find someone to tell it.

The Church has always professed her belief in Mary's virginal conception. The Apostles' Creed, dating from the first century, declares that Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit. In fact, all ancient creeds declared Mary to be a virgin and Christ's conception to not have been by human intercourse, but by the Holy Spirit. The Church Fathers have affirmed unanimously that Christ's conception in Mary was without violation of her virginal integrity. It is also a Catholic dogmatic truth that Mary remained a virgin after Jesus' birth. The Fifth General Council in 553 gave Mary the title "Virgo Perpetua" - perpetual virgin. And St. Augustine so states, "A virgin conceived, a virgin gave birth, a virgin she always remained."

The word 'brethren' referred to in Scripture is to be understood as near relatives of the Savior. what does it mean "She gave birth to her firstborn Son"? This term was not uncommon. The Jews referred to an only son as the firstborn and, in the near East, there have been mothers who having died in childbirth, bear the inscription on their tombstone, "to her firstborn", meaning she had no other births afterwards.

St. Basil, in the 4th century, strongly stated, "Mary never ceased to be a virgin." St. Ignatius tells a fanciful story about riding one day with a Muslim who was disclaiming Mary's virginity. Debating with himself as to whether he should run his sword through this infidel, he decided to leave it to Providence. Coming upon a fork in the road, Ignatius gave his horse a free rein, and the two horses, on their own, parted company. So the story goes. Now we have a St. Ignatius.

Mary, the Mother of God

When, at the beginning of the 5th century, Nestorius forbade his priests to call Mary the Mother of God, the people rebelled. The Council of Ephesus in 431 condemned Nestorius, declaring that "If anyone does not confess that Emmanuel is Christ - in truth is God - and that the Virgin is the Mother of God - Theotokos, since according to the flesh she brought forth the Word of God, let that person be anathema." We don't say that our mothers are mothers solely of our bodies! Recently our present Holy Father anathematized a learned French theologian for questioning Mary's perpetual virginity and her Divine Maternity.

The dogma "Mary, Mother of God" contains two truths.

- A. Mary is truly a mother - she contributed everything to Christ's human nature that every mother contributes to her child. Mary gave to Jesus what other mothers give their offspring, and so Mary is truthfully called the Mother of Jesus, Who is God - Mary Mother of God she so remains.
- B. Mary conceived and bore Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, not according to His Divine Nature but according to His human nature which Jesus assumed. Those who have a clear faith never hesitate calling Mary the Mother of God. But where any obscurity exists in a person's faith, he likewise has a hesitancy in using the correct title. So, Mother of God, Mary is and will be in Heaven.

Mediatrice of Grace

This is no recent assumption of faith: as far back as the 4th century we see Mary so called. St. Ephrem, who died in 373, wrote a prayer to Mary which says, "After the Mediator, thou art Mediatrice of the whole world." St. Ephrem was the earliest great Father of the Eastern Church.

Mary is Mediatrice in three ways:

- A. First, by her cooperation in the Incarnation. Mary freely cooperated in giving the Redeemer to the world. With Mary's maternity admitted and accepted, her cooperation in the Incarnation is to be accepted likewise - no Mary, no Christ.
- B. Instructed by the angel as to what Jesus was to be and do, Mary assented: "*Behold the Handmaid of the Lord.*" The Incarnation and subsequent Redemption of man by Christ's atoning death on the Cross depended on Mary's consent. St. Thomas Aquinas said, "At the Annunciation the human race waited for Mary's assent." When she said "Yes", she represented humanity. And Pope Leo XIII tells us, "In a true sense Mary spoke for the whole human race." That is the first kind of mediation.

- C. Mary is Mediatrice of all graces by her intercession now in Heaven. Mary cooperates in the application of grace to mankind. First, as the Mother of God, and secondly, by joining her will with His in voluntarily accepting her Son's death, thereby mediating by her intercession and channeling the graces Christ merited on Calvary.

Our present Pope John Paul II, who is notoriously devoted to Mary, pleaded constantly with all the Bishops during the Second Vatican Council: "Don't put Mary at the end of the document on the Church, but in the middle where she belongs." They told him, "That is the place of honor." "Yes, I know," he told them. "That's where she belongs." He didn't succeed then, but since he has been Pope, he has placed her in the middle of everything. Catechesis through Mary was the first reference in the Apostleship of Prayer article in 1979. "Mary is either in religious instruction or it is not Catholic religious education."

Three other late Popes are quoted: Pope Leo XIII, "From that great treasure of all graces which the Lord has brought, nothing according to the will of God comes to us except through Mary, and no one approaches the supreme Father except through the Son, and no one approaches Christ except through Mary." St. Pius X called Mary, "the dispenser of all gifts which Jesus has acquired for us by His Death and His Precious Blood." Pope Benedict XVI states, "All gifts which the Author of all good has decided to communicate to the unhappy progeny of Adam are, according to the Divine Providence, dispensed through the hands of the Virgin Mary." The Popes don't use universal or superlative language lightly!

The Immaculate Conception

We think of this doctrine as modern. We know that some saints had reservations about it, including Saints Bernard, Albert the Great, and Thomas Aquinas. Could Mary have been without sin before she conceived the Jesus Who was to have been the Redeemer from all sin? It was St. Francis' sons - Duns Scotus (1308) particularly - that helped clear that question. "It was fitting," he said, "that Christ should pre-redeem His Mother by preserving her from sin from the first moment of her earthly existence. Is it conceivable that any loving Son, who has the power, would not preserve His mother, in whose womb He was to dwell, from every stain of sin from the first moment of her existence?" By the 19th century it was clear and Pope Pius IX defined the doctrine as revealed by God. "The most holy Virgin, by a gift of grace and privilege of the Almighty, in view of the merits of Christ the Redeemer, was preserved from all stain of original sin. (December 8, 1854)