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Marian Mariology

CHAPTER 46



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 46

Doctrine and the Blessed Virgin Mary

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

This conference will perhaps be quite theological for I think we need first to understand who the Blessed Virgin is, what her role in our lives ought to be and then, building on a solid dogmatic foundation, allow our fervor and piety free range.

We might begin by noting that there are some subjects on which a believing Catholic likes to speak and about which believing Catholics like to hear. The Blessed Virgin is that kind of a subject. This is not strange when we reflect on how much the Virgin Mary means in our Catholic lives and what a large part she plays in our relationship with the invisible world of God, the angels and saints, in private prayer and in the Sacred Liturgy. After all, there are two sides to all of us as believers: the side of faith that belongs essentially to the mind, and the side of piety that belongs to our affections. It would be odd, indeed, if we did not feel strongly about what we believe, or if our affections did not assert themselves in our lives as Catholics. So it is as it should be. I would question the depth of a person's faith which never seems to manifest itself in feelings or deep sentiment. *If I really care about someone I am not afraid or ashamed to show my emotions, which in religion means to show my piety.*

All of this, I trust, is common knowledge, and it is very pertinent to our reflections on the Blessed Virgin Mary. Why? Because here, if anywhere, Catholics should be thoroughly honest and thoroughly balanced. Critics of our Faith, who may otherwise

be God-fearing Christians, accuse us of mariolatry, which is a word they coined for making an idol or goddess of Mary; and this word is in all standard dictionaries.

These critics charge that our devotion to Mary is excessive; that it obscures what must be the first and primary object of Christian piety which is devotion to Jesus Christ that Catholics allow their exuberant devotion to Mary to detract from their reliance on God; and that we permit our heart to dictate to our mind in our Marian devotion, to the alleged detriment of sound revelation and a departure from authentic Christianity.

All of these are good reasons for finding out just what the true doctrine about the Blessed Virgin is and for making sure that *how* we honor Mary will be consistent with what the Church teaches about Mary. Accordingly, my intention is to look in sequence at the five principal doctrines of the Catholic Church about Mary and to review them in the approximate order in which they rose to prominence in the Church's history, either because of the opposition of heretics or because of the needs of the faithful. These five doctrines are:

1. Mary's perpetual virginity;
2. Her rights to being called the Mother of God;
3. Her mediation of grace from Christ to the human family;
4. Her Immaculate Conception;
5. Her bodily Assumption into heaven.

Mary Ever Virgin

The earliest opponents of Mary's virginity were the Jews of the first century. At the grand meeting of the Jewish Sanhedrin in Asia Minor, about the year 90 A.D., the Pharisees decided to change the whole Greek translation of the then Old Testament, including the passage in Isaiah where the prophet foretells the virginal conception of the Messiah. They, that is the Pharisees, changed the exquisite term *parthenos* (which means in all classic Greek: an undefiled virgin) to read *neanis* (which means: a young woman. By this definition the young woman, needless to say, may not be an undefiled virgin).

The earliest pagans also denied Mary's virginity, for example, Julian the apostate. Also, the Gnostics claimed that Christ was conceived and born of natural intercourse. One of the many competitive texts to the Catholic Bible in the sixteenth century, unearthed by the Calvinists, was a manuscript still known to history as the Bezae Codex which declared that Joseph was the natural father of Jesus.

Countering these denials the Church, from the very beginning, professed her faith in Mary's active virginal conception. The Apostles Creed dating from the first century declares that Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit. In the same way all the ancient creeds declare both that Mary was a virgin and that Christ was conceived not by human intercourse but by the Holy Spirit. The Fathers of the Church affirm the virginal conception of Christ in Mary with complete unanimity. It is, therefore, a doctrine of the Catholic Faith, infallible and irreversible, that Mary bore her Son without any violation of her virginal integrity. It is, moreover, a dogma of the Catholic religion that Mary also remained a virgin after the birth of Jesus. The fifth General Council in 553 gives Mary the title "Virgo Perpetua" - perpetual virgin. And in the words of St. Augustine: "A virgin she conceived, a virgin she gave birth, a virgin she always remained."

What about the "brethren" of Jesus, referred to in Scripture? They are to be understood as near relatives of the Savior. What about the expression, "She gave birth to her firstborn Son?" This term is not uncommon in the language of those days since among the Jews an only son was known also as a firstborn son. In fact, in recent years in the Near East there have been tombs of mothers who died in giving birth. The inscription on one of these tombstones reads: "Died in giving birth to her firstborn." Evidently there could have been no other birth after this.

I like the strong words of St. Basil in the fourth century who said, *"The friends of Christ do not tolerate hearing that Mary ever ceased to be a virgin."*

There is a delightful story in the life of St. Ignatius, already a Catholic but before his conversion to sanctity. Ignatius was riding on his horse along the road when he caught up with a Muslim, also on horseback, going down the same road. They fell into an animated conversation on Mary. The Muslim was not so sure about Mary's virginity; and all the while the conversation was going on Ignatius was debating with himself: *"Should I run my sword through this infidel or not?" He thought he would leave it to providence. Some distance ahead was a fork in the road; Ignatius decided to allow his horse free rein. If the horse spontaneously went down the same road as the Muslim's he would then run the Muslim through with a sword; if his own horse took the other course, the Muslim would be spared. Ignatius' horse did not follow the Muslim. That's why we have a St. Ignatius Loyola!*

Mother of God

Since the beginning of Christianity the test of a person's faith in Christ's Divinity was his readiness to call Mary the Mother of God. This became dramatically clear in the early fifth century when the then Patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius, forbade his Priests to call Mary by that name. The people rebelled. When the Nestorian heresy was condemned in 431 at the Council of Ephesus (Ephesus is where it is traditionally believed that Mary was assumed into heaven) the Council declared: *"If anyone does not confess that the Emmanuel, that is Christ, in truth is God and that on this account*

The Bodily Assumption of Mary Into Heaven

Again, it may seem that a doctrine like Mary's bodily assumption is a recent development. And in one sense it is, since the dogma was not defined by the Church until 1950. One of the earliest writers to speak of Mary's ascension, as it used to be called, was St. Gregory in the sixth century. Others and their names are well-known in Catholic theology, also wrote extensively in the early Church about Mary's falling asleep, her dormition, her ascension or, as we now call it, her assumption. This is the greatest single title of Our Lady in the Eastern Church.

On what grounds did Pope Pius XII define Mary's assumption? On the grounds of tradition. The Catholic hierarchy, when canvassed by the Pope, all but unanimously agreed that this doctrine is revealed, that it should be defined, and that the time was ripe to make the definition. Pope Pius XII analyzed the Church's reasons for defining Mary's being in heaven not only in spirit but also in body.

First, there was the fact of Mary's freedom from sin. As the dissolution of the body and its separation from the soul is a punishment for sin and as Mary, immaculately conceived and always sinless, was exempt from the general curse of sin, it was fitting, the Pope declared, that her body should be exempted from the general law of dissolution and should be immediately taken into heavenly glory.

Secondly: Mary's Divine Motherhood. As the body of Christ originated from the body of Mary, the most famous phrase in Catholic teaching in Latin is "Caro Jesu caro Maria" - the flesh of Jesus is the flesh of Mary, it was further fitting that Mary's body should share in the same glorious lot as the Body of her Son.

And thirdly: Mary's share in Christ's labor and suffering on earth. As Mary, the Mother of the Redeemer, took a most intimate part in the redemption of her Son, it was fitting that in the completion of her earthly life (the Pope did not say she died) she should attain to the full fruit of the redemption which consists in the glorification of not only the soul but also the body.

And so, on the first of November, appropriately the feast of All Saints, the Queen of all saints was declared by Pope Pius XII to be in heaven in body and in spirit.

"It is a dogma revealed by God that Mary the Immaculate, perpetually virgin, Mother of God, after the completion of her earthly life was assumed body and soul into heaven."

End

the holy virgin is the Mother of God - Theotokos, since according to the flesh, she brought forth the Word of God made flesh, let that person be anathema."

The dogma of Mary's Motherhood of God contains two truths:

- First, that Mary is truly a mother. She contributed everything to the formation of the human nature of Christ that every mother contributes to the formation of the fruit of her womb. And, as we call the woman who conceived and bore us *mother*, Christ also calls Mary His Mother.
- Second, Mary is truly the Mother of God. She conceived and bore the Second Person of the Trinity, not according to the Divine Nature, but according to the human nature that the Son of God assumed at His conception in Mary's womb. A mother conceives and gives birth to a person. We do not introduce our mothers and say: "Meet the mother of my body." Even though our earthly mothers do not, evidently, create our souls we still introduce them as: "my mother." Mary conceived and bore the Second Person of the Trinity become Man. Therefore, she is really and not just metaphorically the Mother of God.

I have found in teaching Protestantism, whether to Catholics or Protestants, that those who have a very clear faith in Christ's Divinity never hesitate calling Mary the Mother of God. But if someone, without exception, refuses to call Mary the Mother of God you can be sure there is in him an obscurity about Who Christ is, an obscurity about the fact that Christ is, indeed, the Son of God.

Mediatrice of Grace

Once Mary's Divine maternity was recognized and this fact grew on the faithful, it was not surprising that Mary's corresponding role of mediatrix of grace also assumed an ever larger importance. Some people may suppose that the idea of Mary's mediation of grace from Christ to us is a recent development in Catholic thought. Not so. As far back as the fourth century we have some outstanding statements about Mary in this regard. Thus St. Ephrem, who died in 373, wrote a prayer addressed to Mary which says, "After the Mediator thou art the Mediatrix of the whole world." St. Ephrem was the earliest great Father of the Eastern Church.

In what sense is Mary a mediatrix? She is mediatrix in two ways:

- First of all, Mary is the mediatrix of all graces by her cooperation in the incarnation. Mary freely and willingly cooperated in giving the Redeemer to the world. No Mary, no Christ. Instructed by the Angel as

to the Person and task of her Son, she freely assented to be the Mother of God. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word." The Incarnation of the Son of God and the consequent redemption of mankind by Christ's atonement and death on the Cross were dependent on Mary's consent. At that astounding moment in the history of salvation Mary represented humanity. St. Thomas Aquinas says, "At the Annunciation the consent of the Virgin was awaited as the representative of all human nature." And Pope Leo XIII simply tells us, "In a true sense Mary spoke for the whole human race." This is the first kind of mediation.

- Mary is also Mediatrix of all graces by her intercession now in heaven. Since going to heaven, Mary cooperates in the application of divine grace to mankind by her prayerful intercession and by channeling the graces Christ won for mankind on the Cross. Always, of course, Mary's intercession and communication are subordinate to that of her Son.

I would like to quote from three Popes in recent years. 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. Consequently, as nobody can approach the Supreme Father except through the Son, so nobody can approach Christ except through Mary." St. Pius X called Mary "the dispenser of all gifts which Jesus has acquired for us by His death and Blood." Pope Benedict XVI said: "*All gifts which the Author of all good has deigned to communicate to the unhappy progeny of Adam are, according to the loving resolve of His Divine Providence, dispensed by the hands of the Most Holy Virgin.*"

Immaculate Conception

As with other doctrines about the Blessed Virgin, the Immaculate Conception may seem to be a modern development. We know, for example, that some great saints, such as St. Bernard of Clairvaux, St. Albert the Great and St. Thomas Aquinas, had reservations about this doctrine. Their problem was that they had not yet found a way to bring Mary's freedom from original sin into agreement with the universality of original sin and with the necessity of all human beings for redemption.

It was to the credit of the sons of St. Francis, notably of the great English Franciscan, Duns Scotus, who died in 1308, that the way was cleared theologically for what was later defined doctrinally. "It was fitting," Scotus 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 to give his mother all that he wanted to give her and wanted her to be, is it conceivable that when this Son is the Infinite God that He 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 nineteenth century the issue of Mary's Immaculate Conception became perfectly clear. And on December 8, 1854, Pope Pius IX defined the following doctrine as revealed by God to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful: "*The most holy Virgin Mary in the first moment of her conception by a unique gift of grace and privilege of Almighty God, in view of the merits of Christ the Redeemer, was preserved from all stain of original sin.*"

We might note here that Pius IX, who defined Mary's Immaculate Conception, had been an epileptic. Even though he had severe seizures he was allowed to remain on at the Seminary, but was told he could never be ordained. He prayed and begged our Lady to cure him of epilepsy. For some time before the perspective ordination he had no seizures. The then Pope intervened and reluctantly allowed him to be ordained, under one condition: that he would never offer Mass alone, but would always for the rest of his life have a Priest next to him in case during Mass he would have another seizure. Now as a Priest he prayed: "*Mary, no more seizures, please. Also, would you please spare me the embarrassment and inconvenience of never being allowed to offer Mass without another Priest at my side.*"

For several years he continued offering Mass with an assistant Priest, no seizures ever occurred. Finally, the Holy See withdrew the condition and Pius IX vowed that he would spend the rest of his life doing everything in his human power to advance Mary's honor. On the day he proclaimed the dogma of Mary's Immaculate Conception, Pius IX declared that this was the happiest day of his life, his opportunity to repay Mary for what she had done for him.

It is not for nothing that most of the miracles in the Catholic Church, most of the shrines, including Lourdes, Beauraing and Fatima, where astounding miracles of spirit and body are worked, are dedicated to Mary who evoked from Christ His first, we might almost say reluctant, miracle at Cana.

Consistent with this doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception, the Church further believes that Mary was preserved from ever committing any actual sin. Indeed, she was preserved from all sinful tendencies such as the rest of us experience because we are burdened with concupiscence, which is one of the results of original sin that remains even after we are justified and receive the grace of God in Baptism.