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Marian Mariology

CHAPTER 24



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 24

Mariology: Mary as Mother of God

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

In the nature of things, our treatment will be theological, and we will have to resort to certain facts of history and statements of doctrine that are somewhat technical.

There are three basic errors which occasioned the Church's defining Mary's divine maternity. Ever since its definition by the Council of Ephesus these three errors keep cropping up, so much so that we can say that the dogma of Mary being the true Mother of God is a precondition for admitting three other mysteries of our Faith.

What are they? First, that Christ was and is a true man because evidently only a human being would need a human mother. Errors in the early Church, or any doubts regarding Christ's humanity ever since, necessarily would exclude Mary's being the true Mother of God. The most common heresy of the early Church denying Christ's true humanity ever since, necessarily would exclude Mary's being the true Mother of God.

The most common heresy of the early Church denying Christ's true humanity was a form of Gnosticism also called Docetism. More commonly, however – both in the early Church and ever since – those who question Mary's being the Mother of God do so because they doubt or deny that her Son is true God. In other words, we cannot intelligibly speak of Mary being the true Mother of God unless her Son is the true Son

That surely must be a distinctive relationship. In other words, Christ did not have a human father, but He did have a human mother. He is therefore truly Mary's Son. He is also truly the Son of the Father.

Mary, then of course, bears the most distinctive relationship to the Second Person. Let's make sure we know what the Church teaches us when she calls Mary the Mother of God the Son. There are three persons in the Trinity, but only one of them became man, and we have to keep reminding ourselves; there are three persons. Absolutely speaking, might God the Father have become man? Absolutely speaking, yes. In fact, there was a very sophisticated heresy in the early Church which taught just that with the long polysyllabic name of Patripassionists. In other words, the Father suffered on the Cross to redeem the world. Nonsense. He didn't. The point is, only one person became a human being, and Mary is the human Mother of that Second Person of the Trinity. The Word, as John tells us, became Flesh. So it did, but it became flesh thanks to Mary. So much so that Augustine later on would say: "Caro Jesu, caro Mariae." The flesh of Jesus is the flesh of Mary. Thus, the only reason we have the Blessed Sacrament and receiving the living Body and Blood of Christ is because He received that flesh and blood from His Mother.

Finally, Mary bears a unique relationship to the Third Person, the Holy Spirit. She is the *Sponsa Spiritu Sancti*, the spouse of the Holy Spirit. What does the Church mean? The Church means that Mary conceived virginally. No human being was the father of Jesus, Nevertheless, it did require divine power to make possible in Mary's womb for a child to grow and develop and finally be born at Bethlehem, and as the angel told Our Lady "The Holy Spirit will come upon you." As far as our weak human language can express it, the Holy Spirit is the one who espoused Mary and because of whom Mary conceived.

In closing, we might make this simple observation. Because of her divine maternity, Our Lady possesses a sublimity that no other creature – except her Divine Son who is God – enjoys. Therefore, there is a legitimate and a profoundly meaningful sense in which Our Lady, though unlike the apostles who were ordained to the priesthood, yet her dignity is higher than that of the priesthood. Why? Because she could say, "This is my body and this is my blood." Not because of the grace of ordination, but because of the dignity of her divine maternity.

End

of God. The tests of orthodoxy regarding Christ's divinity is whether a person will believe in His Mother's divinity maternity: the acid test of orthodoxy over the centuries.

Finally, even where a person might claim verbally, "Yes, Jesus is God. Jesus is Man," but if that same individual does not also say that although Christ has two natures, one divine, one human, but has only one personality which is divine, then you also would exclude Mary from being the true Mother of God. In fact, it was precisely that heresy known historically as Nestorianism that gave rise to the solemn definition at Ephesus in 431. (Tradition has it that Our Lady was assumed into heaven at Ephesus). It was there that the Council defined Mary's divine maternity against the Nestorians. What did they hold? They held that Jesus, the true Son of Mary, was or may be said to be also the Son of God, but the two natures in Christ, the divine and human, did not form one individual, one substance, one person, so that Nestorius and his followers had a very simple dodge: Mary is the true Mother of Jesus, the human person, but she is in no way the Mother of God as God is not united – to use a technical term – hypostatically with His human nature.

When in 431 the Church of the Council of Ephesus defined Mary's divine maternity, it stated – and the words deserve to be memorized – "If anyone does not profess that Emmanuel is truly God and that consequently the Holy Virgin is the Mother of God, let him be anathema." You notice Emmanuel is a prophetic title for the Messiah.

You notice also how the council rested its case for defining that Mary is the Mother of God on the fact that her Son is Emmanuel, "God-with-us." You might distinguish with a bit of subtlety, my saying that the title, Emmanuel, God-with-us, can be divided into two parts: "God," that is Christ's divine nature; "with-us," that is Christ's human nature for there was only one Emmanuel. It is God-with-us, God-among-us, God-one-of-us as a human being. That human being is true God. Both at Ephesus and ever since, in order to prove – as far as we can prove a mystery of faith – that Mary is assuredly the Mother of God, of Christ, both from Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition.

I am sure you heard this logic expressed before. It is a very simple and uncontested syllogism. It comes in three parts. Major premise: We find in the Bible Christ Himself and others declaring Him to be true God. "The Father and I are one." Thomas after Christ's resurrection in adoration addresses the Savior, "My Lord and My God." That is in the Bible. We further find – and it couldn't be clearer – that Mary is declared to be the Mother of Christ. The child she conceived at Nazareth and gave birth to at Bethlehem is identified by the evangelists, and is considered later on by His followers as the Messiah, meaning the Christ. Very well. The logic tells that

if Christ is God and Mary is the Mother of Christ, she is the Mother of that person who is God. She therefore is the *Mater Dei*, or in Greek, *Theotokos*.

It is interesting to know that over the years I have been teaching Islam, I more than once told my students – and it is thrilling to find it in the Koran – how Mohammed believed the Esau, the *Ibn-Mariam* (Jesus, the Son of Mary) was indeed the Messiah, the Christ. Mohammed had no doubts that Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled the Messianic prophecies. Moslems even to this day are offended if we call them non-Christian. But unlike those who are authentic Christians, Mohammed and his followers do not believe that Jesus is the Son of God, so that in the Koran this is Mohammed's own definition of a Christian, and you cannot improve on it: "A Christian is one who believes that *Ibn-Mariam* is *Ibn-Allah* (is one who believes that the Son of Mary is the Son of God)." Mohammed denied it; his followers have denied it ever since; and they have fought, as we know, some deadly wars against the Christians. They have tried to convert Mohammedan-style Christians to Islam.

Mohammed, as far as we know, never had access to our four canonical Gospels. All that he had read or heard about was from the Apocrypha. The course of history might have been changed had we known the reason Mohammed did not have access to the authentic Scriptures. Because at that time, in what later on became Islamic Arabia, Nestorianism (the heresy condemned at Ephesus) had become so rampant that that the only Christians whom Mohammed knew were those who denied that Mary is the Mother of God. Isn't that sad? So much so that I have not hesitated telling my students, this is the perfect description of Mohammedanism: Mohammedanism is Nestorian Christianity. It is Christianity minus Mary as the Mother of God. She is only the Mother of Jesus, the man, as Nestorius claimed and as Mohammed after him preached.

The evidence of Sacred Tradition building on the revelation that the Apostolic Church received whenever they talk about Mary and her relationship to Christ, it is to recognize her as the Mother not merely of the human being, Jesus, but of the God who became man. Three martyrs, Irenaeus, Cyprian and Hippolytus – among the early Fathers of the Church, in their writings are especially clear about Our Lady's divine maternity. We further evidence from the very early tradition that Mary was considered the Mother of God. The name *Theotokos* (God bearer) is found in some of the earliest Greek Fathers. Alexander (early fourth century), then the Latin Father, Ambrose, the one who brought Augustine into the Church, were staunch defenders of Mary's divine maternity. Augustine, having been duly instructed by Ambrose, held the same belief. Vincent of Lerins is especially valuable as a witness to Mary's divine maternity, not only because he used the term *Theotokos*, but because he is the one who gave us that most important principle of how to know what is authentically true in the Christian religion. Here is the way he put it: "Whatever has been taught from the beginning by everyone, everywhere in loyalty to the teaching of the apostles is God's revealed truth."

Therefore, Mary's being the Mother of God is by Vincent of Lerins' own formula, revealed truth. Now a word of explanation is necessary, because we Catholics are more than once challenged by those who do not accept our understanding of Mary as Mother of God. How is it possible! What on earth do you mean when you say that Mary is the Mother of God? Do we mean, as the pagans believe, that there were gods and goddesses and they would copulate and produce other gods or goddesses? Of course not. That's blasphemy. It is not as though the Mother of Christ in any way was responsible – how could she be – for Christ's divinity? Why, then, do we legitimately address her as the Mother of God? Because she gave to Christ whatever human mother gives to the offspring of her womb. Where no human mother gives her child the spiritual soul which the child possesses from the moment of conception, yet she is certainly the mother of the child she bears. In other words, a mother gives birth to a person. Our mother as a mother, along with a father is responsible only for our bodies and is not in any way the author of our souls. If mothers can legitimately be called mothers, Mary can be called the Mother of the person she gave birth to. This was a unique person who had a human body, had a human soul which was united with divinity, but she didn't give Christ His divinity. So what? She didn't give Christ His human soul. So what? She gave Christ all that any mother can give her child, his body, and therefore logically she may be legitimately called the Mother of the one she gave birth to, who is God. Given the divine maternity, the Church and her saints never exhausted the titles of dignity which they have given Our Lady. I searched a bit to come up with a most startling title of dignity that I could find. You know where I found it? Pius X, who describes Our Lady as "The Greatest after God." That's pretty good.

Now Christ is God, so Mary is the greatest after Christ. In other words, God has not created anything, anyone more sublime, closer to His own divinity than when He made His Mother. The Fathers of the Church, while saying Mary as creature is not infinite, nevertheless she is said to be "relatively infinite." Why? Because if we all partake of the perfections of God the one person who was closest to God physically and spiritually, she is the nearest in approximation to God's infinity.

Know the three famous relationships that Mary has with the Holy Trinity. Volumes have been written on each one of them. They have inspired the mystics and are the source of much contemplative prayer. The Church tells us that Mary bears a unique relationship to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. How unique is that relationship? She is said to be the daughter of God the Father *par excellence* in a way that no one else can be. What does the Church mean when she uses that title? She means that Mary has a relationship to the First Person that no one else can have. Why? Because the child that she gave birth to is both the Son of the Father and her Son.