

# The Virgin Mary—why all the fuss?

By Matthew Hazell

## Introduction

Good evening, everybody, and welcome to this Hot Topic on a subject very dear to the heart of Catholics: the Blessed Virgin Mary.

I'm sure that all of us here know at least some of what the Church believes about Mary. What I wanted to do tonight, however, is to examine why the Church believes what she does about Mary—why is there all this fuss about a simple, humble, unassuming first-century Jewish woman? I hope that, if nothing else tonight, we'll be able to go home tonight having learned something we didn't know before. (Though I'm not making any guarantees!)

There are four dogmas of the Catholic faith that are Marian in scope. We'll start with Mary as Mother of God.

## Mary, Mother of God

This belief of the Church can be explained using three simple logical statements:

- a) Jesus is God.
- b) Mary is the Mother of Jesus.
- c) Therefore Mary is the Mother of God.

Yet this dogma has been very controversial all throughout the history of the Church, and continues to be so today. It's always the simplest things that cause the most trouble! To understand why the Church proclaims Mary as the Mother of God, we first need to go back to the fifth century, the heresy of Nestorianism, and the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon.

Nestorianism takes its name from a bishop in the fifth century called Nestorius. He attempted to distinguish between Jesus' human and divine natures, insisting that the better title for Mary was not Mother of God (Theotokos) but Mother of Christ (Christotokos), since Mary was only the mother of Jesus' human nature, not His divine nature. The Catechism of the Catholic Church mentions this heresy, saying that Nestorianism "regarded Christ as a human person joined to the divine person of God's Son" (466).

So we can see that Nestorius' separation of the human and divine natures of Christ led to the erroneous separation of Christ into two persons: one human, one divine. In contrast to this, the orthodox view of Christ was defined in greater detail by the Council of Chalcedon in 451: Christ is "to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God, the Word the Lord Jesus Christ" (Definition of Faith of Chalcedon). In other words: two natures, unified without mixture, in one person.

Nestorianism was declared heretical some twenty years before Chalcedon, at the Council of Ephesus in 431, and this is where we find the dogmatic definition of Mary as Theotokos:

If anyone does not confess that God is truly Emmanuel, and that on this account the Holy Virgin is the Mother of God [Theotokon], for according to the flesh she gave birth to the Word of God by birth, let him be anathema. (XII anath., I)

This very brief excursion into the area of theology known as Christology may appear to be off-topic, but in fact it allows us to grasp why the dogma of Mary, Mother of God is so important. As the Catechism puts it, "What the Catholic faith believes about Mary is based on what it believes about Christ, and what it teaches about Mary illumines in turn its faith in Christ." (CCC 487). To affirm that Mary is truly the Mother of God is to also affirm, in part, the right view of the very nature of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. If we do not say that Mary is Theotokos, then our view of her Son is necessarily deficient. In the first instance, then, the description of the Blessed Virgin as the Mother of God is not intended to exalt her, but her Son, Jesus Christ.

### **Mary, Ever-Virgin**

We find a similar effect when we turn to the second belief about Mary in our list tonight: Mary, Ever-Virgin. This dogma affirms that Mary was a virgin before, during, and after the birth of Jesus.

Unlike Mary, Mother of God, this dogma remained comparatively free from controversy until after the Reformation. As well as the Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth in Matthew and Luke, which themselves are the fulfilment of the divine promise given through Isaiah ("Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son", 7:14), we have ample evidence from the early Church that belief in Mary's virginity was a hallmark of the faith. Ignatius of Antioch in

his Epistle to the Smyrnaeans (c. 110) testifies that Christ “was truly born of a virgin” (Ad. Smyrn. 1:1-2); Justin Martyr in his Dialogue with Trypho (c. 150-60) draws parallels between the virgin Eve, who conceived the word of the serpent and brought forth death, and the virgin Mary, who conceived the Word of God and brought forth life (Dial. 100).

These and other early meditations on the virginal conception of Jesus led the Church in time to confess the perpetual virginity of Mary. From the third century onwards, the acceptance of the doctrine is near-universal. In Augustine’s wonderful description, Mary “remained a virgin in conceiving her Son, a virgin in giving birth to him, a virgin in carrying him, a virgin in nursing him at her breast, always a virgin.” (Serm. 186:1)

Why, though, is the virginity of Mary important? The Apostle Paul gives us part of the answer through his references to Christ as the New Adam. In Romans 5, Paul contrasts Adam and Christ: “as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men” (v. 18). Further, in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul writes that “the first man [Adam] was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man [Christ] is from heaven” (v. 47). Where the first Adam, whom God breathed His Spirit into (Gen. 2:7), gave us death, the New Adam, God Himself conceived by the Spirit in the Virgin’s womb, gives us life.

The early Church, as we have already seen in the extracts from Ignatius, Justin and Augustine, preserved this truth about Mary, and thus also the truth about Christ’s incarnation. The Lateran Synod in 649 brings all of this together in saying that the faithful are to “acknowledge the holy and ever virgin and immaculate Mary as really and truly the Mother of God, inasmuch as she, in the fullness of time, and without seed, conceived by the Holy Spirit, God the Word Himself”.

Recently in the Church, the perpetual virginity of Mary has been seen in ecclesiological, and not just Christological, terms, and this gives us another reason why this dogma is important. The Second Vatican Council teaches in Lumen Gentium that “in the mystery of the Church, which is itself rightly called mother and virgin, the Blessed Virgin stands out in eminent and singular fashion as exemplar both of virgin and mother... The Church indeed, contemplating her hidden sanctity, imitating her charity and faithfully fulfilling the Father’s will, by receiving the word of God in faith becomes herself a mother. By her preaching she brings forth to a new and immortal life the sons who are born to her in baptism, conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of God. She herself is a virgin, who keeps the faith given to her by her Spouse whole and entire. Imitating the mother of her Lord, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, she keeps with virginal purity an entire faith, a firm hope and a sincere charity.” (LG 63-64) Pope John Paul II draws this

out more in his encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, particularly in Part 3.2: Mary is present in the Church as an example, a model of faith; her virginity and motherhood are part of the Church's very mission to preserve and spread the Gospel.

I mentioned earlier the Reformation; it is true to say that, generally, the perpetual virginity of Mary is not believed by Protestants (though there are individual exceptions). Some hold to the virginal birth of Jesus, but say that Mary and Joseph had other children; others of a more 'liberal' persuasion don't believe in the virgin birth; some radical scholars even prefer to side with the anti-Christian Greek philosopher Celsus (cf. Origen, *Against Celsus*, 32), asserting that Jesus was the illegitimate son of Mary and a Roman soldier. Now, it is true that the New Testament refers to the "brothers" of Jesus numerous times, mostly in the Gospels (e.g. Mt. 12:46; 13:55), using the Greek word *adelphos*. This word, however, has a very wide spectrum of meaning. It can mean almost any male relative (with the exception of "father" and "son"); e.g. cousins, brothers-in-law, even friends. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, Lot is called Abraham's *adelphos* in Gen. 14:14, even though Gen. 11:26-28 makes it clear he is actually Abraham's nephew.

This biblical use of *adelphos* is an example of what is called a Hebraism. Hebrew (also Aramaic) has no word for cousin; instead, it uses the word for "brother", 'ach, or a circumlocution such as "the son of my uncle". This usage is carried over into their Greek; Greek has separate words for "brother" and "cousin", but since the writers of the New Testament thought in Hebrew/Aramaic, they used *adelphos* to refer to brothers, cousins, brothers-in-law, etc. This linguistic evidence is consistent with the historic position of the Church, which is that, when the New Testament writers appear to refer to Jesus' brothers, they in fact are referring to cousins.

### **Mary, Immaculately Conceived**

The third Marian dogma, the Immaculate Conception, was solemnly defined by Pius IX on Dec. 8, 1854 in his encyclical *Ineffibilis Deus*. To quote:

The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God, and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Saviour of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin.

Though defined only recently, belief in the Immaculate Conception had been part of the Church's teaching for centuries before this: Sixtus IV had established it as a feast day in 1476. It is not, as is commonly claimed by

some, an innovation without any foundation in history. If people are interested, Pope St. Pius X gives a far fuller historical background to the dogma in his encyclical *Ad diem illum laetissimum* in 1904.

Unlike Mary, Mother of God and Mary, Ever-Virgin, which are rooted in Christology and Mary's role in the incarnation, the Immaculate Conception is about the person of Mary. Let us be clear, however: this does not make the dogma less important. Divine motherhood and perpetual virginity ascertain and deepen our understanding of Jesus Christ; they contribute to answering the question: who is Jesus Christ? The Immaculate Conception (and the Assumption, but we'll deal with that in a little while) shows us how we are to follow Jesus Christ. Mary, Immaculately Conceived shows us that we are called to the highest possible and most intimate union with God.

Let's take a couple of steps back. What does the dogma mean? It means that Mary was preserved from the "stain" of original sin, i.e. from the first moment of her existence, she was free from the corrupting influence of original sin, and filled with the sanctifying grace of God. This grace was made known by Gabriel's salutation to Mary: "Hail, full of grace!" Where Eve, also free from the influence of original sin, said no to God, Mary, free from that same influence, said yes. St Jerome's maxim aptly describes the effects of the Immaculate Conception: "Death through Eve, life through Mary".

Gabriel's greeting is also evidence for Mary's preservation from original sin. The word he uses in the Gospel of Luke is *kecharitomene*, and it is a perfect passive participle of *charitoo*, meaning "to fill or endow with grace." Being in the perfect tense, it indicates that Mary was graced in the past but with continuing effects in the present. Thus, it is not the case that the grace given to Mary is somehow dependent on Gabriel's greeting; Mary was full of God's grace before the Annunciation. And, indeed, this is what the Catholic faith teaches.

The Immaculate Conception helps us to look at the Blessed Virgin as a supreme example of the faith we should live out every day. It declares that following God means to be called and commissioned; as Mary was called to be the Mother of God and commissioned with the necessary grace, so we too each have our own specific callings from the Lord, and He gives us the graces we need through the Church and the sacraments, as well as through our prayer and devotional lives. It also declares that, just like Mary, we need to say yes to God, and live a life pleasing to Him based on His grace.

## Mary, Assumed into Heaven

Which leads us to the fourth, and final, Marian dogma: Mary, Assumed into Heaven. This was defined by Pope Pius XII in 1950 in his encyclical *Munificentissimus Deus*:

By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by our own authority, we pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: 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.

Though only defined very recently, this has long been held as true by the Church. Accounts of the Assumption have been around since at least the fourth century, and, in *Munificentissimus Deus*, Pius XII goes through the scriptural allusions to the Assumption, as well as the patristic and scholastic evidence for belief in it. For example, in Ps. 131:8, we read:

*Go up, Lord, to the place of your rest,  
you and the ark of your strength.*

Since a common image for Mary throughout the history of the Church has been that of the Ark of the Covenant, it seems fitting to see an allusion to the Assumption here. There is also what can be termed the negative historical evidence for the Assumption: the early cults of the saints and martyrs. When we read the accounts of the early Church, it is abundantly clear that relics of saints and martyrs were highly prized. Of Mary, however, there are no bones, there is no record of her bodily remains being venerated anywhere. This has always struck me as odd; surely, if there were relics of Mary, we'd all know about them?

Another reason for the Assumption is that it is, to an extent, the logical outworking of the Immaculate Conception. As Blessed John Henry Newman wrote in his *Meditations* (published in 1893, roughly a half-century before the solemn definition), "If Eve, the beautiful daughter of God, never would have become dust and ashes unless she had sinned, shall we not say that Mary, having never having never sinned, retained the gift which Eve by sinning lost? [...] Therefore we believe that, though she died for a short hour, as did Our Lord Himself, yet, like Him, and by His almighty power, she was raised again from the grave."

The Assumption is, however, primarily a vision of the ultimate destiny of the Church. *Lumen Gentium* 68 says that "just as the Mother of Jesus, glorified in body and soul in heaven, is the image and beginning of the Church as it is to be perfected in the world to come, so too does she shine forth on

earth, until the day of the Lord shall come, as a sign of sure hope and solace to the people of God during its sojourn on earth.” Mary is the eschatological fulfilment of the Church (LG 65), and a sign of hope to each of us that it is possible for us to please God this side of heaven.

And that brings us to the eschatological fulfilment of this talk, also known as the end. Any questions/comments/etc.?