

# Mary, The Mother of God Where It All Begins

## Introduction

One tragedy resulting from the rupture between Catholics and other Christians has been the recent polarization of opposing views regarding Mary. Sadly, devotion to Mary has become a kind of litmus test that determines if one is a Catholic or a Protestant. Pastor Charles Dickson addresses this issue pointing out the fault on both sides.

"A significant part of the divisiveness between Catholic and Protestant traditions has indeed been the place of the Virgin Mary in both faith and practice. Yet we must recognize that the split has been magnified beyond its real dimensions by misunderstandings on both sides, with Protestants accusing Catholics of using Mary to replace Christ and Catholics accusing Protestants of completely ignoring her position in Christian history. In the long run, both accusations are unfounded and serve only to further splinter the family of our Lord at a time when that family needs desperately to pull together." <sup>1</sup>

The reality is that there should be no contention regarding Mary's place in God's redemptive work. "While modern-day Protestants generally cringe at the suggestion of the Blessed Virgin as being a viable part of faith, this was, ironically enough, not a problem for the Protestant reformers. As Lutheran theologian Harding Meyer recently observed, 'Luther, Melancthon, and Zwingli not only did not question teachings about Mary, they explicitly adopted them.' These teachings included the Virgin Birth, the doctrine of the Theotokos, the *semper virgo* of the Fifth Ecumenical Council, and the sanctification of Mary as advocated by St. Bernard, St. Thomas Aquinas, and others. And even practices of Marian piety and devotion emerged, with which they may have had some questions, they did not view them as problems of sufficient magnitude to divide the Church."<sup>2</sup>

This essay will examine the biblical basis of the Catholic Church's teaching regarding Mary's title, the Mother of God.

## Teaching of the Catholic Church

"The Father of mercies willed that the Incarnation should be preceded by assent on the part of the predestined mother, so that just as a woman had a share in the coming of death, so also should a woman contribute to the coming of life."<sup>3</sup>

"*All generations will call me blessed*': 'The Church's devotion to the Blessed Virgin is intrinsic to Christian worship [citing Lk 1:48 and Paul VI's *Marialis cultus*, 56].' The Church rightly honors 'the Blessed Virgin with special devotion. From the most ancient times the Blessed Virgin has been honored with the title of 'Mother of God,'

to whose protection the faithful fly in all their dangers and needs. . . . This very special devotion. . . differs essentially from the adoration which is given to the incarnate Word and equally to the Father and the Holy Spirit, and greatly fosters this adoration' [citing *Lumen Gentium*, 66].<sup>4</sup>

The fact that the Catholic Church "honors" Mary, **but does not worship her** on an equal plane with God comes as a surprise to many Protestants. The official language of the Catholic Church is Latin. The distinctions that the Church makes in its official documents elucidate this point. The worship or adoration that is given to God alone is called *latria*. The adoration of *latria* paid to any creature, including Mary, is idolatry. Special honor, however, is given to the saints, because they are God's special friends and share in his glory. The honor directed to the saints is called *dulia*. Mary, who is a creature like the other saints, is given the highest honor because of her unique sharing in her Son's excellence. This honor given to Mary is called *hyperdulia*.

In honoring Mary Catholics are merely following the example of Christ. Jesus kept the Commandments perfectly. One of the Commandments is "honor your father **and your mother**." Just as Jesus' honor to his Father exceeds that of all others so, too, did the honor he gives his mother. In so doing Catholics are fulfilling the biblical prophesy: "henceforth all generations will call me blessed" (Lk 1:48). Why? Because Mary is now elevated to the status of a goddess? Absolutely not! "For he who is mighty has done great things for me" (Lk 1:49). In honoring Mary, God's masterpiece, we praise the Master, the Divine Artist.

Mary's title, the Mother of God, *Theotokos* - "God bearer," was formally defined at the third ecumenical council at Ephesus in the year 431. The issue at the council was the Nestorian heresy. It taught that Jesus Christ was merely a human person who was joined to the divine Person of God's Son. Therefore, according to Nestorius, it could only be said that Mary was the mother of Jesus, but not the mother of God, that is, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. The council's logic, which rejected Nestorianism, can be succinctly summarized in the following syllogism.

Mary is the mother of Jesus.  
Jesus is truly God.  
Therefore, Mary is the mother of God.

### **Scriptural Foundation**

There are passages in the New Testament that clearly attest to the reality that Mary is the mother of Jesus (Mt 1:18; Jn 2:1, 3; 19:25-26). There are other passages in the Bible which affirm the divinity of Jesus (Mt 1:23; Jn 20:28-29; Jn 14:9; Col 2:9; Mt 26:63-65; Jn 19:7). The conclusion is inevitable, unless one rejects Mary's maternity of Jesus or his divinity. Sacred Scripture explicitly affirms that Mary is the Mother of God when Elizabeth filled with the Holy Spirit proclaimed: "And why is it granted me, that the **mother of my Lord** should come to me" (Lk 1:43)?

Does this title, Mother of God, imply that Mary is in some way superior to God? Of course not! Mary is clearly a creature. But like all mothers, Mary gave birth to a person. In her case it was a divine Person, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. However, in giving birth to her Divine Son she was not giving birth to his divinity, which existed from all eternity.

### **Significance**

All the titles and honors attributed to Mary are connected to and stem from the staggering reality that she is the Mother of God. "Mary's role in the Church is inseparable from her union with Christ and flows directly from it."<sup>5</sup> "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."<sup>6</sup>

Although God wills it to be so, there was no absolute necessity that Jesus is born of Mary or anyone else in order that he redeems the world. It was only necessary that Jesus be fully human, like the first Adam whose sin plunged mankind into the darkness of sin and death. Adam, who was fully human, had no mother. Jesus could also have been truly human without the mediation of a mother. The fact that God determined otherwise reveals profound truths about the role he intended Mary to play in the work of salvation.

It would be a tragic mistake to narrow Mary's role to that of a mere biological incubator. She was called to be a mother in every sense of the word. The annunciation, conception and birth of Jesus were the beginning of a vocation as "the Mother." As a mother she guided the obedient young Jesus who "increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man" (Lk 2:52). During his public life she remained in the background, the model disciple, faithful and obedient. Indeed, it was her submission rather than mere biology that made her life praiseworthy (Lk 11:27-28). Mary's surrender to the will of God reached its climax when she "stood" at the foot of the cross actively offering her agony with that of her son (Jn 19:25-27).

### **Mary, the New Eve: "the Woman"**

Mary's role in salvation history was first revealed after the Fall when God confronted the perpetrators in the garden of Eden. "I will put enmity between you and **the woman**, and between your seed and **her seed**; he shall bruise your **head**, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen 3:15).

The Old Testament presents David as a type<sup>7</sup> of Jesus. David engaged in head crushing in his confrontation with Goliath.<sup>8</sup> Jesus, the fulfillment, crushed Satan's head on Golgotha, the hill called Skull.<sup>9</sup> The Bible also presents women engaged in head crushing who foreshadowed Mary, the New Eve.

In Judges 4:17-22 we learn that Jael drove a tent peg through the temple of Sisera. The language used to honor her because of this deed is significant. "Most bless among women is Jael" (Judg 4:21). This is the same language that St. Luke employs in his Gospel (Lk 1:28, 42). In Judges 9:53 "a certain woman" dropped an upper millstone on the head of Abimelech. Lastly, Judith cut off the head of Holofernes (Judith 13:6-8). The praise directed toward Judith is important. "And Uzziah said to her, 'O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all women on earth. ... May God grant this to be a perpetual honor to you'" (Judith 13:18, 20). This praise is reflected in Luke 1: 28, 42, 48. By employing the language of Septuagint Greek in these citations St. Luke is connecting Mary as the fulfillment of these Old Testament types.

St. John makes a similar connection between Mary and "the woman" of Genesis 3:15. At the beginning of his public ministry Jesus, himself, addresses his mother as "woman" (Jn 2:4) prior to working the miracle of Cana, the first of his signs. Jesus also addresses his mother as "woman" when he was on the cross (Jn 19:26). At the cross Mary participated with her son in his definitive act of crushing Satan's head. Jesus, the God made man and new Adam, conquered the devil, sin and death by the total sacrificial gift of himself to the Father as his body and soul are torn apart by his terrible suffering. Because of Jesus' infinite merits Mary was empowered to unite her agony with his as the sword of suffering pierced her soul (Lk 2:35). Lastly, in Revelation 12 John depicts Jesus and Mary in a death struggle with Satan. In verse 4 one discovers the only verse in the Bible other than Genesis 3:15 in which all the antagonists are depicted: the woman, the seed and the serpent.

### **The Ark of the Covenant**

What made the Ark of the Covenant so special? It was God's special presence manifested by the *shekinah* or glory cloud that overshadowed it (*episkiazo* in the Septuagint). St. Luke cleverly teaches that the Ark of the Covenant was a type, a mock-up, of Mary. He does this in two ways. First he employs the same Greek word, *episkiazo*, to describe the action of the Holy Spirit in the conception of Jesus in Mary's womb. "And the angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come over you, and the power of the Most High will **overshadow** [*episkiazo*] you'" (Lk 1:35).

Secondly, in describing Mary's visitation to her cousin Elizabeth, Luke cleverly draws a parallel between the Ark of the Covenant traveling to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:1-16) and Mary going to Elizabeth's home (Lk 1:39-56).

## **Ark of Covenant**

to Jerusalem  
(2 Sam 6:12,15-16)

in house of Obededom  
(2 Sam 6:10)

David danced with joy  
(2 Sam 6:14)

David said: "How can the ark of  
the Lord come to me?"  
(2 Sam 6:9)

People rejoice  
(2 Sam 6:12)

Shouting  
(2 Sam 6:15)

the Ark remains in the house of  
Obededom for 3 months  
(2 Sam 6:11)

## **Mary**

goes to town in the hill country  
(Lk 1:39)

in house of Zechariah  
(Lk 1:40);

John leaps in mother's womb  
(Lk 1:41)

Elizabeth said: "And why has this  
happened to me, that the mother of my  
Lord comes to me?" (Lk 1:43)

Mary rejoices  
(Lk 1:47)

Loud cry  
(Lk 1:42)

Mary remains with Elizabeth for three  
months (Lk 1:56)

John also describes Mary as the Ark of the Covenant in the Book of Revelation. "Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, loud noises, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail" (Rev 11:19). What does the ark look like? John describes the ark in the next verse. "And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery" (Rev 12:1). That the child is Christ is clear from verse 4. Mary is the woman.

## **The Mother of the Redeemed**

In becoming the mother of Jesus, the Catholic Church teaches that Mary became the mother of the redeemed. "The Virgin Mary ...is acknowledged and honored as being truly the Mother of God and of the redeemer. ... She is 'clearly the mother of the members of Christ' ... since she has by her charity joined in bringing about the birth of believers in the Church, who are members of its head."<sup>10</sup>

This truth finds a foundation in Sacred Scripture. John portrays Mary as the mother of the redeemed in the Book of Revelation. "Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus" (Rev 12:17).

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1. Charles Dickson, *A Protestant Pastor Looks at Mary* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., c. 1996), p. 107. This excellent little book should be must reading for all Christians. The serious student who wishes to study the biblical basis for Catholic theology regarding Mary should investigate the following works of outstanding scholarship: Ignace de la Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant* translated by Bertrand Buby (New York: Alba House, c. 1992); Bertrand Buby, *Mary of Galilee*, 3 vols. (New York: Alba House, c. 1994); Stefano M. Manelli, *All Generations Shall Call Me Blessed: Biblical Mariology*, translated by Peter Damian Fehlner (New Bedford: Academy of the Immaculate, c. 1989); Andre Feuillet, *Jesus and His Mother: the Role of the Virgin Mary in Salvation History and the Place of Woman in the Church According to the Lucan Infancy Narratives, and According to St. John* translated by Leonard Maluf (Still River: St. Bede's Publications, c. 1974; Reginald Garrigou-Lagrance, *The Mother of the Savior and Our Interior Life*, translated by Bernard J. Kelly (Rockford: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1993).
  2. Ibid., p. 108.
  3. Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, 56; also:61.
  4. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, # 971.
  5. Ibid., # 964.
  6. Ibid., # 487.
  7. To develop an understanding of "types" or "typology" one can consult: John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, c. 1965), pp. 903-904 or the fine work of Protestant scholarship Geoffrey W. Bromiley editor, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, c. 1988), Vol. 4, pp. 930-932.
  8. See 1 Sam 17:46, 49, 51, 54, 57.
  9. Mt 27:33; Jn 19:17; Mk 15:22; Lk 23:33.
  10. Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, 53.
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