

A CATHOLIC



UNDERSTANDING OF MARY

Who is Mary of Nazareth? What do Catholics believe about her? What doctrines of faith are connected in some way to her? Why and how do we relate to her as an intercessor?

MARY was, of course, an historical figure—Miriam (her Hebrew name) the mother of Jesus of Nazareth. She had some contact with Jesus during the period of his adult public preaching. She was in the circle of disciples after the Resurrection who experienced the outpouring of God’s Spirit. Beyond that the gospel portraits of her are quite meager.

In Mark’s gospel she is part of Jesus’ family who try to see him out of concern for his well-being. They are worried about him. In reply, Jesus uses the occasion to teach: “Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of God is brother and sister and mother to me.” Even family relationships gain their full meaning only when they are at the service of the reign of God, which breaks into our lives through Jesus.

In the Gospel of Luke Mary is the model disciple. Luke tells us the stories of Jesus’ conception and birth through Mary’s experiences. She is the one who says, upon learning of her pregnancy, “Let it be done to me according to your word.” This is Mary’s “Yes” to her role in salvation. Thus, when the scene is depicted where the family comes to see Jesus and he emphasizes the pre-eminence of doing the will of God, we already have experienced Mary as the first and model disciple to do so.

Finally, in John’s gospel Mary takes on an even greater symbolic role. At the wedding feast at Cana, she tells the waiters to “Do what he [Jesus] tells you,” even after Jesus seems to reject her intercession by saying “Woman, what has your concern to do with me?” [John 2:1-11]. Mary both acts as intercessor and points to her son, not herself, as the focus. At the cross, Mary is with the other faithful women disciples when Jesus says, “Woman, behold your son; son, behold your mother.” [John 19:26-27]. These words are spoken to Mary and the “beloved disciple,” and forever connect Mary as Mother to the community of disciples, the Church.

Further development of Mary’s role in the Church’s life takes place after the biblical period. Popular devotions to her arise within cultures that, in pre-Christian times, had a great emphasis on a “Mother Goddess” figure. Because of that we still see some confusion among Christians as to how to properly understand Mary’s role. But the main developments take place because of theological concerns.

TEACHING ABOUT MARY



*Detail from Velasquez’
Adoration of the Magi*

“**BLESSED VIRGIN**” is the most common title given to Mary. It refers first and foremost to the fact that Mary was a virgin prior to the birth of Jesus. Jesus’ conception was graced in a special way. This teaching tries to safeguard the uniqueness of Jesus’ unity of divine and human natures. Jesus was “son of Mary” and therefore fully human, but also “Son of God” and therefore fully divine. Such a teaching is actually focused on the question of our salvation. In Christ we can truly be saved, because he can mediate for us that oneness between divinity and humanity.

Even in the early Church the virginity of Mary was often understood to extend for her lifetime (“ever-virgin”) and this has shaped the Catholic interpretation of certain biblical texts. In those passages that talk about Jesus’ brothers and sisters, the Catholic Church has interpreted the relationship to be a lesser bond of kinship (the same word at times can be translated as “cousin,” for example), or as step-brothers and sisters who were children of Joseph by some previous, unattested marriage (common interpreta-

tion in the Eastern Church to this day).

Because devotion to Mary as “ever-virgin” has inspired countless lives of consecrated virginity, and because of its acceptance from the early Church on, this understanding remains important to Catholic teaching. However, it is not as close to the core of the Christian faith as is the teaching on the virginal conception of Jesus. The Church’s teaching on the ‘hierarchy of truths” allows us to both affirm Mary’s perpetual virginity and at the same time not make that teaching into a stumbling block to greater unity with those Christian communities who understand Jesus’ brothers and sisters to be Mary’s children as well.

“**MOTHER OF GOD**” is another title that attempts to safeguard our understanding of Jesus’ unique divine-human nature. In 431 at the Council of Ephesus the Church declared it was proper to call Mary not merely the “Christ- or Messiah-bearer” but also *Theotokos*, “the God-bearer.” This ancient title comes into our language as “the Mother of God,” and we celebrate this feast every January 1st. But notice how carefully worded that understanding is. It does not understand Mary to be, literally, “*God’s* mother”. That would be heresy. It means she is the “Mother or Bearer of the Divine One,” Jesus Christ. In protecting our belief in the divinity of Jesus this teaching also suggests that every human person has the potential to be “God-bearers” in our own way: to give birth to God’s Word in our hearts and lives so as to make manifest in all we do, Jesus Christ as God’s Son.

The “**IMMACULATE CONCEPTION**” is a doctrine which states that Mary was “free from original sin” from the very first moment of her existence. At first this looks like an odd doctrine. Why worry about this at all? There is no direct biblical statement of it. Passages like Luke 1:28 (Mary as “favored” or “full of grace”) have since been interpreted as compatible with the doctrine, but there are other acceptable interpretations of these passages as well.

Again, to understand a Marian doctrine we ask: what does it safeguard about Jesus and what does it help us understand about ourselves as disciples? What the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception safeguards about Jesus is that his redeeming grace effects salvation for all who are saved, not just for Christians. All are in need of salvation, and wherever and however they find it, that salvation is ultimately a gift in and through Jesus Christ. Mary is “free of original sin” in virtue of her role in the history of salvation, as the mother of our Savior. The “ordinary” way such a situation comes to us is through baptism into Christ. But what the doctrine helps us understand is that salvation is always a gift from God, not our own doing. For every human being God’s grace is more original than sin. We celebrate this feast on December 8th every year.

The “**ASSUMPTION OF MARY**” is celebrated on August 15th and states that Mary has achieved her final, definitive, resurrected state (“body and soul”). In other words, Christ’s resurrection is already full and complete not just for him alone but at least for one other—Mary. Our hope to one day share in Jesus’ resurrection is not in vain. Whether that takes place for us immediately at death or at the end of time in the final resurrection is not answered by this dogma. Either view is compatible with a Catholic understanding. What is proclaimed is that Christ’s resurrection has conquered sin and death definitively so that, although sin and evil surround us daily and we still struggle against them, they do not have ultimate victory.

MARY AS INTERCESSOR

There is something about the virgin-mother image that captures both the mystery of God uniquely at work and the accessibility



of a loving mother who cares deeply for us. Mary as intercessor—bringing our prayers before her son Jesus who will not refuse a mother’s request—is a powerful image that has long been sought out in Christian prayer. The very popular and widespread prayer-form called the Rosary builds precisely on this relationship to one another in Christ and in asking Mary to pray for us. Other popular Marian devotions such as the one connected to our Mother of Perpetual Help do the same.



Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe

Some of the most popular sources for seeking Mary as an intercessor come from various “apparitions” of Mary—religious experiences of individuals or groups that get connected to specific times and places. Some of the most influential have become destinations for thousands of pilgrims each year. For example, we have Our Lady of Lourdes in France, where people pray and seek healing in the spring of water that Bernadette discovered while having apparitions of Mary, imaged as Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. Or in Ireland Our Lady of Knock has been the destination of countless pilgrims. Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal and many others as well. In the Americas the most influential image of Mary, also connected to an apparition, this time to a young native Mexican Juan Diego, is that of Our Lady of Guadalupe. We celebrate that feast on December 12 each year. Pope John Paul II declared her “patroness of the Americas.”

Granted that some Catholics can be quite superstitious and some even misunderstand that all prayer is ultimately addressed to God, nevertheless the devotion to Mary has been a powerful motivator of faith in numerous cultures and across centuries. That may be why so many claim an “appearance” of Mary to

them over the years. Officially approved apparitions are never matters of doctrine, but they can be authentic manifestations of God's goodness. No Catholic has to believe in them or use them in his or her own devotion. And, such private revelation is always tested against the authentic Tradition of the Church that comes to us from Scripture and the teaching of the Church. But even though no one needs to use these in their own prayer, we should not minimize the strength that can come from such intercessory prayer. Just as we ask one another to pray for us or people in need, so too Christians turn to the communion of saints and ask them to pray for us. And to the pre-eminent saint, Mary. Such popular piety is at the heart of what leads to various other titles of Mary: Queen of the Universe, Our Lady of Good Counsel, Our Lady of Sorrows, and so on. Asking fellow Christians to pray to God for us does not take away from Jesus' unique intercessory role. Asking Mary to pray for us does not as well. In addition to the rosary, various litanies to the Blessed Virgin have been composed over the years and many feast days dedicated to her honor. In the Church the months of October and May are traditionally times of special prayer to Mary. Very clearly, Mary as Intercessor plays a large role in Catholic life, art, symbol, and prayer.

CONCLUSION

Every Marian dogma safeguards some aspect of Jesus' unique role and points to a truth about our own discipleship. To appreciate that unique role of Jesus and to see Mary as our "sister in faith" is the common starting point. In addition, we as Christians are invited to and can benefit by relating to Mary as our "mother in faith," ever-ready to intercede on our behalf.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What do you think Mary experienced as a mother while Jesus was preaching and healing? When he was arrested, tried and crucified? After the news that he is risen? When she was filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost?
2. Even though the gospels do not support the image of Mary embracing the body of her son, after it was taken down from the cross, what does that Pieta image evoke in you? Are there any other images of Mary that are important to you or move you deeply? Why? Does it matter that the New Testament is mostly silent about Mary?
3. When you ask someone to pray for you, does that include Mary and the communion of saints? If not, why not?
4. Pray for one week, including asking Mary's help as intercessor for something or someone that is in great need, or pray a rosary for that person or need. At the end of the week, reflect on your experience of praying in that way.

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