Holy Mary, Mother of God, Pray for Us

CHAPTER 22

Mary, Conceived without Sin

The truths of revelation are cared for by the Magisterium, nurtured in the worship life of the Church, strengthened by theological reflection, and often supported by popular piety. Such is the case of the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception. A true story will help. In July 1830, Sister Catherine Laboure in Paris was awakened by a luminous child who led her to the chapel. The Blessed Mother appeared to her and conversed with her for two hours. On November 27, she had a second vision. Mary appeared standing on a globe with rays of light flowing from her hands. Around her were the words, "O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you."

Catherine saw an M with a cross above it with two hearts, one crowned with thorns and the other with a sword. Twelve stars framed this picture. Mary asked Catherine to have a religious medal made of what she saw. Those who wore the medal—known as the Miraculous Medal—would receive blessings through Mary's intercession. Catherine conveyed this message to her confessor and bound him not to reveal who she was. Millions of the medals have been minted ever since. Catherine moved to a rural convent where she lived in obscurity for the rest of her life. Eight months before her death she revealed her identity. She was canonized in 1947.

1. Is someone like Mary foreshadowed in the Old Testament?

The Old Testament does not specifically speak of Mary, but it does recite events that form a unity, purpose, and *pattern*. The life of Mary is part of that pattern of salvation history. This history is not seen as a series of disconnected events. The people of faith discern a pattern, a plan, a unity in the entire experience, from creation to redemption and the end of the world. Mary reflects and brings fuller meaning to events that preceded her.

From the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*...

Advocate, Helper, Benefactress...

A. How is the greatness of Mary seen at the Annunciation?

At the announcement that she would give birth to "the Son of the Most High" without knowing man, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary responded with the obedience of faith, certain that "with God nothing will be impossible": "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be [done] to me according to your word."[1] Thus, giving her consent to God's word, Mary becomes the mother of Jesus. Espousing the divine will for salvation wholeheartedly, without a single sin to restrain her, she gave herself entirely to the person and to the work of her Son; she did so in order to serve the mystery of redemption with him and dependent on him, by God's grace.[2] (*Catechism*, 494)

B. How closely is Mary linked to the mystery of the Church?

Mary's role in the Church is inseparable from her union with Christ and flows directly from it. "This union of the mother with the Son in the work of salvation is made manifest from the time of virginal conception up to his death."[3]

After her Son's Ascension, Mary "aided the beginnings of the Church by her prayers."[4] (*Catechism*, 964-965)

C. Why do we ask Mary to pray for us?

"This motherhood of Mary in the order of grace continues uninterruptedly from the consent which she loyally gave at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the cross, until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect. Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation....Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix."[5] (*Catechism*, 969)

[1] Lk 1:28-38; cf. Rom 1:5. / [2] Cf. *LG* 56. / [3] *LG* 57. / [4] *LG* 69. / [5] *LG* 62.

Church tradition teaches that Mary, the virgin who will give birth to the Messiah, is foreshadowed in several Scripture references. For example, we learn in the Old Testament that a woman will give birth to a savior from evil: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers" (Gen 3:15).

Also, we see in Isaiah the prophecy that a virgin will give birth to a messiah. "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel" (Isa 7:14).

Church tradition sees in the ark of the covenant a symbol of Mary. Just as the ark "carried" the presence of God, so did Mary carry the Son of God in her womb.

2. Why is Mary's consent to be the mother of God important?

At the Annunciation, the angel Gabriel asked Mary to be the mother of God's Son. She surrendered to the call, saying, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Lk 1:38).

Again, in her song of joy, the *Magnificat,* Mary declared that "the Mighty One has done great things for me" (Lk 1:49).

Mary's consent is important because she sums up personally and collectively the faith of the good people of Israel who are obedient to God. In addition, her consent helped set in motion, historically, the salvation of the world.

3. How is Mary's relationship to Jesus' ministry portrayed in the Gospels?

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus speaks of his mother, who practices the obedience of faith. "Who are my mother and my brothers?...Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mk 3:33, 35). In Luke (8:21) and Matthew (12:50) we see this theme repeated.

John's Gospel illustrates Mary's faith in action. At the wedding of Cana, Mary calls Jesus to begin his active ministry. The scene concludes with these words: "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory" (Jn 2:11).

John further shows Mary as loyal mother and woman of faith at the foot of the cross. Jesus calls her to be the mother of the Church: "Woman, here is your son" (Jn 19:26). The story of Mary's faith is crowned by her presence at Pentecost. Here, she stood as the principal witness of faith and woman of prayer among the believers in the upper room, awaiting the coming of the Spirit (Acts 1:14).

4. Is Mary the woman spoken of in the Book of Revelation?

Revelation tells us, "A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun...gave birth to a son" (12:1, 5). Later, a dragon appeared and goes on to "make war on the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus" (12:17).

Some biblical interpreters see the woman as Israel giving birth to the Messiah and the Church, which gives birth to Christians. Many others see the woman as Mary giving birth to both Jesus and Christianity.

There seem to be enough persuasive arguments to favor the woman as symbolizing both the Church and Mary. The Fathers of the Church see Mary as the symbol of a Mother Church that begets Christians. It is also interesting that the liturgy for the Assumption uses this scene from Revelation for the first reading.

5. Was Mary always a virgin?

The Catholic Church holds it as a matter of faith that Mary was always a virgin. The Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed affirm that Jesus was "born of the virgin Mary." "The deepening of faith in the virginal motherhood led the Church to confess Mary's real and perpetual virginity even in the act of giving birth to the Son of God made man.[6]...The liturgy of the Church celebrates Mary as *Aeiparthenos,* the 'Ever-Virgin'"[7] (*Catechism,* 499).

6. What is the religious significance of Mary's virginity?

Speaking of Mary's virginity, the Church addresses the uniqueness of Jesus, and that he comes from God. Her virginity also signifies that, in Christ, the human race has a *new beginning.* The message of Mary's virginity also tells us that God works through human agents—often the weak, the humble, and the poor.

7. What did the Council of Ephesus say about Mary?

Christians in the fourth and fifth centuries devoted considerable attention to the question of Jesus' divinity and humanity. They struggled with the issue of how the two natures were united in Jesus and sought to protect his full humanity and divinity, and the unity between these two elements.

At the Council of Ephesus (held in 431), the Church Fathers rejected the teaching of Nestorius, which stated there were two persons in Jesus: one human and the other divine. Instead, the council resolved that there is a divine and human nature in Christ, but only one *divine person*. We find God, they said, in the *man* Jesus.

In order to reinforce this teaching, the council bestowed upon Mary the title of *Theotokos* (in Greek, the God carrier) or the Mother of God.

8. What is the meaning of Mary's Immaculate Conception?

On December 8, 1854, Pope Pius IX declared that "the Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by the singular grace and privilege of almighty God, and in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, preserved immune from all stain of original sin."

We find the rationale for this in the opening prayer for the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception: "Father, you prepared the Virgin Mary to be the worthy mother of your Son. You let her share beforehand in the salvation Christ would bring by his death, and kept her sinless from the first moment of her conception."

9. What is the meaning of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary?

In 1950, Pope Pius XII declared the dogma of Mary's Assumption. In doing so, he said, "It was her crowning glory to be preserved from the corruption of the tomb, and like her Son before her, to conquer death and be raised body and soul to the glory of heaven."

The Collect at the Mass during the Day for the solemnity of Mary's Assumption, celebrated each August 15, states, "Almighty ever-living God, who assumed the Immaculate Virgin Mary, the Mother of your Son, body and soul into heavenly glory, grant, we pray, that, always attentive to the things that are above, we may merit to be sharers of her glory."

10. How does Mary affect our lives as Christians?

First, Mary is a *symbol* of the Church. Just as she gave birth to Jesus, so does the Church give birth to Christians in the baptismal font. At the same time, Mary is our spiritual mother, called by Jesus to do this when at the cross he said to her, "Woman, here is your son" (Jn 19:26).

Second, Mary is a *model* for Christian believers. She was the first and greatest Christian. She has been a luminous model of faith, hope, and love. Her "yes" at the Annunciation was the beginning of a lifelong surrender to the will of God.

There is no other believer in Jesus who has been honored more than Mary in the history of the Church. Nowhere can one find a greater example of strong Christian behavior. For this reason, Mary has been lovingly upheld as a model for each of us.

Third, Mary *prays* for us as our loving Mother and fellow Christian. The Hail Mary remains one of our most revered and popular prayers. We know that Jesus is our Savior and principal mediator with the Father (1 Tim 2:5-6). However, because of her unique dignity, special place in salvation, and closeness to Jesus, Mary is a most powerful intercessor with God for the needs of his people.

11. What is the communion of saints?

The communion of saints is the union of all Christ's disciples, those who are living as well as those who are already in the next life. In this regard, a saint refers to anyone who is in union with Christ, not just those Christians who have been canonized saints.

In addition to its reference to the fellowship of believers, the communion of saints is a belief in the power of intercessory prayer. Those of us on earth pray and sacrifice for our dead brothers and sisters in Christ who are in the process of "purgation" to gain entrance into heaven. Meanwhile, we ask the Blessed Mother, the saints, and all those gone before us to pray to God for our intentions.

12. What is the role of canonized saints in our daily lives?

The Church occasionally holds canonization services, at which certain persons are declared to be in heaven and formally listed among the saints. The saints remind us of our heavenly goal and inspire us to reaffirm our dedication to our own faith journey and final destiny in God.

In a number of ways various saints model for us good Christian values. These saintly heroes and heroines inspire us to practice Christian virtues. All of these holy people inspire love of God, neighbor, and self. In addition, they pray for us to the Lord for our needs.

13. What are some of the ways the saints witness to Christian values?

The martyrs of the Church witnessed to Christ in their extraordinary courage in the face of pain and suffering. They expressed an unquestioned willingness to die for Christ and our faith convictions.

We find noteworthy examples in the lives of Francis of Assisi, who shows us the importance of poverty of spirit, Thérèse of Lisieux, who exemplifies the finest qualities of daily living, and Edith Stein, unbelieving Jewish scholar seeking truth who freely embraced the faith, became a Carmelite nun, and died as a martyr of the Holocaust.

Believers like Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac instruct us in the merits of serving the needs of the poor. The work of Elizabeth Seton and John Baptist de la Salle stressed the need for Christian-centered education. Other fine examples can be found in the work of Joan of Arc, and also Catherine of Siena, who worked to alleviate many of the world's social ills.

14. Can only canonized saints fill these hero and heroine roles?

No. There are many other people besides those who have been canonized who serve as inspirations for our lives. In our own time, women like Dorothy Day and men like Cardinal Joseph Bernardin and Archbishop Fulton Sheen fulfill this role very well. Protestants such as Corrie Ten Boom and her holy father and sister can inspire us.

15. What, then, is the communion of saints achieving?

By the saving power of Jesus Christ, the communion of saints witnesses the message of salvation, strives to be a community of love and mutual concern, and reaches out to the needs of all people. These goals are achieved according to the varying capacities of those in the communion.

A universal hymn of praise is given to the origin and destiny of the communion of saints by the strength of the Spirit. To this aim they sing praise to God. "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power to our God" (Rev 19:1).

Living This Message

In a Christmas cover story about Mary some years ago, LIFE magazine estimated that two billion Hail Marys are prayed every day. It is probably the world's most popular prayer, and serves to remind people of the role of Mary in the life of faith. Among Catholics, Mary is the most beloved figure after Jesus. In the *Magnificat* the Holy Spirit moved Mary to sing that God promises that all nations will call her blessed. When we pray in the Hail Mary, "Blessed art thou among women," we fulfill these words of her *Magnificat*.

Mary's greatness is her calling and capacity to turn attention away from herself to focus it upon Jesus and his Church. Mary's only joy and love is Jesus. She would be disappointed should we forget Christ and favor her. Her purpose in life was conceiving, giving birth to, and raising Jesus Christ the Son of God. Christ was the supreme reason for her existence and destiny. Her intercessory prayers on our behalf are effective and a blessing for us all.

Discuss This Message

What has been your experience of devotion to Mary?

Read More About This Message

Catechism for Adults: Chapter 12, "Mary: The Church's First and Most Perfect Member," pages 141 – 149.

[6] Cf. DS 291; 294; 427; 442; 503; 571; 1880. / [7] Cf. *LG* 52.