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# *Marian Mariology*

## CHAPTER 26



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 26

### **Mary, the Blessed Virgin**

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

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Mary, the Blessed Virgin, mother of Jesus Christ and, according to Roman Catholic theology, the greatest of the Christian saints. The title “Mary” occurs only once in the Old Testament as the name of Moses’ sister (Exodus 15:20). Its etymology has been variously traced to mean beautiful, bitter, rebellion, illuminatrix, lady, and beloved of God. Scholars prefer the last meaning, derived from the Egyptian, which may be explained by the four centuries’ sojourn of the Israelites in Egypt.

**Life.** The Gospel account of Mary's life begins with the appearance of the archangel Gabriel at Nazareth to announce her choice as mother of the Messiah. Though espoused to Joseph, she intended to remain a virgin as suggested in her question, “How shall this be done, since I do not know man?” The angel assured her the power of the Most High would overshadow her, at which Mary gave her consent, “Be it done to me according to your word.” Immediately she went to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth, who had previously been sterile and of whom the angel foretold that she would bear a son (John the Baptist) in her old age.

On her visit to Elizabeth, Mary sang the Magnificat, “My soul doth magnify the Lord,” which recalls the canticle of Anna, mother of Samuel, the prophet (I Kings 2:1-10). When she returned to Nazareth, Joseph realized that Mary was pregnant and thought

In the Gothic period, it was the “Mother of the Redeemer,” featuring the merciful kindness of the Savior and of His mother as companion in the redemptive work of her Son. It corresponds to the “age of faith” and the time of the Church's preoccupation with interior reformation of life and ecclesiastical discipline. During the Renaissance, “Mother and Child” were the prevalent theme, graced by such names as Fra Angelico, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Fra Lippo Lippi, Botticelli, Correggio, Dolci, Perugino, Titian, and Verrocchio in Italy; Van Eyck, Memling, and Rubens in Flanders; and Hans Holbein the younger and Dürer in Germany. Typical of the baroque style was Mary's role as “Conqueror of Satan”; and in modern times of “Mediatrice of Grace,” strengthened by historical association of the Blessed Virgin with reported revelations at Lourdes and Fatima, and to such mystics as St. Margaret Mary, Catherine Labouré, Don Bosco, and the Curé of Ars.

The Marian theme has entered the literary culture of all nations, including those in Asia, Islamic as well as non- Islamic, though perhaps with more accent in the Latin countries and France.

It was said of Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340-1400) that he was a good servant of Mary and that in her honor he “wrote a full many a line.” Taking all his writings together, we find about five hundred lines that are explicitly Marian poetry, omitting incidental allusions to the Virgin. Almost half are in “The Prioress' Tale” alone. His poem “A.B.C.” is a collection of epithets that have survived to modern times, for example, “But mercy, Lady, at the great assize / When we shall come before the High Justice,” and “Fleeing I flee for socour to thi tente / Me for to hyde from tempest ful of drede.” Among the later English poets, Richard Crashaw, Francis Thompson, Coventry Patmore, and Gerard Manley Hopkins; and, among essayists, Newman, Chesterton, and Belloc have left a deep Marian impress. Many of the poems have been put into song, as Crashaw's “Gloriosa Domina” (O Glorious Lady), which begins, “Hail, most high, most humble one / Above the world; below thy Son,” and ends, “O boundless hospitality / The Feast of all things feeds on thee.”

Writers in many religious traditions have described the ennobling influence of faith in Mary's dignity on the life and literature of Western thought. The first of all sentiments which they believe distinguishes an advanced civilization is that of reverence for womanhood. By this norm, it is held, the honor and respect paid to Mary as the ideal of her sex have done more to elevate the status of women than any other postulate of the Christian religion.

William Wordsworth in England and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in the United States have left in their poetry memorials of this inspiration. The “Virgin” of Wordsworth is addressed as “Woman, above all women glorified / Our tainted nature's solitary boast.” In Longfellow's “Christus,” if Christianity gave us nothing more than “this example of all womanhood,” this were enough to prove it higher and truer than all the creeds the world had known before.

End

of putting her away privately, but an angel appeared to him and revealed the mystery.

In response to a census decree of Caesar Augustus, Mary and Joseph, who were both of Davidic descent, went to David's city of Bethlehem, where Jesus was born in a stable. Shepherds came to adore the Christ Child, announced to them by the angels, and they found Mary and Joseph with the infant, lying in a manger. After eight days the child was circumcised and given the name Jesus, which He had been called by the angel Gabriel. Forty days later, Mary and Joseph came to the temple at Jerusalem to be purified according to the law of Moses, and to offer her Son to the Lord together with a sacrifice of a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons. At this presentation, an old man, Simeon, took Jesus in his arms and foretold Mary's share in the future sufferings of her Son. “Your own soul a sword shall pierce,” he told her, “that out of many hearts thoughts may be revealed” (Douay Version).

Warned in a dream that Herod wished to destroy the child, Joseph fled to Egypt with Mary and Jesus and remained there until the death of Herod. The Gospels are silent about Mary during Christ's life in Nazareth except for one dramatic incident when Jesus was 12 years old. His parents had brought Him to Jerusalem at Paschal (Passover) time, and then lost Him for three days. Finding Him in the temple in the midst of the rabbis, His mother asked Him why He had done this. In their first recorded dialogue, Jesus replied that He must be about His Father's business.

Mary was with Christ at the beginning of His public life, when, as a result of her intercession, He changed water into wine at the marriage feast in Cana. She was in His company at Capernaum for a short time, on occasion followed Him in His ministry, and at least once was the object of comparison which Jesus made between her and His spiritual followers, “who hear the word of God and keep it.”

She stood beneath the cross on Calvary and was placed in the care of the Apostle John, being told: “Behold your son.” After the Ascension, Mary waited at Jerusalem with the apostles and disciples for the coming of the Holy Spirit. On Pentecost Sunday the Holy Spirit descended on them in the form of fiery tongues. There are no further biographical data about Mary in the New Testament.

According to tradition, Mary lived for a time in or near Ephesus, but her permanent home after Pentecost seems to have been Jerusalem. There is no certainty of the place and date of Mary's death, although Ephesus and 12 years after Christ's Ascension appear the most likely.

**Theology.** While there has been considerable development in Marian theology over the centuries, particularly in the Roman Catholic Church, the main streams of doctrine have their sources in the early patristic age. Thus before the Council of Nicaea (325), at least a dozen major writers, including Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Cyprian treat of Mary's role in the redemption.

Mary's title, "Mother of God," was first defined against Nestorius at the Council of Ephesus (431), but the concept goes back to the period immediately following that of the apostles. The basis in Scripture is the twofold theme of the Gospels, that Jesus was true God and that Mary was truly the mother of Jesus. Ignatius of Antioch (d. 107) wrote, "Our God Jesus Christ was carried in Mary's womb, according to God's plan of salvation." The title *Theotokos* (Mother of God) became current after the third century. It was used by Origen (c. 185-c. 254); and Gregory Nazianzen, writing about 382, said, "If anyone does not recognize the holy Mary as Mother of God he is separated from the Divinity."

The Nestorian objection that Mary could not be the Mother of God because she gave birth to the human nature only was met by Christian apologists, who pointed out that not the nature, as such, but the person was conceived and born. Since Mary conceived and bore the second person of the Trinity, they argued, she is truly the Mother of God.

Consequent on her divine maternity, Mary transcends in dignity all created persons and stands next to her divine Son in holiness. She is honored by the Church with a special veneration, *hyperdulia*, distinguished from that accorded to other saints, which is *dulia*, and adoration, or *latria*, which is due to God alone. Ancient writers stressed the relation between Mary's divine maternity and the fullness of her grace, which they found asserted in the angelic greeting "Hail, full of grace" (*κεχαριτωμένη kecharitōmenē*). She required a special richness of divine friendship, they reasoned, in order to become the Mother of God.

Mary's Immaculate Conception is thought to be a logical preparation for her dignity as mother of the Redeemer. In the words of Pope Pius IX (1854), "The most holy Virgin Mary was, in the first moment of her conception, by a unique gift of grace and privilege of almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of mankind, preserved free from all stain of original sin." This means that the mother of Jesus was preserved from the common defect of estrangement from God, which mankind in general inherits through the sin of Adam. Her freedom from sin was an unmerited gift of God, or special grace, and an exception to the law or privilege, which—Catholic, as opposed to Protestant, theology holds—no other created person has received.

Neither the Greek nor Latin Church Fathers explicitly taught the Immaculate Conception, but they professed it implicitly in two fundamental ways. Mary, they said, was most perfect in purity of morals and holiness of life. St. Ephrem (c. 306-373)

belong to the Christian faith without having been explicitly revealed in the Bible. They recognize the challenge this doctrine raises for the hopes of Christian unity. "Prejudices can be dissipated in fraternal discussion," they reported to the World Council of Churches, "doctrine can be centered anew upon its Christological character, and worship can be modified, reformed or spiritualized." But, "the doctrine and veneration of Mary create extreme difficulties for ecumenical thought." Yet on the solution of this problem, it was conceded, will depend in large measure the prospects of reuniting a dismembered Christianity.

**Influence on Art and Literature.** The life and virtues of Mary have inspired the noblest creations of Christian art and literature, and produced what Henry Adams called, the greatest single force for idealism in the Western World. While conscious of the New Testament emphasis on Christ, the piety of the faithful also recognized the inseparability of mother and Son.

The most ancient image of the Blessed Virgin still extant is a painting in the Roman catacomb of Priscilla on the Via Salaria. Dating from the late first or early second century, the fresco pictures Mary seated with the Child Jesus in her arms and what appears to be a prophet standing next to her, volume in hand and pointing to a star above the Virgin. Three other Marian paintings in the same catacomb date from the second and third centuries. One image on the tomb of a Christian virgin shows Mary holding the Child, as a type and model of virginity; another gives the scene of the wise men at Bethlehem, and a third is in the less common group of Annunciation paintings. Similar representations, all before the fifth century, are found in the cemeteries of Domitilla, Callistus, Sts. Peter and Marcellus, and St. Agnes.

Paintings and sculpture of Mary in Christian antiquity featured her relations with Jesus, as virgin and mother, and generally in one of the Gospel scenes ranging from the Annunciation to the crucifixion or burial of Christ. The Council of Ephesus (431), which defined the divine maternity against Nestorius, ushered in a new artistic phase that began in the East but was soon introduced into Italy, Spain, and Gaul. Instead of the homely scenes from the Gospel, Mary was now more often depicted as heavenly queen, robed in gold and seated in royal majesty.

Roman art adopted and propagated the "Byzantine Virgin," but in place of the oriental posture of Mary at prayer, with hands upraised, Western painters and sculptors favored showing her as the "Seat of Wisdom." The adaptation was slow but significant. It verged away from the colder Asiatic lines in the direction of greater mildness, tempered by human affection. Historians have found in each of the great periods beginning with the early Middle Ages in Europe, an artistic reflection of Mary's important theological role.

On the first level of mediation, Mary freely cooperated with God in consenting to the Incarnation, giving birth to her Son and thus sharing with Him in spirit the labors of His passion and death. Yet Christ alone truly offered the sacrifice of atonement on the cross. Mary gave Him moral support in this action. She is therefore not entitled to the name “priest,” as several Roman documents legislate. As held by the Union Council of Florence (1441), Christ “conquered the enemy of the human race alone.” In the same way He alone acquired grace for all the children of Adam, including Mary. Her part in this “objective redemption,” or meriting of salvation, was indirect, and derived from her voluntary devotion to the service of Christ. She suffered and sacrificed with Him, under the cross, but was subordinate to Him in such a way that the efficacy of her sacrifice depended on that of her Son.

On the second level of mediation, Mary cooperates by her maternal intercession in applying Christ's redemptive grace to men. This is known as the “subjective redemption.” This does not imply that in every prayer one must explicitly ask graces through Mary or that her intercession is intrinsically necessary for the distribution of divine blessing, but means that according to God's ordinance the graces merited by Christ are conferred through the actual intercessory mediation of His mother. Recent popes have spoken in favor of this type of mediation, which finds support in patristic tradition. As the bodily Mother of God she is the spiritual mother of all who are members of Christ in the Church of her Son.

**Mariology and Religious Unity.** This variety of Marian theology is commonly professed in Roman Catholicism, and approximated in other Churches of Christian ancestry and, outside of Christianity, in Islam.

Mary's divine maternity is accepted, qualified, or denied, according to varying belief in the divinity of Christ. Muslims reject the title “Mother of God” as blasphemous. “The Messiah,” wrote Muhammad in the Koran, “Jesus, son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah.” His mother gave birth only to a prophet, since “Allah is only one God. Far is it removed from His transcendent majesty that He should have a son” (Surah 4, 171). Eastern Orthodox Churches believe that Mary was truly the Mother of God, that she was exalted in sanctity above angels and men, was assumed bodily into heaven, and now intercedes for mankind with her Son.

Protestant confessions of faith prefer the expression “Mother of Jesus,” even when they subscribe, on principle, to the divinity of Christ. They also profess in their creeds that Mary was a virgin and closely identify this mystery, as did Calvin, with the divine maternity. “The Son of God,” he wrote in the *Institutes*, “miraculously descended from heaven, yet in such a way that He never left heaven. He chose to be miraculously conceived in the womb of the Virgin.” Similar convictions appear in contemporary Protestant theologians such as Karl Barth.

Mariology is currently undergoing careful study by leaders of the ecumenical movement. Orthodox, Anglican, and Protestant scholars have concerned themselves with how such doctrines as the Immaculate Conception and Mary's Assumption may

addressed Christ and Mary with the words, “You and Your mother are the only ones who are totally beautiful in every way. For in You, O Lord, there is no stain, and in Your mother no stain.” Mary was described as the antithesis of Eve. Again in Ephrem: “Mary and Eve [were] two people without guilt. Later one became the cause of our death, the other the cause of our life.” While implicit in the early writers, the Immaculate Conception had to be clarified before becoming explicit Catholic dogma. Main credit for this goes to the Franciscan John Duns Scotus (c. 1264-1308), who introduced the idea of pre-redemption, in order to reconcile Mary's freedom from original sin with her conceiving of Christ.

Correlative to her conception without sin was Mary's freedom from all sinful desire. Deliverance from original sin does not by itself mean restoration of integrity or immunity from concupiscence, which integrity and immunity had been lost through sin. Although not sinful in itself, concupiscence implies moral blemish because it may lead to sin by exciting the passions to act against the law of God, even when, through lack of consent, a person does not formally do wrong. If this raises the problem of how the mother of Christ, being free of temptation, could find merit before God, the answer given by Catholicism is that she, no less than her Son, could exercise her freedom in ways other than by controlling the passions, for example, by her love of God, and by the practice of patience, charity, and obedience to legitimate authority.

Closely tied in with her integrity, absence of concupiscence, was Mary's immunity from every personal sin. Her sinlessness may be deduced from the Gospel title “full of grace” since moral guilt is irreconcilable with the fullness of God's friendship. Augustine held that personal sin must be excluded from the Blessed Virgin “because of the honor of God.”

The earliest defense of Mary's perpetual virginity was occasioned by its denial, notably by the Gnostics under Cerinthus (c. 100) and the pagans led by Celsus (c. 200). Three stages of virginity are concerned: Mary's conception of her Son without the cooperation of man, giving birth to Christ without violating her integrity, and remaining a virgin after Jesus was born.

The Church's faith in Mary's virginal conception of Jesus found its way into many ancient professions of belief. The Apostles' Creed of the early second century speaks of “Jesus Christ ... who was born by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary.” The Biblical basis was traceable to the prophecy of Isaiah (7:14), which the first Gospel applies to Mary, “Therefore the Lord Himself shall give a sign. Behold a virgin (*halmah*) shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called Emmanuel (God with us).” From the beginning, Christians understood the passage to refer to the Messiah, since the sign had been fulfilled. Contemporary objection that the Septuagint (Greek)

version of the Old Testament, made about 130 B.C., had wrongly rendered the Hebrew *halmah* by *παρθέυος*; (*parthenos*, "virgin") instead of by *νεάνις*; (*neanis*, "young woman") was shown to be unfounded. Matthew thus interpreted the term in recalling the Isaian prophecy (Matthew 1:23). Moreover, in Old Testament language, *halmah* means an unmarried girl of marriageable age, presumed to be a virgin by the Jews' moral code. The context requires "virgin," for an extraordinary sign would exist only if a virgin conceived and gave birth.

All the Church Fathers affirm Christ's virginal conception by Mary. At the turn of the first century, Ignatius of Antioch spoke of Jesus as "truly born of a virgin." Starting with Justin Martyr (c. 100-165), ecclesiastical writers uniformly defended the Messianic interpretation of Isaiah, as given by Matthew and confirmed in the Gospel of St. Luke.

Christian tradition went a step further. Not only did Mary conceive without carnal intercourse, but her physical virginity was also not violated in giving birth to Christ. When the monk Jovinian (d. 405) began to teach that "a virgin conceived, but a virgin did not bring forth," he was promptly condemned by a synod at Milan (390), presided over by Ambrose, which recalled the invocation of the Apostles' Creed, "born of the Virgin Mary." Her integrity during the birth of Jesus is included in the title "perpetual virgin," given to Mary by the Fifth General Council of Constantinople (553). Without going into physiological details, ancient writers such as Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome employ various analogies—the emergence of Christ from the sealed tomb, the penetration of light through glass, or human thought leaving the mind. In his encyclical letter on the Mystical Body (1943), Pius XII described Mary as "she who gave miraculous birth to Christ our Lord."

Mary is also believed to have remained a virgin after Christ was born. Denied in the early Church by Tertullian and Jovinian, the doctrine of virginity *post partum* (after birth) was strenuously defended by the orthodox Fathers and crystallized in the term *αειπαρθέυος*; (*aeiparthenos*, "ever virgin"), coined by the Fifth Council of Constantinople. According to Basil (330-379), "the friends of Christ do not tolerate hearing that the Mother of God ever ceased to be a virgin." From the fourth century on, such formulas as that of Augustine became common, a virgin gave birth, a virgin remained."

Though reliable records are lacking on the time, place, and circumstance of Mary's death, the fact was accepted by the early Church. Ephram, Jerome, and Augustine take her death for granted. But Epiphanius (315-403), who had made a careful study of the documents, concluded that "nobody knows how she departed this world." In the absence of dogmatic pronouncement, modern theologians generally believe that Mary died. Though they admit she was not bound by the law of mortality, because of her exemption from sin, they believe it was fitting that Mary's body should resemble that of her Son, who allowed Himself to die for the salvation of men.

In 1950 Pope Pius XII defined "as a dogma revealed by God that Mary, the immaculate perpetually-virgin Mother of God, after the completion of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into the glory of heaven." The doctrine of the Assumption derives from two kinds of tradition: in the ordinary sense of ancient belief, and in the sense that the Catholic episcopate with virtual unanimity accepted the truth as part of the deposit of faith.

Silence about Mary's Assumption in the first three centuries was only relative. The absence of any veneration of her relics in an age given to such practices, preoccupation with Christological controversies, and the references to the Assumption in apocryphal writings help to explain and modify the idea that the early Church said nothing on the subject. Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260-340) wrote in the *Chronicon* that "the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus Christ, was assumed into heaven, which, according to not a few writers, has been revealed to us by God." Ephrem held that "it is true that Mary died, but her virginal body was never to see corruption." On the liturgical side, Gregory I (540-604) appointed August 15 to commemorate Mary's Assumption into heaven—replacing the older feast (January 18) of her Dormition, or Falling Asleep.

Four years before Pius XII defined the Assumption, he inquired of all bishops in communion with Rome whether they believed the doctrine was revealed and, if so, whether a solemn definition was in order. When virtually the whole episcopate answered in the affirmative to both questions, the pope decided to declare the mystery a matter of faith.

The speculative grounds on which the Church Fathers and theologians base the incorruptibility and transformation of Mary's body are in revelation. Since she was free from sin, it was thought proper that her body should not suffer dissolution. Her divine maternity established a physico-spiritual relationship with Christ, and her cooperation in the redemptive work of her Son deserved a corresponding share in the fruits of the redemption, which includes the glorification of body and soul.

Related to Mary's position as mother of the Savior is her dignity as intermediary between Christ and the human race. There are, however, two aspects of this mediation, which should be carefully distinguished. It is certain in Catholic theology that, since Mary gave birth to the Redeemer who is the source of all grace, she is the channel of all graces to mankind. But it is only probable, as a legitimate opinion, that, since Mary's Assumption into heaven, no grace is received by humans without her cooperation and intercession.