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Marian Mariology

CHAPTER 29



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 29

The Mother of God

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

We address Our Lady as Mother of God every time we recite the Hail Mary, and say, “Holy Mary, Mother of God.” This title is at once the most fundamental Marian profession of our Catholic faith, and the most endearing in Catholic piety.

Unless Mary is, indeed, the Mother of God, no other title, certainly no superlative title of the Blessed Virgin would have any meaning; and because she is God’s Mother, every title we might give her as the noblest of God’s creatures pales by contrast with this one, *Mater Dei*.

The Doctrine

In the Apostles’ Creed, which in substance dates from the first century, the Church professes her belief in the Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary. Because she is the Mother of the only-begotten natural Son of God, she is therefore the Mother of God, because the Second Person of the Trinity is true God, co-eternal with the Father, and one in being with the Father.

It is not surprising that the Apostles’ Creed should profess Mary’s Divine Maternity, since the earliest revelation on Mary, as the Mother of the Messiah, also affirms that she is the Mother of God.

The prophet Isaiah foretold that a virgin would conceive and bear a Son, and His name would be Emmanuel. Literally the word, also spelled Immanuel, means in Hebrew, “with us [is] God.” This is the explanation given by St. Matthew, when he described the event of Joseph’s angelic message: not to be afraid to take Mary as his lawful wife, after she was found to be with child (Mt. 1:23).

The evangelist Luke is equally clear. When Mary asks how she can become the Mother of the Messiah, the angel answers by telling her, “the Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you. And therefore also the Holy One who shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). What his disciple said was repeated by St. Paul, who told the Galatians, “God sent His Son, born of a woman” (Gal. 4:4).

Moreover, when Mary came to visit her cousin, Elizabeth’s first words were astonishment. The unborn John leapt in his mother’s womb for joy, and Elizabeth exclaimed, “And how have I deserved, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Luke 1:42).

The early Fathers of the Church were unanimous in venerating Mary as God’s Mother. Who could improve on the statement of St. Ignatius of Antioch, writing in his letter to the Ephesians, on his way to martyrdom in Rome? Says Ignatius, “Our God, Jesus Christ, was carried in Mary’s womb.” He was, according to Ignatius, “from the seed of David, it is true, but by the Holy Spirit” (Ephesians 53).

Not surprisingly, by the third century, the Greek writers coined the name *Theotokos* (*Theos* = God, and *tokos* = mother) to describe the Mother of Jesus. And before the end of the fourth century, St. Gregory Nazianzus boldly declared, “If anyone does not recognize the Holy Mary as the Mother of God, he is separated from God” (Letter 101, 4).

In the meantime, however, a number of heresies had arisen, all somehow questioning the true divinity of Christ. Cerinthus and the Ebionites in the first and early second centuries, the Monarchians in the second and third centuries, the Arians, Macedonians, and Apollinarians of the fourth century denied, from a variety of angles and for different specious reasons, that Jesus of Nazareth was true God become man.

Thus the stage was set for the heresy of Nestorius, bishop and patriarch of Constantinople. Nestorius had been a monk in the monastery of Antioch. He was also a famous preacher when the emperor insisted that Nestorius fill the vacant see of Constantinople.

Soon after his elevation to the episcopacy, Nestorius got himself into a quarrel with his people because he supported his chaplain in opposing the use of the term *Theotokos* for the Blessed Virgin Mary. The faithful in his diocese were scandalized and soon Nestorius' position aroused anger and opposition all over the Near East. The lay people appealed to their respective bishops who, by then were led by St. Cyril of Alexandria. And finally both Nestorius and his opponents appealed to the Pope for a decision.

On December 7, 430, Pope St. Celestine condemned Nestorius' teaching as heresy and ordered St. Cyril to pronounce sentence of de-position on Nestorius, if he would not submit. Given his sympathies to Nestorius, it was not strange that the emperor should urge a general council that might have exonerated the patriarch. But instead, the Council of Ephesus on June 22, 431, reconfirmed the condemnation of Nestorius and, eventually the emperor agreed with the council's decision.

The definition of Ephesus is stated in one sentence, in negative form: "If anyone does not confess that the Emmanuel [Christ] in truth is God, and that on this account the Holy Virgin is the Mother of God (*Theotokos*)--since according to the flesh she brought forth the Word of God made flesh -- let him be anathema."

Ephesus based its teaching on two premises of the Catholic faith:

- Mary is truly a mother. She contributed everything to the formation of the human nature of Christ, that every other mother constitutes to the formation of the child to which she gives birth. There never was, and there could not be any question of Mary being the mother of Christ's Divine nature. As God, Christ was generated from all eternity by the Father. Unlike the gods of paganism, the one true God has no goddess mother from whom He came.
- Mary is, therefore, truly the Mother of God. Why? Because she conceived and bore the Second Person of the Trinity; not, of course, according to the Divine Nature but according to the human nature that the Son of God freely assumed in order to freely offer Himself on the Cross for our Redemption.

History of Mary's Divine Maternity

One of the lesser known facts about the Council of Ephesus is that not all the bishops accepted the Council's definition. Not a few of them, especially in the East, sided with Nestorius and thereupon broke their unity with Rome and the Catholic Church.

Thus the seed was sown for disunity among Christians, whose fruit was to be seen only as the centuries went on. Not the least of this bitter fruit was the growth of Islam, two hundred years later, when Mohammed proclaimed a new religion in 622 A.D.

There are, after all, two forms of life that we are all to have: a natural life that we received when we were conceived and born of our earthly mothers, and a supernatural life that we received at Baptism, through the merits of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whom Mary made possible by bringing Him into the world.

Queen of Peace. On Christmas morning, the angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will” (Luke 2:14). Thus the shepherds reported to Mary what they had heard the angels promise, and thus Our Lady understood that her Son was to be what His Name Jesus implied, namely Prince of Peace.

Why Prince of Peace? Because as Savior of a sinful mankind, He restored peace between an offended God and the offending human race. Because, even as naturally people are at enmity with one another through their selfishness, so by the grace of Christ they rise above their selfishness and thus live with one another in peace.

But if Christ is the Prince, that is, the Source of Peace, Mary His Mother is Queen of Peace. How? By giving us the One without whom there would be no peace:

- between God and men through the forgiveness of sin;
- within men because their wills are united to the will of God; and
- among men or between men, because they practice justice as selfless charity.

This, too, is what Zachary, the father of John the Baptist, foretold the day that his son was born. He prophesied in the *Benedictus* that when the day shall dawn upon us, Mary’s Son would “guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:80).

As by now almost twenty centuries of history have taught us, there is no true peace on earth or in the hearts of men, except through faith and trust in Mary’s Son. And like Simeon, in his words to Mary we also hope one day to say, before we die, “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace ... for my eyes have seen your salvation” (Luke 2:29-30).

End

It is no coincidence, but one of the tragic ironies of history, that when Mohammed rose as a prophet, the dominant form of Christianity with which he came into contact was Nestorianism. It is no wonder that, when he came to write the Koran, Mohammed showed great respect for *Miriam*, the mother of *Isa* (Jesus). But Mohammed insisted that she was only the mother of a human being; that Jesus was not divine. Mohammed defined a Christian as one who, erroneously, claims that Jesus is more than *Ibn Miriam*, the son of Mary; that He is actually *Ibn Allah*, the Son of God.

With over five hundred million Moslems in the world today, it is one of the “ifs” of history to speculate on what would have been the course of Christianity if all the bishops at Ephesus had remained faithful to their apostolic heritage, and accepted Mary as not only (like Mohammed) the Mother of Jesus, but the Mother of her Creator, who received from Mary the human nature through which He redeemed the world.

We may almost say that the Council of Ephesus was the watershed that has divided the professed followers of Christ ever since.

It is again no coincidence, but highly significant, that in the past 1500 years those who have recognized Mary as the true Mother of the one true God have also been the ones whose faith in Jesus Christ has remained constant in spite of a flood of erroneous teaching about the person of Christ.

Let us be clear on what the Church tells us when she says that Mary Immaculate is the Mother of God.

- She says that, because Mary is the Mother of God, her Son was God from the first moment of His human existence in Mary’s womb.
- Again, because Mary is the Mother of God, any shadow of doubt about her Divine Maternity becomes a doubt about her Son's Divinity. So true is this that practically a mark of Catholic orthodoxy is the degree of believing devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Implications

In order to deserve this title of Mother of God, let us re-emphasize, Mary did not have to give her Son His divine nature, any more than other mothers give their child the soul as well as the body. The soul is always created by God in each individual case. Mary is the Mother of God because she is the Mother of Jesus Christ, in whose one divine Person the nature of man and the nature of God are inseparably united.

But Mary had an even greater claim to be the Mother of her Son than other mothers to be mothers of their children. Why? Because other mothers naturally share their parenthood with their husbands, whereas Mary became her Son's Mother without any human cooperation.

Given Our Lady's Divine Maternity, it is no wonder that the Church exhausts the vocabulary of human language in describing this exalted dignity. A poor, weak young girl becomes the Mother of the infinite, almighty and eternal God. An unknown daughter of Adam becomes the most perfect created image of the Father, the Mother of God the Son, and spouse of the Holy Spirit, the handmaid of the Blessed Trinity.

Let me first briefly quote four saints in their apparently but not really extravagant statements about this dignity of Our Lady.

- St. Eusebius says that to understand the greatness of Mary's dignity as Mother of God, we would have to understand the greatness of her Son, Jesus Christ.
- St. Thomas Aquinas says that Mary's dignity as Mother of God is so great, it partakes of the infinite, something of God.
- St. Bernard calls her the miracle of miracles, the marvel of divine omnipotence.
- St. Bonaventure says that God could have made a world more beautiful, more great, more wonderful than the one He has made. But He could not make a greater mother than the Mother of God.

Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God

When Pope Paul VI, after the Second Vatican Council, established January 1 as the solemn feast of Mary, the Mother of God, he gave his reasons for this dramatic change.

Recall that for centuries January 1 had been the feast of Christ's Circumcision, as we read in St. Luke's Gospel. "And at the end of eight days, when He was circumcised, He was called Jesus, the name given Him by the angel before He was conceived in the womb" (Luke 2:21). One reason why January 1 became the feast of Our Lady's Divine Maternity is that, originally, the Church celebrated on this day the Octave of Christmas, and only later on did it also become the feast of the Circumcision of Our Lord.

Here is what the Pope declared in explanation of the new title for the feast on January 1.

In the revised arrangement of the Christmas season, we should all turn with one mind to the restored solemnity of the Mother of God. This feast was entered into the calendar in the liturgy of the city of Rome for the first day of January. The purpose of the celebration is to honor the role of Mary in the mystery of salvation and at the same time to sing the praises of the unique dignity thus coming to "the Holy Mother...

through whom we have been given the gift of the Author of life." This same solemnity also offers an excellent opportunity to renew the adoration rightfully to be shown to the newborn Prince of Peace, as we once again hear the good tidings of great joy and pray to God, through the intercession of the Queen of Peace, for the priceless gift of peace. Because of these considerations and the fact that the octave of Christmas coincides with a day of hope, New Year's Day, we have assigned to it the observance of the World Day of Peace (Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus*, Feb. 2, 1974, no.5).

Accordingly, the Feast of Mary, the Mother of God, is simultaneously three feasts of Our Lady all in one:

- Mary, the Mother of God,
- Mary, the Mother of divine grace, and
- Mary, Queen of Peace.

A word of explanation of each of these three roles of Mary will help to bring out the full significance of Mary's Divine Maternity.

Mother of God. The highest form of prayer we can offer to Our Lady is the prayer of veneration. By our veneration, we praise and honor her, we pay our respect and reverence towards her, we acknowledge her greatness and extol her dignity.

But there is no higher title by which we can venerate Mary than to address her as the Mother of God. Every other mark of honor depends on this one, as every other form of excellence in Mary flows from the fact that she, who is God's creature, became in His mysterious designs the Creator's Mother.

Mother of Divine Grace. We have become so accustomed to speaking of Mary as Mother of divine grace that the deep meaning of this title may have become obscured. What does it mean? It means that, except for Mary we would not have Christ, who is the Author of our supernatural life, in other words, the Source of all grace, without which none of us could hope for heaven. It means that Mary mothered the Author of grace, not only physically in conceiving Him and giving Him birth, but spiritually in caring for Him during His mortal stay on earth, and mystically after His Ascension, when she cared for His infant Church.