



Theology Corner

Vol. 125 – January 10th, 2021

Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“What Do Catholics Believe about Mary?”

There are four Marian dogmas of the Catholic Church: **Divine Motherhood, Perpetual Virginity, Immaculate Conception, and Bodily Assumption.** These four Marian “privileges” are indicative of Mary’s relationship with God and her role in God’s plan of salvation. Beginning with the first, we refer to Mary as “Mother of God” precisely because of who Christ is. As Catholics, we understand Christ to be fully God and fully human with these two natures united in the one person of Jesus Christ (i.e., the hypostatic union). We also know that Mary is the true mother of Christ who gave natural birth to Jesus. Due to the fact that Christ is not two distinct persons, to say that Mary is not the Mother of God would be to deny that the person of Jesus Christ is not fully God. In virtue of the hypostatic union, we cannot claim that Mary is the Mother of Christ’s humanity only, because in the natural world, human mothers do not give birth to “natures” since natures are universal. On the contrary, human beings give birth to individual *persons*. Certainly, we do not claim that Mary is responsible for the divinity of Christ (thereby claiming Mary to be somewhat superior to him). For these reasons, the Church dogmatically declared Mary as the Mother of God or “God-Bearer” (*Theotokos* in Greek) at the Council of Ephesus in 431AD. Just remember, if anybody takes issue with this title, know that the fundamental issue is not with Mary, but with that person’s understanding of the identity of Christ.

The second doctrine is Mary’s Perpetual virginity. This teaching states that Mary remained a virgin before, during, and after giving birth to Christ. We already know from the Gospels (e.g., Matthew and Luke) that Mary was a virgin at the time of Jesus’ conception. This has been a longstanding view dating back to the early Church. In fact, even the three leaders of the Protestant Reformation (Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli) taught that Mary was a perpetual virgin! The main source of disagreement here comes from reading Luke 2:7 and Matthew 13:55-56 where it says that Jesus was Mary’s “firstborn” and that Jesus had “brethren.” The “firstborn” concern is not usually raised by scripture scholars because it is general knowledge that “firstborn” was a legal term in Ancient Israel which applied to the child who opened the womb. It was used regardless of whether a mother had more children or not. Regarding the “brethren” of Jesus, this is easily dispelled because the Hebrew word for brother was far more inclusive than how we use the term today (it could mean any blood relative). The Jews of the time would often address cousins using the term brethren. Mary’s Perpetual virginity was confirmed at the Lateran Council of 649.

The third Marian dogma is her Immaculate Conception. This teaching proclaims that Mary, at the first moment of her conception, was preserved from the stain of Original Sin. We know this from the fact that Gabriel gives her the title “full of grace” and this is fitting because if Mary was to be the person who bears the Son of God it makes sense that he would be born from an uncontaminated source. To be clear, this does not mean Mary was without need of a savior, but only that the merits of her son on the cross would be applied to her in advance to preserve her from the sin which one ordinarily contracts at conception. It is like she received a divine vaccination to prevent the disease of sin. The Immaculate Conception was dogmatically defined in 1854 by Pope Pius IX in the papal bull, *Ineffabilis Deus*.

The fourth Marian dogma is her Bodily Assumption. The assumption of Mary was included in ancient liturgies and homilies from the earliest history of the Church, although it was never mentioned in the writings of the Church Fathers (many speculate that this was because it was common knowledge). This teaching naturally flows from Mary’s Immaculate Conception because Original Sin brought human death into the world by the loss of grace including the gift of immortality provided in the garden of Eden. It is not fitting that Mary, being preserved from Original Sin, would experience the *effect* of sin (i.e., corruption) since there is no *cause* of it in her soul. The Assumption of Mary was dogmatically defined in 1950 by Pope Pius XII in his papal bull, *Munificentissimus Deus*.

Contrary to popular belief, we as Catholics do not worship Mary. This is reserved to God alone. Rather, we honor Mary for her role in the plan of salvation as the “woman” prophesied in the *protoevangelium* (the first gospel) of Gen 3:15. We honor her as the “Ark of the New Covenant” who carried the very Word of God made flesh. Lastly, we find a great example from her *fiat* (“...let it be done”) which reversed the order of events that came about from Eve’s sin in the garden, thereby making Mary the “New Eve.” What a great blessing it is to have a spiritual mother to guide us and nurture our faith both individually and the Church as a whole! Let us ask Mary to intercede on our behalf: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”