

Mary, Mother of Jesus

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As Christians we all grow up hearing the story of the Nativity at Christmas time and the role of Mary in the birth of Jesus. Although the stories of Mary's trials and joys are simple, much doctrine has been generated about her.

Mary First Referred to in the Garden of Eden

The earliest scriptural reference to Mary can be found in Genesis, where the Lord speaks to the serpent in the Garden of Eden: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15).

The woman referred to in this scripture is Mary, her seed being Jesus Christ who would come to bruise the head of the serpent. Many hundreds of years later, 700 years before the birth of Christ, Isaiah made reference to Mary saying: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isa. 7:14).

The Calling of Mary

Little is known about Mary's life before she spoke to the Angel Gabriel about the coming forth of Christ through her. The scriptures teach us that Mary was faithful in obeying the word of God, grateful for the blessings of the Lord, and wise in receiving counsel from God's chosen servants.

Mary being mortal, conceived Jesus Christ as a virgin, with the angel telling her beforehand, "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Through this act God became the literal father of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only individual on earth to be born of a mortal Mother and an immortal Father, making him "the only begotten son of God."

Ambiguous Christian Doctrines Concerning Mary

Nowhere in the Christian world is Mary more venerated than in the Catholic Church. Mary is often the symbol of the Catholic Church in public communications, paintings, and church buildings. There is the Hail Mary prayer, which is an integral part of the rosary. Some Catholics have taken their own personal veneration to the extreme in conducting pilgrimages to Medjugorje, while having seen appearances of Mary on buildings, objects, and so forth. It is important to note the Catholic Church does not promote the worship of Mary.

The Bible does not offer much detail on the life of Mary before or after the birth of Jesus Christ. Catholic doctrines about Mary came about long after the ascension of Christ and not as a result of divine revelation (as the Catholic Church does not accept revelation after the ascension of Christ); but rather through councils, debates, and spiritual pondering by Church leaders and theologians. Consider the following three doctrines that came as a result of spiritual committees and not of scriptural origin.

Immaculate Conception

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was defined by Pope Pius IX in what came to be known as the *Ineffabilis Deus*, published on December 8, 1854. Pope Sixtus IV from 1483 left Catholics free to make up their own minds as to whether or not Mary was subject to original sin or not—this freedom was verified at the Council of Trent. The doctrine argues that since Jesus became personified of the Virgin Mary, it was a requirement that Mary be totally free from sin to bear Christ.

Mary Ever-Virgin

From A.D. 107, under Ignatius of Antioch, to about A.D. 1555 at the Council of Trent, there was constant and spirited debate on the subject of Mary's perpetual virginity. It was at the Council of Trent on August 7, 1555, that the newly elected Pope Paul IV issued an Ecclesiastical Constitution called "Cum Quorundam," laying the foundation for the doctrine that Mary was a virgin before, during, and after the birth of Jesus Christ.

Mary's Assumption

The story of Mary's assumption dates back centuries, but did not become Catholic Church doctrine until Pope Pius XII in November of 1950 "dogmatically and infallibly defined" it in his Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*. This led to the annual celebration of the Feast of the Assumption of Mary.

All three of these doctrines: the Immaculate Conception, Mary ever-virgin, and the Assumption; did not originate from the word of God, but rather through councils and papal proclamations since the doctrine of divine revelation has been rejected by the Catholic Church since its origins. If the Catholic Church believed in further revelation such declarations may be more easily accepted. However, Catechism 73 clearly states that there will be no further revelation after Christ, and therefore these three points of doctrine concerning Mary must be scrutinized as to their divine origin.

Mary Having Other Children

There are no less than six scriptural references in the Bible to Mary having other children. These are not scriptures that merely use the term "brother" in a general sense, but are more literal. For example Paul writes the following in his letter to the Galatians: "Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days. But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord's brother (Galatians 1:18-19).

Since all of the Apostles were men, and could be considered the Lord's brothers, why would James be singled out as "the Lord's brother"? Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3 further support that James was a brother of Jesus and that Jesus had brothers and sisters (plural).

To explain away this Biblical reference, some Catholic theologians argue that Joseph had a marriage prior to his union with Mary and had children from that marriage. There is no historical evidence for this claim. In fact, Pope Boniface VIII was said to have denied the virginity of Mary following the birth of Christ.

Perhaps the clearest reference to Mary relinquishing her virginity after the birth of Christ comes from the gospel of Matthew which states: "Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS" (Matthew 1:24-25).

The term "knew" is generally associated in the scriptures with sexual intercourse for the purposes of procreation. For instance, in Genesis 4 we read that "Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and that Cain knew his wife; and she conceived" (Gen 4:1, 17). Joseph didn't know Mary until after Jesus was born, thus the doctrine of the virgin birth stands, but Mary being ever-virgin does not.

The value and importance the Catholic Church places on celibacy is well known, and therefore the doctrine of Mary being ever-virgin is a natural extension of that emphasis. The doctrines of the Immaculate Conception, Mary being ever-virgin, and the Assumption, are not central to Mary's character and the role she fulfilled as the Mother of Jesus Christ, therefore they are not critical to the canon.

Conclusion

A true Christian will feel no less reverence towards Mary as a result of not embracing the three aforementioned doctrines on Mary. Mary is the mother of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; she is revered, venerated, and said to be a "pattern of righteousness for all Saints to follow" (Susan Easton Black, "Mary, His Mother," *Liahona*, Dec 1991, 7). Putting Mary into the proper spiritual perspective will redirect the attention of the Christian from undue focus on Mary, back to her son Jesus Christ where it should be.

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