

The First Marian Dogma

Mary, Mother of God

ISSUE: What is the Church’s teaching concerning Mary’s divine maternity?

DISCUSSION: The first and foremost revealed truth about our Blessed Mother, from which all her other roles and honors flow, is that she is the Mother of God.

Catechism, no. 509 summarizes the teaching as follows: “Mary is truly ‘Mother of God’ since she is the mother of the eternal Son of God made man, who is God himself.” The title “Mother of God” points to the sublime truth of the Incarnation, that Jesus Christ is true God and true man.

The Church’s teaching concerning Mary’s divine maternity is deeply rooted in Scripture and Tradition, and was dogmatically defined at the Council of Ephesus in 431. The Church celebrates this mystery of our Catholic faith on January 1.

For many Catholics, Mary’s “divine maternity”—in other words, her status as the “Mother of God”—is almost second nature. One of our oldest and most recited prayers, the Hail Mary, explicitly invokes “Holy Mary, Mother of God.” We typically call Mary our “Blessed Mother,” which points to our participation in the divine life as adopted children of God (cf. Rom. 8:15-17; Gal. 4:4-7; Rev. 12:17). We could not call her *our* Blessed Mother unless she was first and foremost His Blessed Mother.

Since the fifth century, Mary’s title as “Mother of God” has been firmly established, and is easily the least controversial of the Christian doctrines concerning Mary. This teaching thus is a good starting point for ecumenical discussion and, as will be shown below, preserves correct teaching concerning who Jesus Christ is.

As we prepare for the celebration of Jesus’ 2,000th birthday, let us take a closer look at His mother, from whom “the Word became flesh” (Jn. 1:14).

The Logic of Scripture

The Bible nowhere uses the expression “Mother of God.” But Mary is clearly identified as the “mother of Jesus” (cf. Mt. 2:13, 20; Lk. 1:31; 2:34; Acts 1:14) and mother of the Son of God (cf. Lk. 1:35; Gal. 4:4). Even before the birth of Jesus, Elizabeth proclaims that Mary is “the mother of my Lord” (Lk. 1:43; cf. Catechism, no. 495). Clearly, Mary is identified throughout the New Testament as the mother of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Catechism, no. 481 summarizes the fundamental Christian belief that Jesus Christ is true God and true man: “Jesus Christ possesses two natures, one divine and the other human, not confused, but united in the one person of God’s Son.” Therefore, Saint Paul can write that in the fullness of time, “God sent forth his Son, born of woman” (Gal. 4:4).

And so at the appointed time, the eternal, divine Word of God (cf. Jn. 1:1), the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, “became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn. 1:14). Scripture teaches that Christ is Emmanuel—God is truly with us (cf. Mt. 1:23).

If we take these two biblical teachings, that (a) Mary is the mother of Jesus and (b) Jesus is truly God, then we must conclude that Mary is the mother of God. To conclude otherwise would be to deny either (a) or (b) or both, and thereby fall into one of the ancient heresies rejected by the apostolic Church.

What Is Motherhood?

To understand the Church’s teaching on Mary’s divine maternity, it is important to clarify what we mean by motherhood.

Motherhood is the relationship that is established when a woman communicates her own human nature to her children. This gift of nature occurs at conception, and is continually nurtured through gestation, childbirth, and the life of the child. At conception a human person, a real son or daughter—and not simply a physical body—comes into being. And this is true even though we know that the mother did not create the child’s soul, which is created and

infused directly by God.

Mary did not give Jesus His divine nature or His divine personhood, which was His from all eternity. Nor did she give Him His human soul, which was infused when He became man in her virginal womb (cf. Catechism, no. 471). As a true mother, Mary did give Jesus a human nature identical to her own, and she is the mother of a person, not merely a body or a nature.

Now here is the twist. In Jesus Christ, there are two natures—human and divine—and these natures are united without confusion in one divine Person, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, in what is called the *hypostatic union*. Since Mary is the mother of Jesus and Jesus is a divine Person—that is, God—then Mary is rightly called the “Mother of God.”

There are two sonships, but only one Son. Christ is the true Son of God the Father from all eternity, but He is also the true Son of Mary, born in the fullness of time (cf. Gal. 4:4).

What About the Fathers?

Early Christian Tradition, particularly the liturgy, bears witness to the Christian belief that Mary is the Mother of God. In the oldest profession of the Christian faith, the Apostles’ Creed (cf. Catechism, no. 194), the faithful for nearly two millennia have professed their faith in “Jesus Christ, His Only Son, Our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.” The ancient Marian prayer *Sub tuum praesidium* (“We fly to thy protection . . .”), which dates back to the third century, explicitly addresses Mary as “Mother of God.”

Mary’s divine motherhood is richly attested to in the writings of the Church Fathers. For example, Saint Irenaeus (d. 202) wrote, “The Virgin Mary, . . . being obedient to His word, received from an angel the glad tidings that she would bear God.”¹

Saint Ephrem of Syria (d. 373), in his poetic *Hymns of the Nativity*, authored the following:

In the womb of Mary, the Infant was formed,
 who from eternity is equal to the Father. . . .
The Virgin became a Mother
 while preserving her virginity;
And though still a virgin
 she carried a Child in her womb;
And the handmaid and work of His Wisdom
 became the Mother of God.²

Saint Athanasius (d. 373), in his treatise *On the Incarnation of the Word of God and Against the Arians*, wrote:

The Word begotten of the Father from on high, inexpressibly, inexplicably, incomprehensibly, and eternally, is He that is born in time here below, of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God—so that those who are in the first place born here below might have a second birth from on high, that is, of God.³

These are just a handful of the many patristic references to this Marian teaching during the first four centuries of Christianity. Of course, after the dogmatic definition of the Council of Ephesus in 431 (see below), this teaching was firmly established as part of the deposit of faith entrusted to the Church (cf. 1 Tim. 6:20).

How Can We Go Wrong?

Historically, there have been three errors concerning Mary’s divine maternity. First, some have held that Christ was true God, but not true man. Therefore, since Christ did not receive a human nature from Mary, she could not be called His mother.

The second error, much more prevalent today, is that Christ is truly a man, but not God. Therefore, Mary is truly the mother of Christ, but in no sense the mother of God.

The third error, called *Nestorianism*, is what occasioned the Church’s definition at the Council of Ephesus. According to this view, there were two persons in Christ, one divine and one human, and Mary gave birth only to the human person. She could rightly be called the Mother of Christ (*Christotokos*) or even the Receiver of God (*Theodokos*), but not the Mother of God (*Theotokos*).

Let's take a closer look at how this error was resolved by the Church.

Showdown at Ephesus

In his encyclical letter *On the 1500th Anniversary of the Council of Ephesus (Lux Veritatis, 1931)*, Pope Pius XI traces the events leading up to the decisions of this ecumenical council.

Nestorius, a monk of Antioch who in 428 became the patriarch of Constantinople, publicly preached that Christ was not God, but that God only dwelt in Him as in a temple. In other words, he taught that there were two persons in Christ, and thus Mary was *Christotokos* (Mother of Christ), but not *Theotokos* (Mother of God). "*Christotokos*" became the watchword of the Nestorians.

The true Christian teaching was championed by Saint Cyril, who was the patriarch of Alexandria. Saint Cyril not only strenuously defended the Catholic faith among his own flock, but he also addressed letters to Nestorius in a charitable, brotherly attempt to lead him back to the Catholic faith.

When these attempts failed, Cyril appealed to Pope Celestine, writing that "[t]he ancient custom of the Churches admonishes us that matters of this kind should be communicated to Your Holiness."⁴ Celestine condemned the teaching of Nestorius and appointed Cyril as his representative for settling the controversy.

Meanwhile, Emperor Theodosius convoked an ecumenical council at Ephesus to facilitate the resolution of the dispute. Under the presidency of Saint Cyril, and with full papal approval and authority, the Council condemned the false teaching of Nestorius and fully affirmed Christ's divinity:

Scripture does not say that the Word associated the person of a man with Himself, but that He was made flesh. But when it is said that the Word was made flesh, that means nothing else but that He partook of flesh and blood, even as we do; wherefore, He made our body His own, and came forth man, born of a woman, at the same time without laying aside His Godhead, or His birth from the Father; for in assuming flesh He still remained what He was.⁵

The decision of the Council of Ephesus is a classic example of how authentic Marian doctrine flows from and will always protect and safeguard authentic teachings concerning the Person of Christ. By proclaiming that Mary is *Theotokos*, the Church is affirming that Mary is truly a mother, thus affirming Jesus' humanity. By affirming that she is the Mother of God, the Church is not only affirming Jesus' divinity, but also the union of Jesus' human and divine natures in His one divine Person.

Ecumenical Concerns

It is important to emphasize that the pronouncement of the Council of Ephesus, despite the necessary refutation of the Nestorian heresy, was a cause for rejoicing and celebration in the streets of Ephesus:

And the populace of Ephesus were drawn to the Virgin Mother of God with such great piety, and burning with such ardent love, that when they understood the judgment passed by the Fathers of the Council, they hailed them with overflowing gladness of heart, and gathering round them in a body, bearing lighted torches in their hands, accompanied them home.⁶

To this day, devotion to the *Theotokos* is a point of unity among many Christians, particularly among the Eastern Orthodox Churches, as Vatican II teaches:

It gives great joy and comfort to this sacred synod that among the separated brethren too there are those who give due honor to the Mother of Our Lord and Savior, especially among the Easterns, who with devout mind and fervent impulse give honor to the Mother of God, ever virgin (*Lumen Gentium* [LG] 69).

Among Protestant Christians in the West, there are diverse views concerning Mary's role in the work of salvation (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 20). Interestingly, the three fathers of the Protestant Reformation—Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli—all affirmed Mary's divine maternity.

"All Generations Will Call Me Blessed" (Lk. 1:48)

The Church has, from the earliest times, honored Mary with the title "Mother of God" (Catechism, no. 971). Because of her intimate, mother-Son relationship with the Redeemer of the world, the Church recognizes her "high office" and "dignity," as well as the fact that she is also "the beloved daughter of the Father and the temple of the

Holy Spirit” (LG 53).

In a singular but subordinate way, she freely cooperated in her Son’s saving work by her obedience, faith, hope, and burning charity (LG 61). She is our mother in the order of grace, the new mother of all those who are alive in Christ (cf. Gen. 3:20), the mother of all of Christ’s beloved disciples (cf. Jn. 19:27), who keep the commandments and bear witness to Him (cf. Rev. 12:17).

For that reason, the Church honors Mary “with filial affection and devotion as a most beloved mother” (LG 53). This devotion is not the adoration that is proper to God alone, but rather the love for a mother who always reminds us to follow her Son (cf. Jn. 2:5), so that He may be known, loved, and glorified, and that all people may be gathered into one family in Christ, to the glory of the Most Holy Trinity.

The Protestant Reformers on Mary

Martin Luther: “In this work whereby she was made the Mother of God, so many and such good things were given her that no one can grasp them. . . . Not only was Mary the mother of Him who is born [in Bethlehem], but of Him who, before the world, was eternally born of the Father, from a Mother in time and at the same time man and God.”

John Calvin: “It cannot be denied that God in choosing and destining Mary to be the Mother of His Son, granted her the highest honor. . . . Elizabeth calls Mary Mother of the Lord, because the unity of the person in the two natures of Christ was such that she could have said that the mortal man engendered in the womb of Mary was at the same time the eternal God.”

Ulrich Zwingli: “It was given to her what belongs to no creature, that in the flesh she should bring forth the Son of God.”

—As quoted in *Beginning Apologetics: How to Explain and Defend the Catholic Faith* (Farmington, NM: San Juan Catholic Seminars, 1993-96)

Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

1. What was decided at the Council of Ephesus? How does the title “Mother of God” preserve an orthodox understanding of who Jesus Christ is?
2. Since Mary is never called the “Mother of God” in the Bible, how can I explain this title to a Christian who rejects the authority of the Church?
3. Jesus is the “first-born among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29). If I am Jesus’ brother or sister, what should my attitude be toward Jesus’ mother? Toward other Christians?

¹ Saint Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 5, 19, 1, as quoted in William A. Jurgens, ed., *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1970), 101.

² As quoted in *ibid.*, vol. 1, 312.

³ As quoted in *ibid.*, vol. 1, 340.

⁴ As quoted in *Lux Veritatis*, no. 12.

⁵ As quoted in *ibid.*, no. 28; cf. Catechism, no. 466.

⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 41.

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