

# THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY: *Mother of God and Mother of the Church*

*(Catechism of the Catholic Church 484-511, 963-975)*

## Introduction

Devotion to Mary is perhaps the one essential aspect of Catholic spirituality and theology that marks us as distinct from non-Catholic Christians. At least that is what is widely believed. Actually, that belief is simply not true.

Devotion to Mary is shared in one form or another by practically every denomination that worships Christ. The Orthodox Churches venerate Mary to the same degree as Catholics, and accept the doctrines concerning her that we do. Among the reformers of the sixteenth century there was a great deal of criticism aimed by them at the Catholic Church for what they felt to be exaggerated honour paid to her - but even the most radical reformers such as Calvin, Zwingli and Knox regarded her as an exemplary disciple of her own son. Indeed we might be surprised at the extent to which some of the reformers accepted Catholic teaching on Mary. Martin Luther, for example, rejected Catholic teaching on many subjects (the Pope, the sacrifice of the Mass, the number of sacraments, the efficacy of prayer to the saints or for the dead) and yet he was surprisingly Catholic in his writings concerning Our Lady. Twenty years after he had left the Catholic Church, he vehemently defended the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, for instance, at a time when it was widely held in the Catholic Church and yet 300 years before it was dogmatically defined as an article of faith by Pope Pius IX (1854)!

Beyond the Christian Church, there are even non-Christians who give a unique place of honour to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mohammed regarded Mary as a prophetess in her own right & without question accepts the doctrine of the Virgin Birth (see sura 19 of the Koran). What separates the Catholic Church (and the Orthodox) from other Christian denominations is the level of devotion that is appropriate to give to her. Some say that veneration of Mary detracts from worship of Christ. The Catholic Church teaches that one of the ways of worshipping Christ is to recognise and appreciate the work he has achieved in his disciples - and the greatest achievement Christ has won over sin and death is in his mother, Mary.

# 1. What does the Catholic Church say about Mary?

Mary is a creature: she is 100% human and absolutely NOT divine in any way. This must be our first statement on Mary – she is not God or the so-called fourth person of the Trinity. The Church has always and everywhere condemned the terrible heresy that would call her divine (as some tried to do in the third century – until they were conclusively refuted by St. Epiphanius who promoted her *veneration* but deplored and forbade her *worship*). Some rather trendy theologians of the last 30 years or so have tried to make out that Catholics think her of as a kind of Christian mother goddess - this is a horrendous distortion of Catholic teaching. Not one Pope, Church council or accepted theologian has *ever* placed Mary on a par with God. To do so would be explicitly condemned by the Church and would truly be idolatry. Mary is wholly and solely human: she is as much in need of a saviour as you and I. Alongside all humanity, she is utterly dependant on God to achieve any and all good in her life. Indeed, the veneration which is accorded her is directly related to the degree to which she has co-operated with the grace of almighty God: she is described as "*full of grace*" (Lk 1:28), "*the most blessed of all women*" (Lk 1:42) - in other words she completely co-operated with the will of God for her. This is most perfectly expressed in her response to the invitation of the angel "*I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let what you have said be done to me.*" (Lk 1:38) This response summarises Mary's attitude to God's invitations to her throughout her life - especially in her role as mother of Jesus Christ.

All devotion to Mary is dependant utterly not on herself but on her Son: whatever the Church teaches about Mary flows directly from the content of our faith in Christ, and all practical expressions of devotion to Mary, whether private or public, are acceptable to the Church only in so far as they focus attention on the salvific work of Christ.

- "*What the Catholic Church believes about Mary is based on what it believes about Christ, and what it teaches about Mary illuminates in turn its faith in Christ.*" C.C.C. 487.
- "*Mary's role in the Church is inseparable from her union with Christ & flows directly from it.*" C.C.C. 964

Thus, the acid test of the catholicity of any Marian devotion or theory is: does this devotion teach us truthfully about Christ, or does it lead us astray?

## **A. Mother of God**

This is the oldest solemnly defined doctrine concerning Mary, confirmed by the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D. It is stated and taught in Sacred Scripture by St. Elizabeth, cousin of Our Lady, when Mary visits her directly after her vision of the Archangel Gabriel. Elizabeth asks why she should be honoured by a visit from "*the mother of my Lord*" (Lk. 1:43). NOTE: she doesn't ask why the mother of Jesus has come, or the mother of this human baby is here – Elizabeth is accepting that the baby Mary carries is her "Lord" (a title reserved exclusively to God by Jews of this time), and that Mary is to be called his mother. She is, to St. Elizabeth and to St. Luke

(who recorded the event in his Gospel), quite simply the mother of Jesus, the Lord, our God: she is mother of God. The reasoning behind it couldn't be simpler. The Church teaches that Christ is God as well as man. It also teaches that Christ is one person, not two (i.e., not a human person and a divine person in one body!). This one person had a single human mother, Mary. Thus, Mary must be the mother of the whole person Jesus Christ (i.e., human & divine) because mothers give birth to persons, not natures. If we deny Mary's motherhood of God, we therefore deny that Christ is both truly God and truly man in a perfect unity - we make him out to be some kind of composition of two persons of which Mary is only mother of the human bit. In 430 A.D the bishops of the Church defined at the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus that Mary was truly to be called Mother of God so as to ensure the safety of the teaching that Jesus was BOTH truly God and truly man:

- *"If anyone does not confess that the Emmanuel is truly God, &, therefore, that the holy Virgin is the Mother of God (since she begot according to the flesh the Word of God made flesh), anathema sit." (Council of Ephesus, Canon 1)*

It does not mean that Mary is the originator of God or his creator - but *it does state* that as the human mother of the God made man, Mary bears to the world not just the *humanity* of Jesus the God/man but his *divinity* as well since in the Incarnation these two natures are joined. To deny it is to deny the Incarnation: if Mary is not mother of God, then her Son, Jesus Christ, is not God. The divine motherhood of Mary is really about the divine nature of Christ: if you have the latter, you have to have the former.

- C.C.C. 495.

## ***B. Mother of the Church***

This doctrine was explicitly proclaimed and clarified at the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s - but it is not new. It describes what the Church has never ceased to believe about Mary, and more importantly, about Christ (as with the doctrine of Mary the Mother of God).

Again, the thinking is simplicity itself. Jesus is not just an example for us - he is our brother and salvation is ours because of this simple fact, divine Sonship given to us. This is the constant witness of the Sacred Scriptures. See the Letter of St. Paul to the Galatians chs. 3 & 4: the argument runs like this. Jesus is God's only Son. But, because we believe and have been baptised, we have "*put on Christ*" and been "*baptised into him*" (*Gal 3:27*). This means that God has adopted us into Christ: adopted us as sons (*Gal. 4:4-7*). Christ is therefore the oldest brother of all those who have received Baptism, and we are all members of a new family, with God as its head and Father. By extension, therefore, the mother of the oldest son becomes the mother of all adopted sons of the family: Mary, being Christ's mother is thus the adopted mother of all Christ's younger brothers – the Church. If Christ is our brother in Baptism as St. Paul tells us infallibly that he is, then Mary must be our mother: conversely, if we deny that Mary is our mother, we by implication deny that Christ is our brother, that we are adopted as sons of God and members of his family and therefore we render ourselves outside the bounds of salvation - Christ came, died and rose from the dead totally in vain. We do not believe that we are saved because she is

our mother, but if we believe she is not our mother, we cannot be saved, because Christ cannot therefore be truly our brother.

This is also the implicit teaching of Revelation ch. 12: a woman appears in heaven, giving birth to a son, who will "*rule all the nations with a rod of iron*" (a reference to the prophesies of the Messiah in Isaiah 66:7 and Psalm 2:9) and whom the dragon (the devil) attempts to eat (*Rev 12:1-6*). The son is clearly Christ, and the mother is naturally seen as Mary. At the end of the chapter, when the dragon has failed to destroy the child (an allegory of Christ's death on the cross which leads to his great triumph over the devil in the Resurrection), the text continues: "*The dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus.*" (*Rev. 12:17*). St. John clearly presents the image that those who believe in Christ, in other words the Baptised (or, the members of the Church), are counted as the spiritual children of the same woman who is the mother of the one they believe in. This should come as no surprise, really: the Christian life is about living today as closely as possible according to the mind of Christ, to act as he acted and think as he thought. We must be new Christs in the world, modelled entirely on him. The Christian life is even called the imitation of Christ. Is not a part of that imitation to venerate what he venerated and to give due honour where he gave honour: thus we venerate John the Baptist because Christ pointed him out to us as a man of unique holiness, and we honour St. Peter because Christ singled him out for special honour amongst his disciples. We do no less for Mary who was so honoured by her Son that he obeyed her authority as a child (*Lk. 2:51*), acted on accord with her request at the marriage at Cana and even on the cross was so primary in the mind of Christ that he provided for her protection once he was dead in the household of St. John (*Jn. 19:26-27*).

- C.C.C. 963-970.

### ***C. The perpetual Virginity of Mary***

The Church teaches that Mary was a virgin before, during and after the birth of Christ. This is the evidence of Sacred Scripture and the constant teaching of the Church from the earliest times. Where does this come from, since the Sacred Scriptures never say as much explicitly? We receive it from two sources - Sacred Tradition and (implicitly) from Sacred Scripture.

1. Sacred Tradition: there has been an unbroken tradition in the Church that Mary was a virgin for the whole of her life. Is this tradition reliable or invented? We need to remember that the Church has never been keen on innovation - in fact the apostles were so keen to introduce nothing new into the teaching of the Church from what they received from Christ that their writing constantly warn against false preachers who invent teaching which differ from or add to what they had received from Christ (see the Letter of St. Jude, the 2 Letters of St. Peter, 1 Thessalonians etc.). They constantly back up the authenticity of their preaching with the assertion that what they say, far from being invented by themselves, comes directly from Christ ("*To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from the husband ... (1 Cor 7), "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to*

*you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night that he was betrayed ... (1 Cor. 11:23) etc.*). St. Paul goes so far as to condemn anyone who preaches a gospel that differs in any way from what he proclaimed (*Gal. 1:8*). The whole idea of preaching the Gospel to non-Jews - something we would today consider as pretty obviously the will of God - was very gingerly adopted by the apostles because although it seemed to conform with Christ's teaching, it was a radical break with the accepted teaching of the day, that salvation was for the Jews alone. The early Church was not given to inventing pious myths - nice-sounding stories that have no basis in fact - but in truth was characterised by quite a conservative character. In this light it makes absolute sense to conclude that the completely unanimous witness of the earliest writers concerning Mary's perpetual virginity represents the testimony of those who knew her and simply repeated a fact of her life which went uncontested in the Church until the sixteenth century, when, at the Reformation, the doctrines of the Church about Mary were systematically attacked by the reformers.

2. Sacred Scripture: this is implicit, not actually stated in the Gospel of St. Luke. Unless you presume Mary had made a vow of lifelong virginity, a part of the story of the Annunciation makes no sense at all. At the time, Mary is betrothed to Joseph in marriage – this is more than engagement today - it was considered to be the first part of the marriage itself in the sense that the betrothed was from then on sworn to marry the intended, and for the marriage to be called off would have taken a writ of dismissal - exactly as if they had completed the marriage in the final ceremony itself. In other words, when Mary was invited by the archangel Gabriel to agree to God's plan that she become the mother of his only Son, Jesus Christ, her wedding was definitely on, and simply a matter of time. This being the case, why on earth should Mary not understand how she could be about to conceive and bear a son? After all, that is the presumed outcome of marriage, especially in her Jewish society which looked on children as proof of God's blessing and therefore greatly to be desired (especially a male child). Why should this prophecy confuse Mary? She objects, "*How can this be since I do not know a man?*" (*Lk. 1:34*) Gabriel's answer, all things being equal, should presumably have been: "No, you do not, yet - but you are just about to get married, and that is how you will conceive. Through your husband, you will bear a son, so don't get worried - God has it all in hand and has even provided a husband for you to make sure his plan will not fall at the first hurdle." But he doesn't - Gabriel never mentions a husband. Indeed his silence here presumes that not only does Mary not know a man at this moment, but that she will not in the future, even after she is married. Mary's objection, and Gabriel's answer, ("*the Holy Spirit will come upon you...*" *Lk. 1:35*) all presume that the fact that she is about to acquire a husband will be of no benefit to her having children. In effect, although she will be married, it will be no easier for her to have a son than it would be if she were single. The story only makes reasonable sense if you assume beforehand that Mary had already consecrated herself to a life of virginity, which she was resolved to live out in the married state. This is not proof positive, granted, but the strong indication and really the fundamental precondition of the annunciation story in the Sacred Scriptures.

### AN ASIDE: THE 'BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF JESUS'

References in the Sacred Scriptures to Jesus' "brothers and sisters" make no sense if they are interpreted literally. James & John the so-called brothers of Christ are called by Matthew the sons of "the other Mary" so as to distinguish them absolutely from Christ's mother (*Mt. 13:55*). If Mary had other children, why should Christ entrust her to John from the cross with the words "*This is your mother*", & "*This is your son*" (*Jn. 19:26-7*). If Christ had had blood brothers/sisters it is inconceivable that he would have entrusted Mary to one outside the family.

So, who are these people, and why are they called brothers and sisters? The problem is with language: ancient Hebrew had no word for cousin, and did not distinguish between direct relatives and collateral relatives (i.e., between members of the nuclear family and members of the extended family – the difference between brothers and cousins, nephews, uncles etc.). Greek literature, and common ancient custom, called true brothers and cousins the same thing. All living blood relations are considered members of the family and so are all loosely referred to as brothers and sisters. Outside of Sacred Scripture this is widely recognised by scholars in secular literature: why should it not be true in Sacred Scripture as well, particularly when we do have examples of men who have different mothers and yet are called brothers? The best example of this from the Sacred Scriptures is in Genesis - Gen. 11:27 tells us that Abram was the uncle of Lot (Abram's brother Haran was Lot's father), but this does not stop Abram speaking of his nephew Lot as his own brother ("*Let there be no dispute between us ... for we are brothers*" - Gen. 13:8). It was common and accepted practice to call all family members 'brothers' or 'sisters', and in near-eastern countries that is still true today. It is similar to the western practice of referring to close family friends as 'uncle' or 'aunt' even when there is no blood relationship.

Nowadays, nearly all non-Catholics would deny the perpetual virginity of Mary - usually this is done on the grounds that only Catholics hold to this doctrine because Catholics are obsessed by Mary. Most non-Catholics reject the doctrine because they argue that it has no foundation in Sacred Scripture and that it is the solid witness of protestantism through its 400-year history.

*HOWEVER, this opinion is simply not true: many protestants have believed in the perpetual virginity of Our Lady, and at the highest circles. In the sixteenth century, at the height of the Reformation, three of the strongest defenders of the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity were the German reformer Martin Luther, and the Swiss reformers John Calvin and Zwingli. None of these rejected Mary's perpetual virginity. They all recognised that although it was not explicitly affirmed in Sacred Scripture it was to be accepted unquestioningly as factual and to be believed by all the faithful (why? Because of the unanimous witness of ALL the earliest writers and Christian witnesses going back to the second century.) It never occurred to the protestant reformers to dispute or question this teaching (let alone deny it) they were contemptuously dismissive of the possibility that it could ever be seriously considered. John Calvin, the radical Swiss reformer, even said that no one could dispute the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary unless he was "**an obstinate, pig-headed and fatuous person.**"*

The strong language shows how bizarre it was even to the reformers that anyone should doubt or deny this well-attested and universally held doctrine, even among

reformers and protestants. It is only a recent hardening of protestant positions (from the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries) that have led modern protestants to reject this doctrine – one that their own founding fathers had unanimously accepted, vigorously defended and were scandalised that anyone could even consider doubting, let alone actually having what they saw as the arrogance to deny. How ironic that the protestants who would absolutely reject Our Lady's perpetual virginity are the very ones who claim to follow the teachings of Martin Luther and John Calvin – both of whom thought that this doctrine was so obvious, inoffensive and necessary that only the bigoted, prejudiced, ignorant and stubborn could ever dare to question it! Condemned by their own founder and teacher!

- C.C.C. 496-507.

#### ***D. The Immaculate Conception***

The Church teaches with the greatest solemnity that Mary was born free from sin, and lived her life without any stain of sin. The definition of this dogma, which is binding on the members of the Church, makes it clear that while Mary is sinless, this does not mean she had no need of a saviour. Indeed, the doctrine states that she had a saviour in a way no one else has had. We, who have sinned, are for the most part, saved by God from the sin we have fallen into - we are saved by being rescued from the pit. But God also saves us in another way - preservation from the pit. God saves us out of sin - but he also saves us from falling into sin. Every time we are able to resist a temptation, we experience the preservative grace of God, which does not save us once we are in a mess, but prevents us from getting into it in the first place. What is unique about Mary is simply that the way she was saved by Christ is solely by preservation from sin, rather than by rescue from being in it. This is not to say she was not tempted: after all, not sinning does not automatically mean we are not tempted to leap into it. Christ himself was absolutely sinless, but no one with a passing knowledge of Sacred Scripture would suggest we thought that because of this, he was never tempted! The same is true of Mary. Nevertheless, if we are tempted to think that the Church suggests that Mary was sinless through her own strength, apart from God, the official statement of the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception makes it clear that this belief is absolutely Christ-centred, and depends completely on the power of God, not the personal holiness of Mary:

- *"The doctrine that the most blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by the singular grace and privilege of almighty God & in view of the merits of Christ Jesus the saviour of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin, is revealed by God &, therefore, firmly & constantly to be believed by all the faithful." (Pope Pius IX, Papal Bull 'Ineffabilis Deus', 1854)*

The definition states that:

1. **Mary is saved** (i.e., she needs a saviour, who is named in the decree – Jesus Christ – in other words Mary is not being held up as holy by her own merits and with no need of God's saving power),
2. **by almighty God**, (i.e., not by her own merits or intrinsic holiness),

3. **in view of Christ's merits**, (i.e., she is saved by Christ – exactly as we are),
4. **by a singular grace & privilege** (i.e., it is the *method* of her saving by Christ which is different from our own - yet she is still saved from falling into sin by Christ. She has the same saviour we do, just in a slightly different way. She is saved by Christ from falling into sin - we are saved by Christ out of the sin we have chosen to fall into).

There is nothing in this doctrine which in any way detracts from the absolute necessity of the work of Christ for the salvation of the whole of creation. In fact, it is the only doctrine which makes explicit the absolute and unrestricted dominance of Christ over sin: so complete is his victory over sin that he is not simply able to apply divine first-aid to those who have been wounded by falling into sin – he is strong enough & unquestionably victorious over sin to be able to preserve his people from falling into sin not just occasionally but throughout our whole lives. How do we know? Because he has already done it. Can we really resist temptation? without doubt. How do we know? Because in Mary, Christ has already done it.

Is this doctrine an exclusively Catholic one? It may be now – but not always so: many years after he separated from the Catholic Church in 1521, Martin Luther wrote concerning the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Although he had rejected many other doctrines of the Church as later inventions, Luther never imagined that this doctrine could be rejected: he accepts it without question as a doctrine flowing directly from the apostolic teaching and therefore from Christ. Indeed, it was beyond his comprehension that anyone could call himself Christian while denying or rejecting the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. He wrote:

*"Many have been disposed to assert that Mary was also born in Original Sin, though all with one mouth affirm that she was sanctified in the maternal womb, and conceived without concupiscence. So that in that very infusing of the soul, the body was simultaneously purified from Original Sin and endowed with divine gifts to receive that human soul which was infused into it from God; and thus in the first moment it began to live, it was exempt from all sin. Thus the Virgin Mary holds, as it were, a middle position between Christ and other men. Again it was just and right that this person should be preserved from Original Sin." (The emphasis is my own, not Luther's). From his sermon 'On the Day of the Conception of the Mother of God', 1527*

This is the founder and father of protestantism speaking! He shows that there was simply no debate on this issue in the sixteenth century: even the reformers accepted the doctrine that Mary was preserved from sin by Christ, and were scandalised when anyone rejected it. Modern protestants who reject this doctrine are parting company from the beliefs of their own founder - and, logically, would be forced to condemn Martin Luther as a papist! What an irony! Even worse, Martin Luther would condemn modern Lutherans for departing from the very teachings which he himself proposed, defended and maintained as the authentic Christian message – he would regard them as unbelievers and heretics!



- The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is first of all a doctrine defending the absolute necessity of Christ, for he is our only saviour, and he alone has sufficient power to save not just out of sin but also save from falling into sin. Christ can save at the deepest level by preventing our collapse into sin. The Immaculate Conception is his gift to the world to show us that this act of saving is not just theoretically possible but realistic and already achieved in his unparalleled act in saving Mary.
- C.C.C. 490-494.

## **E. The Assumption of Mary & her Coronation as Queen of Heaven**

The Assumption of Mary is the second infallibly defined dogma concerning Mary, defined in 1950 by Pope Pius XII after consultation with all the bishops of the Church and much discussion among theologians and by the faithful lay people of the Church. This solemn and infallible definition makes the dogma of the Assumption of Our Lady binding on Catholics because it is seen as not just being central to the Gospel but actually an indispensable part of it. Why? The Assumption is the only doctrine that makes it absolutely explicit that human beings will benefit from the Resurrection of Christ by actually sharing in it in a bodily way. Christ rose & was glorified by the Father: but he was God, so perhaps this is not surprising. But what of mere human beings? The Assumption states that a human being can and in Mary already has, shared in the glory bestowed by the Father on Christ. The definition speaks of the Assumption as "*the crowning glory*" of the privileges given to Mary by Christ, the "*divine Redeemer who won a complete triumph over sin and its consequences.*" (*Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution Munificentissimus Deus, 1950*). In other words, the Assumption is the part that Mary is given in the victory that is Christ's, and his alone, over sin & death. He shares it with her because it completes in her the many graces that she has already received. Like the other doctrines about Mary, this is more truly about Christ and his work - it is a doctrine about what Christ gives and Mary receives. We draw from this that the fulfilment of the graces, which we have all received, must be a similar glorification by Christ of us in heaven. To deny the Assumption places in doubt not the resurrection of Christ, but the possibility of our sharing in that at the end of our earthly life.

Queen of Heaven: The thinking behind this is simplicity itself. Christ, in his humanity perfectly fulfils the requirements of the Law and the Commandments. He not only does what is required but also goes beyond such minimal action to live them fully as a choice of love not just a grudging obligation. He must therefore have perfectly fulfilled the commandment "*Honour thy Father and mother*". The meaning of this commandment is deep: the word "honour" is complex and implies in Hebrew thought not simply courtesy but the giving of the honour which is the son's/daughter's to the parent. The child is asked to give to his parents the honour and glory with which they are respected. Christ thus honours his mother with the glory that is his not just as man but as God as well. This doesn't mean that he makes her God but it does mean that he treats her with the love and honour that he is used to receiving himself - as God. The second step is even easier to follow: as Christians, we follow Christ. He gives her a

unique share in his particular honour as King: he bestows on her the royal dignity of the mother of a King - we call that a Queen Mother. Hence the prayer which begins "*O Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God and our most gentle Queen and Mother...*".

### **3. Do we over-do our veneration of Mary?**

- "*Mary, the all-holy, ever Virgin Mother of God, is the masterwork of the mission of the Son & the Spirit in the fullness of time.*" C.C.C. 721

This is the most common objection to our devotion of Mary. We are seen to elevate her to a level equal to Christ. She is seen as an alternative route to God, the back door for those who are too afraid to approach by the front, through Christ. Perhaps our devotion of Mary can give this impression: we must certainly be careful to avoid doing or saying anything concerning Mary which does give to her these roles.

However, none of our doctrines concerning Mary do this in themselves. Quite the reverse: all the Marian doctrines underline the supreme necessity for us of the life and ministry of Christ. The Church has been consistently careful and hesitant in defining her doctrines concerning Mary because the Church has always been aware of the dangers involved. What is more, the Church has always been cautious and slow to approve new forms of devotion to Mary because of the implications they may have on our doctrine of Christ - and indeed, it has always been in order to defend the truth about Christ that the Church has pointed out misrepresentations or abuses in the veneration of Mary. The experience of 2000 years of defending the truth about Christ has taught the Church that the most effective way of defending our faith in Christ is to preserve our beliefs concerning Mary. For this reason, theological arguments about Christ have often been resolved with definitions that clarify Mary's role - see the sections on Mary as Mother of God, Mother of the Church, the Immaculate Conception etc. Equally, it is essential to the Church that exaggerated devotions to Mary be corrected – for over-emphasising her role is as destructive of our faith in Christ as under-emphasising it. For instance:

Two forms of veneration that went too far, exaggerating Mary's role:

1. Collyridianism (Thrace, fourth century): treated Mary as a member of the Trinity in that a women's cult began to offer the sacrifice of the Mass to Mary. The heresy was attacked and eventually refuted by St. Epiphanius: sacrifice is the form of praise offered exclusively to God - to offer the Mass is to worship and that we give to God alone. Mary would be the first to object to being treated as God. YET we should not over-respond to this heresy by refusing even to venerate Mary. This would be like refusing to speak to or even acknowledge a blood sister for fear coming to think of her as mother! It is over-reaction, not to mention unjust to the sister (who is neglected because I am afraid to trust my own common sense). Mary deserves our veneration because of the great things which God has done for her: because of these, as she herself says, "*henceforth, all generations will call me blessed*" (Lk. 1:48). If God inspired these words, we MUST accept that it is God's desire that Mary

be praised beyond all women for all generations: not to venerate her because God wouldn't like it would seem to contradict God's own word!

2. In the thirteenth century, St. Thomas Aquinas wrote condemning the Immaculate Conception: what he criticised was the way the concept was being explained which seemed to suggest that Mary was sinless because of her own natural virtue and quite independent of God. This, he rightfully argued would be a grave error which would mean Mary had no need of a saviour and that therefore, if she could do it on her own, so logically can we - in other words, we have no need of a saviour either. It took another 600 years for the Church to think through the implications for this ancient idea among the faithful, that Mary was somehow free of sin.

A form of veneration which did not go far enough, and which underestimated Mary's role in salvation history (and effectively sabotaging our doctrine concerning Christ):

1. The Nestorian title 'Mother of Jesus': in the fifth century a debate arose about Christ. The Nestorians denied that he was the true union of the two natures of God and man but said these two were separate in him (like split personality). In effect, this denies that God ever took human nature to himself (only inhabited a human being, never really engaging with the human nature of the man he inhabited). It was almost impossible to produce a formula that showed the real differences between these positions - they signed up to every statement of the Catholic bishops concerning Christ (just understanding the definitions in their own, mistaken, way). Mary was the breakthrough. Nestorians said she was simply mother of the human nature of Jesus (because Christ's divine nature could have no mother as he was divine and eternal). The Church responded by giving Mary the title "Theotokos" - the 'God-bearer': Mary is truly Mother of God because she is truly the mother of the whole person Jesus Christ (i.e. of the God/man, not just of the man part). The title 'mother of Jesus' inadequately described Mary's glory as the one chosen to bear the eternal Son of God: the Church could not be content with minimising her role in this way because it would have repercussions within the person of Christ (that there was division within him - Mary being mother of only a part of him). Defending Mary's role was the only way to underpinning the full significance of Christ himself. As the Nestorians found out, downgrading the importance of Mary does not reinforce the role of Christ - in fact it undermines Christ. To understand and worship Christ we need to understand fully the part played by Mary: she establishes the uniqueness of Christ, far from detracting from it.

The doctrines that Mary is not God but is God's greatest work, and that Mary lived her life free of sin are & always have been taught by the Catholic Church, first implicitly and later explicitly. Yet in both cases, the true doctrine was in danger of being phrased in a way which would have taught falsehood: hence the Church's extreme caution. If, therefore, these doctrines or any doctrine concerning Mary held by the Catholic Church should appear to divinise Mary or sideline Christ, they have been wildly misunderstood. Mary is without doubt the work of Christ: the doctrines all proclaim this. Everything in her that we salute or venerate we attribute to the grace of God. Indeed Mary is the masterpiece of the work of God: the one person in whom the

grace of God is completely effective. That, and that alone is the cause of her greatness. In the Sacred Scriptures, Mary is presented as saying, "*Do whatever he tells you*" (*Jn 2:5*). The doctrines concerning Mary carry out the same function: they focus us not on her but on Christ, and what he has done for her. Her role is to exemplify in a perfect way the completeness of Christ's work, which is manifest in her. Mary simply points to him. Every Marian doctrine is primarily a Christ-doctrine: they say: "Look what Christ is able to do: if he can do that in one case, he must, by logical extension, be powerful enough to do that for others (i.e., you & me). It's just a question of whether we want him to in the same way she did. Because if we do want it, his love means that he will do it."

### ***Imitators of Christ***

But we do not venerate Mary for the sole reason that it makes theological sense, (although this is certainly a very necessary thing). We venerate her because if we are to be true and complete followers of Christ we cannot legitimately avoid venerating her. The basic principle of the Christian life is the imitation of Christ: those whom Christ honours, we honour – no more (that would be to divinise her) but certainly no less. Indeed, one way of showing our respect for people in authority is to treat with respect the people or things that they treat with respect. It is a sure sign that there is something wrong between parents and children, for instance, when the children are gratuitously rude to their grandparents: what better way of getting back at parents than by injuring those their parents love. The reverse is also true: the courting man knows that the way to win over his beloved is to win the respect of her parents - because by treating them well, he shows he is serious about her. We do the same with Christ through Mary: by honouring one he has honoured with the same degree of honour he has given her, we show Christ that we are completely one with him - and thus we would want to honour those he has honoured.... simply because he has done so.

If we ignore those whom Christ has so highly favoured, what does this say about our relationship with Christ? It implies we care little for his judgement of character – he may have chosen Mary, but we know a little better! It says that those whom God elevates we should overlook: but this goes against every instinct of love. If we are truly in love with God, we would never be capable of ignoring one who has so shone in the eyes of God. If God has prized, honoured and glorified her, then for us *not* to do so would be indicative of how we regard *God*.

NO – we do as Christ did because we have faith in *God*: if God saw fit to chose Mary above you or I, then faith tells me that there is truly ‘something about Mary’. If I don’t see it, it is because my eyes are bad, not because God made a mistake!

### ***Lovers of God***

To take it further, if, through our baptism we are actually "in Christ", as St. Paul says, and are members of Christ's actual body; if we are serious about saying that Christ works in us to make us more like himself, then he would presumably impart to his brothers and sisters the burning strength of his perfect divine love not merely for his Father, but also for his human mother. This is not to detract from his work, nor to sideline Christ. To elevate and appreciate the greatest achievement of God made man could not in any way alienate or sideline the one who had achieved that. Quite the

opposite - recognising the sublime beauty of the artist's work is the best way of showing the artist you have understood the immensity of his talent and wonder at the beauty of what he has been able to create. According to the Sacred Scriptures this is one of the defining characteristics of faith in God - so, at least is the lesson of Genesis: in blessing Abraham, God tells him that he will be a source of blessing for the whole human race. If anyone recognises what God has done for Abraham, and honours Abraham because God has honoured him, that man (or woman!) will be blessed by God:

- *"And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. **I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.**" (Gen. 12:2-3)*

To recognise that God has blessed Abraham is implicitly to honour God - and thus to profess faith not in Abraham, but in the one who has made Abraham great. Thus the one who blesses the one God has blessed is showing belief in God, and therefore receives God's favour and blessing. If this is true of Abraham, whom God blessed, how much more is this to be true of Mary whom God did not simply bless but purify, sanctify and redeem perfectly? In fact, God didn't just bless Mary but also inspired her to declare that the blessings he gave her would be spoken of throughout history - and that she herself would be the recipient of the blessings and praises of every generation to come. No other biblical character is given such a promise or claims it, even God's anointed, David. She proclaims, in words of sublime beauty and joy:

- *"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, **henceforth all generations will call me blessed;** for he who is mighty has done great things for me." (Lk. 1:46-49)*

Mary echoes Abraham: both recognise that the great things done to them have been carried out by the election and power of God. In other words, both have been blessed to an extraordinary degree. Both recognise that in consequence, future generations will look back in wonder at what God did to them and honour them, because God had considered them worthy of honour. Abraham is told that such action is sufficient demonstration of faith in God to merit a blessing for these generations. To praise God's work is another way of praising God: and to praise God is to profess belief and faith in him. Doing this guarantees us the fullness of God's blessings - in other words it is the teaching of Sacred Scripture that **when we honour Abraham, God blesses us** (remember - "*I will bless those who bless you, etc.*"?). By the same thinking, but to a greater degree, when we honour Mary because God chose her for even greater honour, this too is faith and righteousness. To venerate Mary is to receive God's favour and blessing. So, anyway, is the thinking of God in Sacred Scripture.

It is hard to see how God could be offended by his people singing the praises of Mary, who is from beginning to end the greatest example of what his grace can achieve. It is almost as hard to see how any son worth his salt could imagine that a compliment paid to his mother because she is his mother, could ever diminish or trivialise him. God is not so insecure that he feels threatened when we glorify him by magnifying his work. Like a good teacher, God is best praised by hearing praise given to his greatest

pupils. Like a good Father, God seeks not so much to be admired and adored in himself but to see his children honour, love, respect and above all imitate the mother he has fashioned for them. Teachers and parents are best praised through their greatest works. One of the greatest and most sincere ways we can worship and adore the Most Blessed Trinity is by admiring and venerating the Blessed Virgin. Where she is praised, God is worshipped.

And Mary said,  
*"My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour,  
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.  
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;  
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name."*

(Lk. 1:46-49)

- For the latest Ecumenical Council's presentation of Mary's place in Catholic tradition, see ch. 8 of Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (1964). It is a masterful picture of Mary as image of the Church, Christ's other great work.
- Without Mary, the doctrines concerning Christ begin to unravel. In those Christian denominations where Mary is regarded with suspicion or at best simply ignored, we find that even the oldest and most fundamental beliefs about Christ are being questioned, scorned or even rejected. There are now Christians who even deny the divinity of Jesus, seeing him merely as a good man, or a great teacher (but nothing more). We need Mary in order to preserve the apostolic faith concerning Christ. If we have no place for Mary, we will never understand her Son who loved her perfectly (which is a failure to love and follow Christ). If we refuse to acknowledge the unparalleled honour and glory that God gave her, we only have partial vision of Christ's work (which is a lack of faith and failure to acknowledge the work of God). If we oppose the titles that have been afforded her, we will truly witness the erosion and abandonment of our very faith in Christ - for the defence of the true significance of Christ is the actual purpose of the titles and veneration of Mary. Without the full veneration of Mary, faith in Christ will be temporary and inevitably tending towards collapse. This is not Catholic prejudice - it is simple observation of history. The old saying is true *"Know Mary, know Christ. No Mary, no Christ."*
- Without Christ, Mary is nothing. Everything good in her is done through the grace of her Son, Jesus Christ. In this regard, she is identical to you and me. The real difference between Mary and us is in the response of the creature to the redeemer: she held back nothing from him - while we are usually content with surrendering next to nothing to Christ. She is the disciple we ought to be.