

THEOTOKOS: MOTHER OF GOD

Mary, the Mother of Jesus, was deeply steeped in the Bible and Jewish Tradition. So well was she versed in the Scriptures that the New Testament presents her as quoting and applying them in her everyday life: when she visited her cousin Elizabeth, and at the wedding in Cana. But this humble woman who pondered the Scriptures is quite often misunderstood. We shall try to answer questions about Mary using the Bible as meditated upon by the Church in Tradition.

MOTHER OF GOD (THEOTOKOS)

The first one to call Mary this was her cousin Elizabeth when she asked, “*Why should I be honored with a visit from the mother of my Lord?*” (Luke 1:43). The Greek word for “Lord” was the common word used to mean God. When we say that Mary is the Mother of God we do not, of course, mean that she existed before God, the Holy Trinity, but that she is the mother of Jesus. The apostle John teaches us that the Word who is God was made flesh. This is Jesus born of Mary. If Jesus is God made flesh and Mary is truly His mother, then she deserves the title Mother of God. As a title this term dates back to the 200's. It was used as a defense of Christ's divinity at the Council of Ephesus in 431.

EVER-VIRGIN

Many ask why Mary should be called ever-virgin when “*Jesus had brothers and sisters*” (cf. Matthew 13:55). The Aramaic language spoken at Jesus' time used the word “brother” for “relative.” Eastern Christians understood that

James, the “*brother of the Lord*” (cf. Galatians 1:19), was Joseph's son from his first wife and the others mentioned may have been cousins, nephews, etc.

The Tradition of the Church has stated that Mary is both physically and spiritually pure and immaculate. Mary was consecrated to God in a very special way, and so she offered her perpetual virginity to God as a gift. After bearing God in her womb she would not allow herself to be known by another. Her virginity is actually spiritual purity manifested in an everlasting physical way: Mary's first husband is the Lord God.

IMMACULATE

The Virgin Mary was begotten for a unique purpose – to bear God's seed within her. She was predestined to be the Bride of God in a unique way. Because Mary bore Jesus, the Wisdom of God, in her body she had to be sinless. As it is written, “*No, Wisdom will never make its way into a crafty soul nor stay in a body that is in debt to sin...*” (Wisdom 1:4) . Her sinlessness is due to God's prerogative and her free, grace-sustained cooperation.

It is only by God's saving grace that one can be preserved from sin. Just like us, Mary needs God as her Savior and Lord. We believe that Mary *freely and fully* cooperated with God's saving grace. A special grace was given her and she participates fully in this grace.

This is why Christian Tradition has long considered Mary as a model of the Church, which Paul says is to be “*... holy and immaculate, without spot or wrinkle or anything of that sort*” (Ephesians 5:27). The earliest extant writing that describes Mary is this way is from

St. Ephrem the Syrian about AD 370, but the belief is indirectly stated as early as 150.

ASSUMED INTO HEAVEN

It is through Tradition that we believe Mary was taken up into heaven. This belief is traceable to the 400's, when Mary was looked to as a sign of the promise that at Christ's coming we will all be caught up into heaven (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

This should not appear so impossible. The Bible states that Enoch and Elias were taken into heaven. Enoch walked with God in purity of heart (cf. Genesis 5:24). In Sirach it is written, “*Enoch pleased the Lord and was taken up, an example for the conversion of all generations*” (Sirach 44:16). In the same way Mary's place in glory stands as an example and promise to us.

"FULL OF GRACE"

When the Bible was translated into the Latin Vulgate (385), Luke 1:28 was rendered “*full of grace*”, although the Greek means “*highly favored*”. The English translations of our prayers have adopted the popular rendering, although we do not use the Latin Vulgate, because Mary can truly be said to be full of grace. All spiritual blessings have been given us in Christ (cf. Ephesians 1:3) . Paul further states that the goal of the Christian is to be “*... filled with the utter fullness of God*” (Ephesians 3:19). Mary, carrying the Son of God in her womb, was definitely filled with this utter fullness, the fullness of grace which is a free gift.

HOLY THEOTOKOS, SAVE US

We as Christians believe that “... *there is only one mediator between God and mankind, Himself a man, Christ Jesus, who sacrificed Himself as a ransom for them all. He is the evidence of this, sent at the appointed time ...*” (1 Timothy 2:5-7). But we also believe that this appointed time was bound up with a woman, Mary. The prophet Micah wrote concerning the Jewish people, “*Yahweh is therefore going to abandon them till the time when she who is to give birth gives birth.*” (Micah 5:2)

This verse immediately follows the prophecy of Bethlehem as the Messiah's birthplace. Hence saving grace is directly tied to Mary, the woman who bore Jesus.

Mary is an instrument of salvation. She cooperated and worked with, but did not initiate, God's saving grace. Similarly when we are a channel of grace to someone, it does not detract from Christ, but flows from Him and builds up His Body. “*We are God's co-workers...*” (1 Corinthians 3:9) and God's work is salvation. Therefore, being united to Him, we share in the work of redemption. Mary shares in this work in a special way.

Mary is a powerful intercessor because of her deep union with the Holy Trinity. Her portion in life is the fullness of intimacy with God. God has chosen to use her in extraordinary ways.

From the beginning of the Church Mary has been seen as the Mother of us all by reason of our being members of Christ her Son. St. Justin the Philosopher (died 165) saw Mary as a model of the Church. He and later Fathers, such as St. Irenaeus, a disciple of St. Polycarp who was himself taught by the Apostle John, all saw Mary as the New Eve.

As Jesus is the New Adam, Lord of the New Creation (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:45-49), Mary is the New Eve who undid what the first Eve had done. The first Eve disobeyed God and brought sin and death into the world. The New Eve, Mary, believed God's message to her and obeyed, bringing salvation and life to the world in her Son Jesus, who crushes the head of the serpent. She is seen as a type of the Church just as Peter and Paul saw Sarah (cf. Galatians 4:21-31; 1 Peter 3:6).

The earliest existing witness of Christians asking Mary's intercession dates back to the 200's. As a matter of fact, the Nicene Creed which all Christians profess was heavily influenced by the creed delivered to St. Gregory the Wonderworker by the Virgin Mary around the year 260.

The Catholic and Orthodox Churches have thus always had a devotion to Mary, Mother of God, but some of the faithful have misunderstood her proper place, as they have misunderstood many other things. Mary is not divine: she can never be equal to God. She, like we, participates in the divine nature, though in a fuller and deeper way. Due to God's will and her free and loving cooperation, she is more intimately united to the divine nature. And so we honor her as the crown and fruit of creation found pleasing and acceptable to God.

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