The Five Doctrines on Mary

For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. ~ Luke 1:48

THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY has a very special place in the teaching and devotional life of the Catholic Church. Here, we examine what the Church teaches about Mary. Why does the Catholic Church give so much attention to Mary? Mary is honored because of her Son. In other words, Mary is important because her Son is so much more important. Her great dignity flows directly from her being the human mother of Jesus Christ. No human being could be more blessed and exalted than the woman whom God chose to be the mother of Christ. It is a uniquely high calling and privilege.

It must be made clear at the outset that the Catholic Church does not teach that Mary is divine. She is no goddess but a creature like all of us, who has been made by almighty God. God alone is to be adored and worshipped.

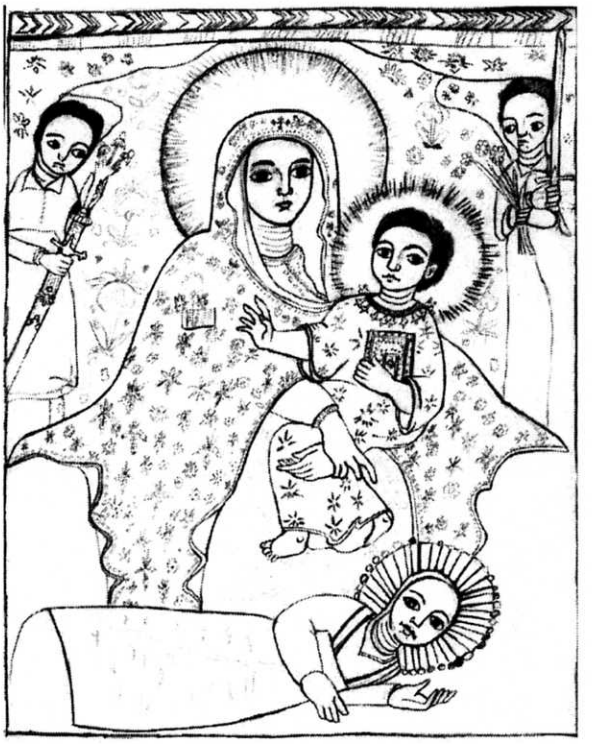
God's Redemptive Plan and the Role of Mary

God knew before he created Adam and Eve that they would disobey him and thereby bring sin, suffering and death into human history. Yet God's desire to share his life with us could not be squelched by human sin. He chose to create humanity anyway, knowing that he would send his own Son as our Savior to make it possible for those who love him to be with him forever in Heaven.

This is an important point. God knew that humanity would sin against him, and yet from the very beginning he knew what he was going to do about it. His own Son, the second person of the Blessed Trinity, would become a man. God the Father desired that his Son become truly one of us. He would live among us and reveal God the Father to us. He would restore our friendship with God that had been lost by the sin of Adam and Eve.

Mary is the woman out of all human history who was chosen by God the Father to give human flesh and blood to his divine Son. This fact makes Mary absolutely unique and special. God knew that Mary would be the mother of Christ before he ever created Adam and Eve — and long before he created Mary. Certainly God could have done things differently. God is not bound to do anything in particular, for he is the Almighty. Nonetheless, he freely chose to give Mary a very special role in the redemptive work of Christ.

"Mary is important because her Son is so much more important."



Virgin and Child, by Daniel Tipton, copy of an original painted on the wall of an Ethiopian monastery

Throughout the Scriptures he calls mere human beings to participate in his plan of salvation. He continually comes down to meet us where we are. He speaks with us through his Word and reveals himself to us in ways that we can understand and relate to. Nothing could be more comforting than the fact that the almighty Creator of the universe loves us so much that he became one of us. He became a tiny embryo, and was born as a helpless babe into the arms of his mother Mary. This is our Lord coming to save us in the same way that

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all of us come into the world — through a mother.

All doctrines of the faith come from the Word of God that consists of both Scripture and Tradition. The Church is the handmaid to God's Word; she faithfully transmits and interprets this Word to the world. Nothing that the Church teaches is her own. It is the same teaching given to her by Christ. Therefore, doctrines concerning Mary are also part of the Word of God, either in Scripture or Tradition.

Let us now take a deeper look into Mary's role in God's plan of salvation, as it is revealed to us in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. There are five key doctrines that reveal the truth of who Mary is. All of these doctrines are rooted in the Bible, either explicitly or implicitly. If we are to know and understand the mother of Christ as she really is, then we must understand these five doctrines.

"Mary is the woman out of all human history who was chosen by God the Father to give human flesh and blood to his divine Son."

Annunciation of the Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary, 15th century illuminated manuscript, French Book of Hours

Mother of God

"And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High" (Lk 1:31-32).

One of the central truths about Jesus is that he is both fully God and fully man. To understand this, one must understand the distinction between the terms "person" and "nature." Person refers to *who* we are. Nature refers to *what* we are. If we ask, "who is Jesus Christ?" the answer is that this is the name of God the Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity *Incarnate*. If we ask "what is Jesus Christ?" the answer is that he is a being with two natures — divine and human.

When Mary, newly pregnant with Jesus, left Nazareth to go to her heavily-pregnant kinswoman Elizabeth, Elizabeth greeted her with the words, *"And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy"* (Lk 1:43-44). The Greek word used by St. Luke in writing these words for "leaped" is precisely the same word in the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew, which we render into English as "danced": *"And David danced before the Lord with all his might... So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting, and with the sound of the horn"* (2 Sm 6:14-15). This is no accident: St. Luke intended us to understand Mary as the new Ark of the Covenant, she who carries within herself not the Ten Commandments, but the Lawgiver himself; she who carries not manna from the desert, but the very Bread of Life; she who carries not the rod of Aaron the high priest, but the eternal high priest himself. This understanding is reinforced in the book of Revelation: *"Then God's temple in Heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple ... And a great portent appeared in Heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars"* (Rv 11:19, 12:1) — that is, the Ark of the Covenant is Mary, the "woman clothed with the sun."

At the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD, the Church proclaimed that Mary is "the Mother of God." In doing so, the Church was actually defending and protecting the whole truth about Christ which, at the time, was being denied by a man named Nestorius.

The term "Mother of God" is often misunderstood. It has a very specific meaning. It does not

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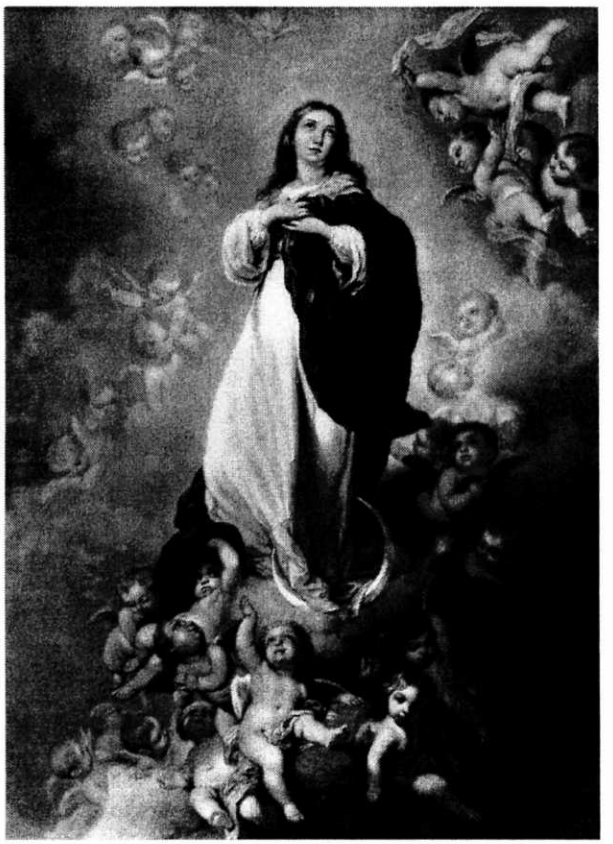
mean that Mary gave to Jesus his divine nature. The almighty God is one God existing from all eternity as three Persons — the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit. This is the Holy Trinity. At a particular moment in history, the second person of the Holy Trinity took to himself a human nature. He became a man, while remaining at the same time, fully God. This is called the "Incarnation." This is where Mary comes into the picture. When the Son of God "stepped into" human history, he did so through Mary. The womb of Mary is where he received his human nature. But Mary did not give to Jesus his divine nature. He possessed his divine nature already; he has always been divine. In childbirth, however, mothers bring forth persons, not natures. The person that Mary gave birth to is the Lord of Heaven and earth Incarnate It makes perfect sense, really:

Mary is the mother of Jesus.

Jesus is God.

Therefore, Mary is the Mother of God Incarnate.



Immaculate Conception, by Bartolomé Murillo, 1617-1682

The Immaculate Conception

"The Lord God said to the serpent... 'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel'" (Gn 3:14-15).

The term "Immaculate Conception" is also frequently misunderstood. It does not refer to the conception of Jesus in Mary's womb. The term for that is "Incarnation." Rather, it refers to the conception of Mary in her own mother's womb. This truth about Mary was officially proclaimed a dogma of the Catholic Church by Pope Pius IX in 1854, although it can readily be documented that it has been taught and believed at least as far back as the third century.

At this point we must recall that God knew what he was going to do to save us all along. From all eternity, God knew that Mary would be the mother of Christ. This helps us to understand why Mary would receive special graces and privileges from God. She would need all the grace that God could give her in order for her to fulfill such an awesome task. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception means that at the moment of her own conception in her mother's womb, God intervened and preserved Mary from original sin. Therefore, Mary was born with a perfect, sinless human nature, the same sinless nature that she would be giving to her Son Jesus.

Jesus was like us in all things except sin (see Heb 4:15). Since Mary was Jesus' mother and gave him his human nature, it is appropriate that her nature also would be sinless. Though as a daughter of Eve she deserved to be born in the state of original sin like the rest of mankind, as the future mother of his Son, God preserved Mary from original sin at the first moment of her conception in her mother's womb.

What basis is there for this doctrine in Scripture? Because of the sin of Adam and Eve, their friendship with God had been ruptured. And in them all humanity became subject to sin, Satan and death. Sacred Scripture reveals that almighty God is holiness

The Humble House of Nazareth, c. 1901, by Giovanni Gagliardi

itself, that nothing impure can exist in his presence. He is a consuming fire of holiness. Knowing this, the Church found it unthinkable that the all-holy God could receive his human nature from a mother stained with original sin.

Yet all humanity was affected by the sin of Adam and Eve, and thus needed to be redeemed by Christ. The early Church soon began to see in Sacred Scripture clues to answering the dilemma. One of the first images of Mary in the early Church was the "new Eve." Just as Christ was the "new Adam," the early Church began to see that Mary filled the role of a new Eve. (The difference, of course, is that Jesus is God as well as man, while Mary is a human being.) Nonetheless, the parallel is undeniable. In Genesis 3:15, God tells the serpent, *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."*

"Her virginity is a sign of her singular devotion and total gift of herself to God."

This passage was understood as God's first promise of our redemption — as foreshadowing the time when the seed (Jesus) of the woman (Mary) would conquer the seed (sin) of the serpent (Satan). But even more, the word "enmity" in this context means absolute opposition. The mother of the Messiah would share in the same kind of "enmity" against the devil as that of her Son; total opposition would exist between the devil and sin on the one hand, and Mary and Jesus on the other. This would mean that Mary and Jesus would have absolutely nothing in common with the devil — especially sin. It was necessary for Christ to be free from all sin so that he could be the perfect expiation for our sins. Mary was to be the mother of the Redeemer, so it was apprpriate for her, too, to be free from sin.

The second key passage of Scripture is Luke 1:28. The angel Gabriel appeared to the Virgin Mary and said, *"Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!"* The English phrase "full of grace" is a translation of the Latin Vulgate *gratia plena*, itself a translation of the unique Greek word *kecharitomene*. In the original Greek of the New Testament, the angel's greeting literally reads as "Hail, you who have been graced, the Lord is with you." Although a multitude of renditions exist in modern translations of the Bible, *gratia plena* has the great virtue of antiquity, dating back to the late fourth century and based on even older Latin translations, putting it very close to the time the Greek original was written. The angel's greeting expresses something about who Mary is and what God has done for her. The angel can call her "full of grace" because Mary had received the fullness of grace at her Immaculate Conception.

For Mary to truly be the mother of Christ, he would have to receive his human nature from her. That is the very meaning of motherhood. A mother gives her own nature to her child. Yet, if Mary had been born with a fallen nature, one tainted with original sin, then that is what she would have given to Christ. No one can give what he or she does not have. Yet we know from St. Paul that *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Rom 3:23). What, exactly, does St. Paul intend to say? From the context of his words, it is clear that by the word "all" St. Paul meant "both Jews and Gentiles." The human race as a whole has been affected by the sin of Adam and Eve. Unless God intervenes, all human beings are born with original sin. Every single human being needs the saving grace of Jesus Christ. But there is nothing in Scripture that dictates exactly how God applies the redemption of Christ to each person. There is nothing that would prevent God from doing something unique if he chose to. After all, he is the Lord and Ruler of all creation.

The Blessed Virgin receives the body of her Son, by James Tissot, 1836-1902

When God gives someone a high calling, he also gives the grace needed for it. There is no role that any human being has ever been called to that is higher than Mary's. She was called to be the Mother of Jesus Christ, who is God. The highest calling requires the highest grace. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception does not in any way mean that Mary was not also redeemed by Christ. God is outside of all space and time, and therefore could easily redeem Mary in a unique way. The Church teaches, based on the teaching of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, that the merit and grace of Christ's redemption was applied by God to Mary at the very first moment of her conception in her mother's womb. In this way she was preserved from being born with original sin. She was given a sinless nature so that she could then give a sinless nature to her Son Jesus as a true human mother.

Think about it. The Son of God became flesh, the Incarnate Word of God. *"All things were made through him"* (Jn 1:3). This means that the Son of God created his own mother, Mary. Anyone who had the opportunity to create his or her own mother would create her as perfectly as possible, without the stain of sin. Jesus created his mother Mary as the most perfect and holy human being in all creation. As she proclaimed in her Magnificat, *"he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name"* (Lk 1:49).

Perpetual Virginity

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Is 7:14).

Belief in Mary's perpetual virginity — before, during, and after Jesus' birth — is of great antiquity. Ancient Christian writers saw in the prophecy of Ezekiel, *"This gate shall remain shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it; for the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered by it; therefore it shall remain shut"*

"Her Assumption strengthens our faith in the future resurrection and hope for eternal life."

(Ez 44:2), the Old Testament foundation for this belief. At the Lateran Council in 649 AD, the Church affirmed the ancient belief in Mary's perpetual virginity.

Scripture attests to the fact that Mary was a virgin before the birth of Jesus. *"The angel Gabriel was sent from God ... to a virgin ... and the virgin's name was Mary"* (Lk 1:26-27). Mary conceived Jesus without any loss of her virginity: *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God"* (Lk 1:35). By the time Jesus was conceived, the prophecy found in Isaiah was considered to refer specifically to a virgin, not merely a "young woman" (see Mt 1:23, which used the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scripture in citing Isaiah).

Just as Jesus' conception was miraculous, so too was his birth. Mary retained her virginity even in the act of giving birth to Jesus as a sign of her everlasting purity and holiness. Following Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph did not engage in marital relations and therefore had no other children. What about the "brothers and sisters" of Jesus mentioned in the Bible? In the original language of the New Testament, the term for brother or sister can refer to any close relative. James and Joseph are called "brothers of Jesus" but were in fact sons of another Mary who is called *"the other Mary"* (Mt 27:61; Mt 28:1) to distinguish her from Mary the mother of Jesus (see Mt 13:55; Mt 27:56).

Mary is a virgin not because sex is evil or incompatible with holiness. Sex is a good created by God in the beginning and sanctified by Christ through the sacrament of Matrimony. Her virginity is, rather, a sign of her singular devotion and total gift of herself to God. Because she is both virgin and mother, Mary's life is a supreme example of holiness to both those who are married and those who have made themselves virgins for the sake of the Kingdom (see Mt 19:12).

"Mary watches over and protects the human race through her powerful intercession in Heaven."

Mary is our Mother in the order of grace

The Assumption

The Assumption of Mary clearly rests on the fact that Mary was sinless. The Church has always understood the reference to the *"woman clothed with the sun"* found in Scripture (see verses at beginning of handout) as referring to Mary once she had been assumed body and soul into Heaven. There is scriptural precedent for this in the stories of Enoch (Gn 5:23) and Elijah (2 Kg 2:11).

All humanity suffers as a result of original sin. But by the singular grace of her Immaculate Conception, Mary was preserved from original sin for her special mission as the mother of the Messiah. When her mission was finished, the time came for her to enter into the glory of Heaven. At the end of her life, God assumed her body and soul into glory. This event is called the dogma of the Assumption. Her Assumption should not be confused with the Ascension of Christ. He ascended into Heaven by his own power; she did not. She was assumed into Heaven by God.

Evidence for the Church's belief and teaching of this dogma can be found in the prayers and writings of the early Church. The Dormition (the fall-

"The world, which received Christ through Mary over two thousand years ago, continues to receive Christ through Mary even today."

ing asleep) of Mary celebrated as a feast in the East attests to her Assumption: "In your Dormition you did not leave the world, O Mother of God, but were joined to the source of Life. You conceived the living God and, by your prayers, will deliver our souls from death"[1] (CCC 966).

Depictions of the Assumption in sacred art also confirm the common belief of this dogma. Although it has been part of the Church's Tradition for many centuries, it was declared a dogma only in 1950, by Pope Pius XII. He declared that "when the course of her earthly life was finished, [Mary] was taken up body and soul into Heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things"[2] (CCC 966). (The statement of the dogma does not address the question of whether or not she died first.) Her Assumption strengthens our faith in the future resurrection and hope for eternal life.

Mother in the Order of Grace

Jesus is our Redeemer so Mary can be called the mother of the Redeemer. But her motherhood does not stop there. Because of her unique cooperation with the work of redemption brought about by Christ, she also becomes the mother in a spiritual sense of all those who have been joined to her Son in Baptism. The Church teaches that "this motherhood of Mary in the order of grace continues uninterruptedly from the consent which she loyally gave at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the cross, until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect"[3] (CCC 969).

Mary is our mother in the order of grace, but what does this mean? First, it means that Mary watches over and protects the human race through her powerful intercession in Heaven. She intercedes for our needs in the same way that she went to Jesus when the wine had run out at the wedding feast of Cana (see Jn 2:1-11). She not only prays for us, but also leads us back to Christ. Mary's words to us are always the same: *"Do whatever he tells you"* (Jn 2:5).

Second, Mary is our mother in the order of grace because she is the mother of the Church. The Church is the body of Christ and *"Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior"* (Eph 5:23). All who are joined to Christ in Baptism make up *"the body of Christ and [are] individually members of it"* (1 Cor 12:27). Going one step further with this analogy, Mary then is also the mother of Christ's body because she gave birth to the head of this body who is Christ. We *"who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus"* are *"the rest of her offspring"* (Rv 12:17).

Third, she is our mother in the order of grace because she is the handmaid of the Lord upon whom the Holy Spirit came to rest. No human being is closer to the Holy Spirit than Mary. She was chosen by the Holy Spirit to bring Christ into the world. God did not have to give Mary this role; but he chose to do so, according to his own designs. Scripture says that, *"Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever"* (Heb 13:8), so God's designs do not change. Therefore the world, which received Christ through Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit over two thousand years ago, continues to receive Christ through Mary even today.

Last, Mary is our mother in the order of grace because she uniquely participates in the mediation of Christ. This mediation is prefigured in the Old Testament in the way the mother of the king, the queen mother, would act as an intercessor to the king for the needs of others (see, for example, 1 Kgs 2:19). All Christians are called to participate in his work; St. Paul even goes so far to say that we are *"God's fellow workers"* (1 Cor 3:9) in mediating Christ and his grace to the world. Mary also is called to be God's co-worker, but her role is unique. In a wholly singular manner Mary cooperates in his work of "restoring supernatural life to souls"[4] (CCC 968). For all these reasons Mary is the mother in the order of grace and our mother. It is through her help that God's grace reaches us, transforming us more and more into the image of her Son Jesus Christ.

(CCC 487-507, 963-970, 2673-2679)

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[1] Byzantine Liturgy, Troparion, Feast of the Dormition, August 15th

[2] *Lumen Gentium* 59; cf. Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950) from Denzinger-Schönmetzer, Enchiridion Symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum 3903 (1965); cf. Revelation 19:16

[3] *Lumen Gentium* 62

[4] *Lumen Gentium* 61