

Mary

Just as God saw it fitting that we should have the opportunity to participate in the events which accomplished our salvation, the Paschal Mystery of Jesus' Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension, throughout salvation history God has enlisted the participation of his people in the accomplishment of His plans. Arguably, the most significant contribution was made by a maiden of Nazareth when God chose her to be the mother of Jesus. Understandably, those outside the Catholic Church often find our devotion to Mary excessive or inappropriate, but no one will ever out do God the Father who chose her, from among all women, to play such a unique role in the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity. Nevertheless, devotion to our Lady, in its wide variety of forms and cultural expressions, can easily be inappropriate, if it is not properly oriented to her Son. Sacred Art throughout the Church's history has consistently given testimony to the fact that Mary always points us to Jesus, and the Catechism itself affirms that what the Church teaches about Mary, tells us about Him. (CCC 487)

We begin each calendar New Year with a celebration of Mary, Mother of God on January 1st, a memory often crowded out by rose parades, college football bowl games, and perhaps a little too much partying after watching the ball drop the night before. But the title is nevertheless familiar to all of us who were taught the "Hail Mary" from a young age. In its closing lines we ask the prayers of "Holy Mary, Mother of God." And though the title still remains troublesome to those who suggest that it implies a position of Mary above or older than God, the title, and role that it describes, are perhaps the clearest example of how the teachings about Mary tell us about Jesus.

Perhaps a brief history lesson might help. The title "Mother of God" is associated with the Council of Ephesus in 431. The Council gathered the bishops of the Church in response to the teaching of Nestorius, who, in his defense, had difficulty with the union of human and divine natures in the person of Jesus, what became known to us as the "hypostatic union." Mary was described as "Theotokos", literally "God-bearer" to clarify her relation to the Second Person, Jesus Christ, become Man, but nevertheless God. The title certainly tells us something about Mary, but more importantly then, and perhaps even now, it affirms the divinity of Jesus. Mary is the Mother of God. Her son Jesus, is divine. And she is okay with us making that point, I checked with her, really.

Another teaching about Mary also comes from the prayer addressed to her, this time in its opening line where the Angel Gabriel's greeting to her at the Annunciation is quoted, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!" (Luke 1:28) The Church has

historically seen in this greeting the biblical basis for her “Immaculate Conception,” an important teaching not to be confused with the “Immaculate Reception” which has special meaning to Steelers fans.

The Immaculate Conception refers to the conception of Mary, not the conception of Jesus, which took place immediately upon her “yes” to Gabriel’s invitation. And though it refers to her conception, not His, this teaching also tells us something important about Him. The Church reads Gabriel’s greeting, “full of grace” as intentional and meaningful, and not just flattery on the part of God’s Messenger, using it like a salesman to obtain her cooperation. The title “full of grace” in that day was striking in its relation to the rest of humanity, which had specifically not been full of grace since that fateful day in the Garden of Eden when our first parents lost their friendship with God, symbolized by their banishment from the Garden. “Full of grace” is specifically not what each of us is until our Baptism, which is God’s means of restoring that friendship, or perhaps more concretely, the divine life which we call “Sanctifying Grace”. Mary was “full of grace” in an age when nobody else was, she was “Immaculately Conceived” before Her Son established the Sacrament of Baptism to be the means by which the fruits of His saving work, a share in divine life, could be given to us. And the reason for this astounding gift to her was more than just because the Son wanted to give His mother nice things, but rather it is based on the biblical principle that God’s holiness and our sinfulness are always incompatible. Like Isaiah, whose response to God’s visit was, “Woe is me, I am doomed!” (Isaiah 6:5), or Peter, who responded to the miraculous catch of fish, not with celebration, but “Depart from me, Lord...” (Luke 5:8), we who are aware of our sins, when invited by the holy Augustinians to participate in the work of their lay fraternity, might naturally feel a little unworthy. We know better than to arrive at a wedding in gym clothes, and we know not to receive the Lord in the Eucharist when we are aware of grave sin. And this is not just due to some unjustified feeling of unworthiness, but rather, to enjoy the company of those holier than us means that we strive to be holy like them, and to enjoy being in the presence of God, we turn from our sin.

Mary’s “Immaculate Conception” prepared her to carry in her body the Second Person of the Trinity, the Creator of the Universe, God Incarnate. We celebrate her Immaculate Conception on December 8th, and though it has not been historically established that this was the day on which she was conceived, the Church gives us this Solemnity during the Season of Advent, a word that literally means “to come”, as if to say, “This is what it took Mary to prepare for the coming of Jesus, what are you doing to prepare for His coming?”

Mary is the Mother of God, and was Immaculately Conceived so that she could be His mother. And because He was conceived in her by the power of the Holy Spirit, we say that He was “born of the virgin,” that she became a mother without the help of an earthly father. This is the teaching about the “Virgin Birth” as foretold by Isaiah, but is to be distinguished from her “Perpetual Virginity.” The Virgin Birth tells us that Jesus did not have an earthly father, her Perpetual Virginity tells us that Jesus did not have any siblings. St. Augustine tells us that “Mary ‘remained a virgin in conceiving her Son, a virgin in giving birth to him... always a virgin.’” (CCC 510) Modern translations of the Bible make reference to Jesus’ “brothers and sisters,” (Mark 3:31), although the Church has long recognized in these references a limitation of translation. Namely, in the original language of the text, these could have been references to extended family members or cousins. St. Joseph knew that Jesus was not his son, and the Angel who visited him made it clear that his betrothed had been visited by the Holy Spirit. We consider that out of reverence, he would not have approached his wife in the way that husbands and wives normally do. Beyond this, we also recall how virginity has long been revered as a high calling, not because the Church thinks that marital relations are bad, but because our Lord himself praised those who “have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom,” (Matthew 19:12) so that they could be more available to love and serve God’s people. Chastity is one of the “Evangelical Counsels,” along with poverty and obedience, obliged upon all the faithful according to their state in life, but lived out in a more radical way by priests and religious sisters, in response to the gospel, in anticipation of heaven, and in imitation of our Lord. It is not difficult to imagine that His mother chose to respond in this way.

“When the course of her earthly life was finished,” Mary was assumed into heaven, body and soul. (CCC 966) Not to be confused with the other big “A” words, Mary’s “Assumption” refers to her entrance into heaven, not to Jesus’ return to the Father at the “Ascension,” nor the Angel’s visit to her at the “Annunciation.” If you go looking for an account of the Assumption in the Bible, you will not have much luck, but then again, nor would you if you went looking for the great Basilica that marks her burial site, as would be the case for the Church’s other great Saints. Her body, like that of her Son, is in heaven, and though we don’t go to the Bible for an explicit account to affirm this teaching, we find that the Assumption follows logically from the Immaculate Conception, and that both find their foundation in the Bible’s description of the effects of Sin.

Finally, Mary is our “Mother in the Order of Grace.” She is not only “Holy Mary Mother of God,” she is our mother too. The Church understands that when Jesus

entrusted His mother to St. John, “Behold, your mother,” (John 19:26) He was not only asking him to take care of her after His death, but establishing a new relationship between them. And not only them, but between her and all who followed St. John and the rest of the Apostles, namely, us. When we become children of God in Baptism, we are not speaking metaphorically, God shares his very life with us, what we call “Sanctifying Grace”. If the genes or DNA that we receive from our parents make us their children, with all the characteristics (or defects) that come with them, the divine life that we receive from God makes us His children in a more significant and more “real” way. The unbaptized baby may have Aunt Millie’s nose or Uncle George’s chin, but after Baptism he or she resembles God more than the members of his or her family. We call this the “order of grace,” and relations in the order of grace are always closer than relations in the order of blood. God is more truly our Father than our earthly fathers, Jesus is more truly our brother than our earthly siblings, and Mary is more truly our Mother than our earthly mothers.

All that may seem fairly theoretical unless we can experience the difference or recognize the benefit. And when we struggle in that regard, it is often because we place more of a priority on the material care that mothers provide so well, than on the spiritual benefits that are oriented to our eternal welfare. Our mothers pray for us and intercede for us. Mary does too, and her intercession is powerful because of her close relationship with her Son. If you have not received the care of your heavenly Mother lately, perhaps it is because you have not asked. It may be time to find that rosary from your First Communion and put it to use.

Mary is the Mother of God, she was Immaculately Conceived, she is Perpetually a Virgin, she was Assumed into Heaven and she is our Mother in the Order of Grace. Devotion to Our Lady takes many forms and has provided a rich and beautiful supplement to the lived faith of the people of God throughout history. If you have not recently taken advantage of that heritage, I encourage you to explore those expressions which may be available in your parish or diocese. Perhaps the simplest way to foster a deeper relationship with Jesus through His mother is to make your own her response to the Angel Gabriel at the Annunciation: “Fiat,” that is, “Let it be done to me... according to your word.” (Luke 1:26) Make a daily commitment to seek God’s will for your life, and take a little motherly advice, given at the Wedding at Cana: “Do whatever He tells you.” (John 2:5)