DEVOTION TO MARY

Catholic beliefs about Mary have their roots in our belief in her son

by Alan Schreck

Below on 5 pages an excellent explanation of Catholic beliefs about Mary.

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Kees Slijkerman
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Devotion to Mary

Catholic beliefs about Mary have their roots in our belief in her son.

by Alan Schreck

Of all the issues that divide Catholic and Protestant Christians, few create as much misunderstanding and tension as the Catholic devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus. In this month's article, the last in a six-part series on specific points of Catholic teaching, Alan Schreck explains what the Catholic Church teaches about Mary and the correct way to honor her.

The disagreements over Mary touch on some larger differences between Catholics and Protestants, especially in our understandings of scripture and tradition and in our beliefs regarding the communion of saints. Readers may want to refer back to Dr. Schreck’s articles on these topics in the March and June issues of New Covenant.

"Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!” announced the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:28). “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” exclaimed Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:41). The person being addressed is a young woman of Galilee who lived over 19 centuries ago, Mary of Nazareth.

Why do Catholics today continue to honor Mary?
First of all because God has honored her by choosing her for an important role in his plan of salvation. What greater honor could God give a person than allowing the fullness of his divinity to take human form within her?

We also honor Mary for her full and faithful response to God’s call. Consider her response to God’s invitation to become the mother of the savior. Naturally, the angel’s message left her stunned and perplexed at first: “How can this be, since I do not know man?” (Luke 1:34). But when Gabriel explained that she would conceive by the Holy Spirit, Mary’s response was whole-hearted: “I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say” (Luke 1:38).

Mary’s response to God is also seen in her prayer of praise, the “Magnificat” (Luke 1:46-55). She acknowledged the honor God had given her—“all ages to come shall call me blessed” (1:48)—but immediately directed all praise for this back to God—“for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name” (1:49).

Mary accepted not only praise on her son’s account, however, but also hardship and suffering. She gave birth to Jesus in a stable, then had to flee to Egypt to escape Herod’s wrath (see Matt. 2:13-14; Luke 2:6-7). When Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the temple, Simeon prophesied that she would be “pierced with a sword” (Luke 2:35), apparently referring to her sorrow upon Jesus’ death. Mary also experienced the normal anxieties of a mother, as when the 12-year-old Jesus was lost in Jerusalem (see Luke 2:41-50). Yet scripture never shows her complaining about these trials. Rather, Mary “kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Luke 2:19, 51).

MARY AND HER SON

Mary was a model disciple of her son. Although she does not appear often in the accounts of Jesus’ public ministry, it is evident that she followed her son from the beginning to the end of his life. We find her at Cana, where her simple, firm faith evoked Jesus’ first miracle (see John 2:1-12). We find her at the foot of the cross, a witness to his death. Artists have enshrined the moving scene of Jesus’ lifeless body cradled in her arms. Mary may well have remembered at that moment all the events of Jesus’ life: his conception, birth, childhood and adolescence, his first miracle at Cana, the trials and triumphs of his public ministry, and now the agony of his passion and death.

Our last glimpse of Mary in the New Testament is in the upper room in Jerusalem after Jesus’ ascension. She was with the apostles as they “devoted themselves to constant prayer” (Acts 1:14). A few days later they would all receive the full outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. That same Spirit who overshadowed Mary at Jesus’ conception would be released in her life once again.

There is one scene in the gospels in which Jesus seems to distance himself from his mother, saying that his true relatives are those who do the will of his heavenly Father (see Matt. 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8:19-21). Yet we cannot consider his words a rebuke of Mary, for the gospels clearly show her as the one person above all others who would hear the word of God and act upon it (see Luke 8:21). Rather Jesus’ words indicate that Mary’s relationship with him went beyond the purely human ties of mother and child. She was a true disciple of her son.

OUR MOTHER

One of the most important scripture passages for understanding the Catholic devotion to Mary is the scene of Jesus’ death from the gospel of John: “When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son!’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother!’” (John 19:26-27).

Catholics have long believed that this scene, coming at the very climax of John’s narrative, holds a rich symbolic meaning. Jesus was giving Mary as a mother to all Jesus’ faithful followers, symbolized by the “disciple whom he loved.” And he was giving all of us to Mary, to her sons and daughters in him.

The early Christians took to heart Jesus’ words “Behold, your mother!” and they spoke of Mary’s motherly role in God’s plan of salvation. The earliest references to Mary in the teaching of the church fathers speak of her as the new Eve. By her disobedience Eve, who was “the mother of all the living” (Gen. 3:20), enmeshed all her children in the bonds of sin. Mary’s obedience to God, her yes to Gabriel’s message, opened the way for the saving work of Jesus. As St. Irenaeus explained late in the second century, “The knot of Eve’s disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. What the virgin Eve had bound in unbelief, the virgin Mary loosed through faith.” Thus, Mary becomes our mother in faith.

Catholics continue to look to Mary as a mother and to experience her help and care. We do not worship Mary or pray to Mary in the strict sense, but we do ask her to pray for us, and we believe that her intercession has a great effect in calling forth God’s grace and mercy. This is not primarily because of her own merits but because of her special relationship with her son Jesus.

The Second Vatican Council emphasized that Jesus remains the one mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 1:15-16). Mary’s intercession “in no way obscures or diminishes the unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power. For all the saving influences of the Blessed Virgin on men originate, not from some inner necessity, but from the divine pleasure. They flow forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rest on his mediation, depend entirely on it, and draw all their power from it. In no way do they impede the immediate union
of the faithful with Christ. Rather, they foster this union” (“Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” no. 60).

To put it simply, Jesus and Mary are not in competition. Jesus is the source of all God’s grace and salvation, and Mary directs her prayers and our attention to Jesus. But God has chosen to “channel” his grace through his creatures. Most Christians have experienced how they can themselves be channels of God’s grace to others by their prayer and example. Catholics believe that, because of her close union with Jesus, God has chosen to use Mary as a special channel of the grace of her son. He has given her a motherly concern for all his sons and daughters, while not placing her on the same level as God himself.

The Vatican Council also stated: “By her maternal love, Mary cares for the brethren of her son who still journey on earth. . . . Therefore, the Blessed Virgin is invoked by the church under the titles of advocate, auxiliatrix, adjutrix, and mediatrix. These, however, are to be so understood that they neither take away nor add anything to the dignity and efficacy of Christ, the one mediator. For no creature could ever be classed with the incarnate Word and redeemer” (“Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” no. 62).

The council explained this further through an analogy. Jesus is the one great high priest (see Heb. 8:1), and yet God has granted Christians a share in his priesthood (see 1 Pet. 2:9). In the same way, Jesus is the one mediator, but Christians, and in a unique way Mary, share in his mediation through their prayers and care for each other.

SPECIAL BELIEFS ABOUT MARY

Many Christians can accept Mary as a woman of faith or as a model disciple. But they have difficulty understanding why the Catholic Church teaches certain other beliefs about Mary—that she was conceived without sin, for example, or that she was assumed into heaven at the time of death.

Where did these teachings come from? They are not explicitly taught in scripture, and it is not even historically clear that they were handed down from the preaching of the original apostles. Rather, these beliefs emerged over the course of several centuries, as Christians reflected on what the Bible says about Jesus and his mother.

As the Christian people came to a deeper understanding of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God, they began to consider what this belief implied about Mary. For example, if Jesus was truly God, wasn’t it correct to speak of his mother as the mother of God? Various phrases of scripture, like the angel’s greeting, “Hail, full of grace,” took on greater significance in light of these reflections.

The teaching authorities of the Catholic Church—the pope and the councils of bishops—had to discern which beliefs about Mary were to be considered the authentic beliefs of the church. Two principles of discernment guided their judgment.

First, no Christian belief can contradict anything in scripture or in the genuine tradition handed down from the apostles. All further understandings of Mary’s role had to be tested against the canon of revealed truth before they could be accepted.

Second, any insight that develops from reflection on the Christian revelation must be shown to have won acceptance from God’s people over a long period of time. Individual theologians can be wrong, no matter how convincing their arguments may seem. But God has promised to protect his church as a whole from error (see John 16:13). The fact that a teaching has been consistently accepted by the great pastors and teachers of Christian history, and by the people of the church as well, is a sign that the Holy Spirit was leading God’s people to this insight.

There are four particular teachings about Mary that have stood these tests over the course of time and are now part of the official teaching of the Catholic Church.
MARY AS EVER-VIRGIN

Most Christians believe that Mary was a virgin before and at the time of the birth of her son Jesus (see Matt. 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-27). Yet some cannot accept the Catholic Church's belief that Mary remained a virgin for the rest of her life. What about the scripture texts that mention the brothers and sisters of Jesus (see Matt. 12:46; Mark 3:31; 6:3; Luke 8:19)? What about the statement that Joseph did not know (have sexual relations with) Mary “until she had borne a son” (Matt. 1:25)? These statements would seem to indicate that after Jesus' birth Mary and Joseph had a normal marriage and raised other children.

When we look back in history, however, we find that almost all of the great teachers of the church, from at least the fourth century on, spoke of Mary as having remained a virgin throughout her life. The list of those who proclaimed Mary's perpetual virginity includes some of the most illustrious Christians of all time: Athanasius, Epiphanius, Jerome, Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, and others. One of the earliest church councils, the Second Council of Constantinople (355-354 A.D.) twice referred to Mary as “ever-virgin.” Even the Protestant reformers Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Huldreich Zwingli affirmed their belief in Mary's perpetual virginity.

Were all these great Christians unaware that scripture talks about the “brothers of Jesus”? Of course not. But they also knew that the Greek words for “brothers and sisters” were also used to refer to other close relatives—cousins, nephews and nieces, and so on. Scholars also note that in its Greek and Semitic usage the word for “until” does not imply anything about what happens after the time indicated. In Matthew's gospel it simply emphasizes that Mary was indeed a virgin at the time Jesus was born.

Recently some leading Catholic and Protestant scholars jointly published a book entitled *Mary in the New Testament* (Paulist Press, 1978), which studied the pertinent scripture texts. Not all these scholars agreed on Mary's perpetual virginity, but they did agree that the New Testament does not give conclusive evidence either for or against this doctrine. In such cases Catholics have always sought to understand the scripture according to what the Holy Spirit has led the church as a whole to believe. Here it seems clear that the Christian people have historically believed that Mary remained a virgin.

Why is this belief important? It certainly shows the uniqueness of Mary's call and mission: No other human was to be carried in the womb that bore God himself made man. Her virginity does not demean sex or marriage but proclaims the uniqueness of her call and the holiness of the God who dwelt within her. Mary freely chose this virginity in order to honor God, just as she freely accepted God's invitation to be the mother of the redeemer.

MOTHER OF GOD

The title *Theotokos*, a Greek word meaning “God-bearer” or “Mother of God,” was first applied to Mary in the early centuries of the church. The title acknowledged that Mary's child, Jesus, was truly God as well as man.

In the fourth century a bishop of Constantinople named Nestorius challenged the title. Nestorius only wanted to call Mary “Mother of Christ”; He feared that the title “Mother of God” would confuse the divine and human aspects of Jesus.

Almost the entire church in the East rose up to reject Nestorius's view. To deny that Mary was the mother of God was to deny either that Jesus is God or that Mary was truly his mother. A general council of bishops at Ephesus in 431 A.D. declared, “If anyone does not confess that God is truly Emmanuel, and that on this account the holy virgin is the mother of God (for according to the flesh she gave birth to the Word of God become flesh by birth), let him be anathema [condemned].”

The council carefully stated that Mary is the mother of God “according to the flesh” to clarify that Mary is not the source of Jesus' divinity. Mary did not give birth to God in the beginning. But since the divine and human natures of Jesus are inseparable, Mary must be considered the mother of God as well as the mother of the man Jesus.

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

As Christians reflected more deeply on who Jesus was and what it meant to be his mother, they came to a conviction that God had specially prepared Mary for her place in his plan of redemption. It seemed impossible that the all-holy God, whose very nature is opposed to sin, could have been born to someone marked by the sin and rebellion of the fallen human condition. It also seemed impossible that Mary could have consented so freely and unquestioningly to God's plan if she had shared the rebellious nature of the children of Adam and Eve. The belief grew that God had preserved Mary from original sin—the inheritance of sin passed on to all mankind from our first parents.

This is called Mary's “immaculate conception.” It does not mean that Mary had a virgin birth, as Jesus did: She had a normal human mother and father and was conceived and born in the normal way. But Mary was preserved by God from original sin from the moment she was conceived. This was God's perfect act of purification to prepare Mary to bear the Son of God in her womb.

In a sense, Mary's immaculate conception tells us more about Jesus than about Mary. It says that he was
someone so unique and holy that God would even prepare his mother by preserving her from sin.

The belief in Mary’s sinlessness appeared early in church history. In the fourth century St. Ambrose spoke of Mary as “free of every stain of sin.” St. Augustine believed she was the one exception to the scripture text, “If we say we have not sinned, we deceive ourselves” (1 John 1:8). “For how do we know what abundance of grace for the total overcoming of sin was conferred upon her, who merited to conceive and bear him in whom there was no sin?” Augustine wrote.

There was also controversy over this belief, with even such great Catholic teachers as St. Bernard and St. Thomas Aquinas questioning it. Many Christians today continue to object to this belief, on grounds that it conflicted with the teaching of scripture that says all men have sinned (see Rom. 3:23).

As Catholic pastors and theologians looked more deeply into such objections, however, they came to the conclusion that belief in the immaculate conception is consistent with scripture. Scripture is speaking of the fact that all human beings need redemption. We are bound by the original sin of Adam and cannot free ourselves from sin without the intervention of a savior. Jesus is the only man who was by his very nature sinless and so able to redeem us.

The doctrine of the immaculate conception does not deny this truth. Mary too needed a redeemer. She had to be saved from sin by the death and resurrection of her son Jesus. She is not sinless by her own nature, as Jesus was, but through a special intervention of God. The Lord, who is above time, applied the grace of Jesus’ salvation to Mary in advance, to prepare her for her special role in his plan. Mary herself acknowledged that any privilege she enjoyed was due to God’s grace: “He who is mighty has done great things for me. Holy is his name!” (Luke 1:49).

As theological discussion dealt with the objections to belief in the immaculate conception, the belief came to be almost universally held by Roman Catholics. Finally, in 1854, Pope Pius IX defined it as an official teaching of the Catholic Church in these words: “The Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God, and in view of the foreseen merits of Jesus Christ, the savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin.” Pope Pius stressed that Mary’s sinlessness was not due to her own merits, but that she was truly redeemed by the merits of her son Jesus.

**THE ASSUMPTION**

On November 1, 1950, Pope Pius XII declared that Mary, “having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul to heavenly glory.”

Like belief in the immaculate conception, the belief that Mary was taken bodily up to heaven emerged among early Christians, was taught by many respected leaders of the church over the centuries, and was almost universally accepted among Christians by the 13th century. In the hundred years before Pope Pius’ declaration, the popes had received petitions from 113 cardinals, 2500 bishops, 32,000 priests and religious brothers, 50,000 religious women, and 8 million lay people, all requesting that the assumption of Mary be recognized officially as a Catholic teaching.

What is the importance of belief in the assumption? The raising of Mary, body and soul, to the glory of heaven foreshadows what will happen at the final judgment to all who are to be saved. The assumption provides hope that we too will one day experience the resurrection of the body that she has already experienced.

Belief in the assumption also follows logically from belief in the immaculate conception. Death is a consequence and punishment of Adam’s sin. If Mary was preserved from sin by the free gift of God, it follows that she would not be bound to experience death in the same way we do. Her assumption into heaven can be understood as a sign of what might have eventually happened to each of us had Adam and Eve not sinned. And it is also a sign of hope for all Christians of the blessing God has in store for his faithful people at the end of time.

**MARY AND US**

With all the special graces and privileges that Catholics believe God gave to Mary, it would be easy to think of her as abnormal or as some sort of goddess. Many Protestants are indeed convinced that Catholics, Anglicans, and Orthodox do look on Mary in this way.

Mary is special, in that she alone was chosen by God to be the “ark of the new covenant” by which God entered fully into our world. Only Mary was the mother of God, conceiving her son by the Holy Spirit and yet remaining a virgin.

On the other hand, Mary is really more normal than any of us, if by “normal” we mean closer to what God originally intended human beings to be. God did not will sin and death for mankind. He preserved Mary from these things to remind us what normal human life is meant to be.

Mary was also normal in that she was not spared the trials and sufferings of this life that have come as a result of sin. If anything, she experienced the horror of sin even more acutely because of the special grace God had given her. Because she bore the cross of Jesus so fully in this life, she is now experiencing a unique fullness of his glory in heaven.

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