

## MARY – THE SYMBOL OF THE POWER OF GOD’S GRACE AND LOVE

Jesus’s mother Mary is singled out by both Catholics and the churches of the East as being unique amongst human beings because she and she alone had a role to play in the actual unification of the community of the Trinity with the community of humanity. She did this by giving her body to God as the womb in which the second person of the Trinity would take on human flesh while remaining fully divine as well. For this reason, she is seen as being a new Eve, the beginnings of a new creation, one in which God’s grace demonstrates its power to forgive and heal a world filled with goodness but also deeply scarred by rampant sin. She came to be seen therefore as a symbol, as *the* example of all that the church is meant to be, of all that salvation is meant to be, of all that God’s love is meant to do for us.

She has been showered with many titles, for example, Mother of God, Queen of heaven. She was and still is believed to be privileged in ways in which the rest of humanity is not. And the reason given in much pious literature was that Jesus would do only the best for his mom. I’m afraid that’s not a very good theological reason. Because any privileges Mary may have been given, anything extraordinary about her has its roots and its motivation not in Jesus doing special favours for his mother but rather carrying to its logical conclusion that she is the mother of the new creation which came into existence in her womb. It is the new creation that is important, not Mary’s dignity. Heading the new creation, she stands as a symbol of all that it is meant to be. And so she is singled out as being holy to a degree that no human being other than her son was holy.

Her holiness begins in her own mother’s womb, in which she is surrounded and transformed by God’s grace from the first moment of her existence. Unknown to anybody the power of the new creation slipped quietly into this world. The belief that she was holy from the first moment of her existence is called the doctrine of her **immaculate conception**. It is a widespread misunderstanding that this refers to her own virginal conception – a mistake that betrays the common assumption that there is always something wrong with sexual intercourse. No the doctrine refers to Mary’s holiness from the first moment of her existence. It is almost universally accepted in the Catholic Church as a

dogma. The Greek Orthodox church regards it as a peculiar belief of Catholics that is only there because of another, in their eyes, peculiar belief of ours: the doctrine of original sin.

The doctrine of original sin was crafted by St Augustine. It's essential characteristics are (a) every human being is born into a world cut off from God by sin; (b) the guilt for this sinful state of the world is carried by everybody; and (c) salvation consists in being moved from the old creation to the new one, the community centered on Christ.

Since Christ is the Redeemer of every human being and indeed of the entire universe, even Mary was for centuries believed to have been born cut off from God through the presence of original sin in her. But everyone tried to keep the length of time that she must have been under the influence of original sin as brief as possible in modern jargon, a nano- second. By the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Catholic theology was divided over the issue: the great Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas said she must have been under the influence of original sin. Otherwise Christ could not be her Redeemer. Then along came the subtlest of Scholastic theologians, *doctor subtilis*, the great Franciscan theologian John Duns Scotus. He argued that to be born without original sin does contradict our belief in Christ as the Redeemer of the entire universe. On the contrary, it is to show just how perfect and powerful his redemptive grace can be. Well that threw the cat amongst the pigeons. From that moment onwards the supporters of Mary's immaculate conception began to increase until many centuries later, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Pope Pius IX<sup>th</sup> proclaimed it as a dogma.

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Catholic theologians began to question the traditional formulation of the doctrine of original sin. We cannot go you into all the arguments used. But the one that impressed me went as follows: if Mary is the symbol, the embodiment of the holiness of the new creation then her Immaculate Conception is a doctrine that is telling us what is happening to every new human being born into the world. If so, we are *all* born wrapped in the swaddling clothes of grace. BUT it is a forgiving grace. Jesus is part of our world and it is therefore into a saved world that we are born – and not into one that Augustine described as a *massa damnata* – ie. a humanity condemned to hell. Whether these interesting ways of viewing our spiritual state at our conception will ultimately be absorbed into the catholic faith or find themselves excluded from it for ever, remains to be seen. But if it can be shown that it retains the core of the doctrine of original sin,

(which is a picture of what life would be like if Christ did not become part of our world) then Mary's role as a symbol of redemption shines out all the brighter.

Let us turn now quickly to Mary's virginal conception of Jesus. There is much that can be said about it, especially for those who find the doctrine difficult to accept. But there is insufficient time to do so. Suffice it to say again that the doctrine has nothing to do with the morality of sexual intercourse. It is not a doctrine intended to show how holy Mary was. Rather is it a doctrine testifying to the fact that with Mary's conception of Jesus the new creation began. Catholics also believe that Mary remained a virgin for the rest of her life. This would normally be a very odd situation for a young married woman. However, standing as she does with Christ her redeemer at the head of the new creation, one can understand the divine logic that led her to choose this way of life: it is the logic of her total commitment to that which she gave birth: a son who is also her Lord and God and to whom she gave the rest of her life.

We can be sure then that, like Jesus, Mary did not throw away the overwhelming grace she was given but lived a life of love for God and neighbour. If John could write in his first epistle that no one who remains in God sins, how much greater must the fidelity of Mary be to the God who sent an angel to address her as being "full of grace". In the early church there were some church fathers who felt her holiness was not perfect because she was a bit too pushy at times. But in both Eastern and Western churches the overwhelming position was that Mary's holiness was completely unstained by both venial and mortal sins. Were it not the case, she could not have played the role that God had prepared for her - to be the embodiment of the power of his grace..

When Mary's life came to an end, she was as we saw some weeks ago, assumed into heaven body and soul. I pointed out to you that this was nothing extraordinary. For it was simply the belief that she experienced her resurrection at the moment of death. And as I also went on to explain, an increasing number of theologians believe that all those who die in Christ experience their resurrection at death.

So Mary's own conception, life and resurrection are doctrines that are telling us something about our own conception, the way we should lead *our own* lives and when we can anticipate *our own* resurrection.

I mentioned earlier that Mary was showered with titles down the ages. For a long list of them see the litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary, also known as the litany of Loreto. Of all her titles the one that I think sums up her role most appropriately is “mother of the Church”. Strangely it was not part of the Litany and the title was only officially bestowed on her during the second Vatican council by Pope Paul VI. Why she was given that title should be obvious: if the Church is Christ’s body then Mary is literally its mother. For the flesh she gave birth to was the flesh of the incarnate God. This is not merely a logical deduction: it is also a role that the dying Jesus is believed to have given to Mary and the beloved disciple when he said: “Mother behold your son; son behold your mother”. John has been seen since the early days of the Church as standing there as the representative of every believer. And Mary is cast once more into her role as the New Eve, the mother of the new creation, and therefore our mother too. But to prevent any misunderstandings one has to emphasise that Mary remains firmly simply a human being, one who like us has been redeemed by Christ. Mary’s motherhood does not place her above the Church but firmly in the middle of it.

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