

# **Ministering to Catholics**

## **Mary**

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There is much the Bible says about Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. She is the most blessed of all women, chosen by God to be the earthly mother of our Lord and Savior (Luke 1:42). She is called “the mother of my Lord” in Luke 1:43 and favored by God (Luke 1:28). Her special place among women is not in dispute as we observe the history of God’s work among mankind.

However, much of Catholic doctrine concerning Mary is completely beyond the actual words of the Scripture. The teaching of the Word of God has been added to by the Catholic teaching about Mary. In truth, this is subtraction by addition since the doctrines that have been added by the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church have led to confusion over the One whom Mary worshipped.

While we can recognize Mary’s historical position in the work of God through the incarnation of His Son, how we express this recognition is at issue. Also, the continued role of Mary in the present ministry to the Church is where Catholicism diverges from biblical teaching. This class will look at the issues regarding Mary and how to address this with those who have a background of exalting the mother of our Lord.

### **1. Catholic titles for Mary**

#### **a. Mother of God**

The beginning of the unbiblical exaltation of Mary goes back to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. when the title of “God-bearer” or “Mother of God” (*Theotokos* in Greek) was designated for her. This designation was true in a narrow sense that Mary gave birth to Jesus, who was God incarnate. But the purpose of this title was an attempt to further solidify the doctrine of the deity of Christ in building upon the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.) and the creed regarding Christ as God.

This affirmation of Christ deity by declaring that Mary was the Mother of God was more than unnecessary, it was unfounded. God has no mother and Mary is called the mother of Jesus in the Bible. In Him all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form (Colossians 2:9) but divine nature does not have a mother for He exists from eternity.

While the Council of Chalcedon intended to affirm Christ’s deity by calling Mary “Mother of God,” it unintentionally laid a framework for the veneration of Mary in the centuries following.

b. Queen of Heaven

Pope Martin I was the first to use the title “Queen of Heaven” for Mary in the seventh century. Pope Boniface (1389-1404) called her the Queen of the heavens. The prayer, “Hail Holy Queen” was added to the end of the Mass by Pope Leo (1878-1903). This prayer is the final prayer of the Rosary.

“Hail, holy Queen, Mother of mercy, hail, our life, our sweetness and our hope. To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve: to thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this vale of tears. Turn then, most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy toward us, and after this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus, O merciful, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary! Amen.”

This title of Queen is not a biblical title and in light of Christ’s title of King (1 Timothy 1:17), there appears to be good reason why the Scripture refrained from this designation for Mary.

c. Coredeptrix

Some Catholics take their devotion to Mary to an extreme. Rather than seek to promote the centrality of Christ in salvation, Mary’s function in salvation is emphasized. These Catholics tend to be more traditional in nature. This belief is related to her role as the mother of God, as Pius XI (1922-1939) noted, “The most blessed Virgin, conceived without original sin, was chosen to be the Mother of God so that she might be made an associate in the Redemption of mankind.”

Other examples of this view of Mary’s participation in our redemption include Pope Benedict XV (1914-1922) who wrote, “Thus, she suffered and all but died along with her Son suffering and dying; thus, for the salvation of men she abdicated the rights of a mother toward her Son, and insofar as was hers to do, she immolated the Son to placate God’s justice, so that she herself may justly be said to have redeemed together with Christ the human race.” Also, Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) stated, “just as no one can come to the Father on high except through the Son, so almost in the same manner, no one can come to Christ except through his Mother.”

Mary’s role in Christ’s incarnation was as the instrumentality, not as the essential source. She was chosen to bear the Son of God and she fades from the Gospels and is completely absent outside of the four Gospel accounts. Any movement to exalt her role in salvation comes at the expense of the exaltation of Christ Himself.

Many other titles have been assigned to Mary over the centuries that are too numerous to cover. The title of Mediatrix, that the grace of God is dispensed with the intercession of Christ’s mother is one of the more troubling. She is called “Mother of the Church” which positions her to a role in which she never functioned in the Scripture. These titles communicate poorly about Mary and more significantly, serve to diminish our Lord.

## 2. Catholic doctrine regarding Mary

### a. Immaculate Conception

The Immaculate Conception is the Catholic doctrine of the virgin birth of Mary. This arises from the Catholic belief that Mary was sinless. While many church fathers spoke of Mary as holy yet not without sin (Origen, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, and Basil), a belief grew as early as the fourth century of Mary's perfection. In the words of Ephram (306-373), "Mary and Eve were the two people without guilt. Later one became the cause of our death, the other the cause of our life." Augustine taught that Mary received special grace from God to overcome sin and lead a perfect life.

The concept of Mary's freedom from personal sin developed into the concept of Mary being born without original sin through the centuries. British monk Eadmer was the first to suggest that Mary was without the stain of original sin in the early twelfth century but was opposed by leading Catholic theologian such as Thomas Aquinas and Peter Lombard. The idea of Mary without original sin grew in acceptance under the belief that Christ's sanctifying grace was so great that it delivered her from the original sin that she would have otherwise inherited.

This doctrine of Mary's freedom from original sin was debated in Catholicism until 1854 when Pope Pius IX decreed the Immaculate Conception, "the doctrine which holds the Blessed Virgin Mary to have been, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of Almighty God, in view of the merits of Christ Jesus the Savior of mankind, preserved free from all stain of original sin, was revealed by God, and is, therefore, to be firmly and constantly believed by all the faithful."

The primary biblical text used to support the Immaculate Conception is Luke 1:28, where the angel Gabriel addresses her with "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." Also, Luke 1:44 where she is called "Blessed among women." Obviously, neither of these passages either explicitly or implicitly points or even alludes to the Immaculate Conception. Besides the teaching of Scripture that all sin (Romans 3:9-10; 3:23 1 John 1:8-10), Mary herself said, "my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior." What was Mary saved from if not from sin?

### b. Bodily assumption into heaven

The doctrine of that is known in Catholicism as the Assumption of Mary, was officially proclaimed by the Church in 1950: "We pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory." Prior to the ex-cathedra pronouncement as the official Church doctrine, there had been over a century of grassroots support for devotion to Mary in general and this doctrine in particular.

The doctrine of the Assumption is rooted in the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, as Pope Pius IX noted in a letter to Spanish Queen Isabella II, “There is no doubt that the Assumption, in the sense commonly believed by the body of the faithful, follows from the Immaculate Conception.” Catholicism celebrates the Feast of the Assumption every August 15<sup>th</sup> as a holy day of obligation, established by Pope Leo in 855.

The Bible says nothing about Mary’s death. Church tradition is silent as well as church fathers do not reference it over the first five centuries of church history. This seems to be one more way that over time the attributes of Christ, who ascended into heaven bodily (Acts 1:9-11), has been transferred to Mary.

c. Perpetual virginity

The doctrine of Mary’s perpetual virginity was affirmed as early as the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 AD. It was widely accepted even before then, particularly as the monastical movement and asceticism grew in popularity. The idea that celibacy was a higher spiritual state of being is inherent in this doctrine of Mary.

Beyond the advancement of celibacy, some early church leaders could not imagine that another birth could come from the same womb as Christ. Siricius, whom Catholic consider a pope in the late fourth century wrote, “you had good reason to be horrified at the thought that another birth might issue from the same virgin womb from which Christ was born according to the flesh.”

This doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary is why she has become known by the title “Virgin Mary.” This designation is not from the Bible but has been given to her by the tradition of the Church. Nevertheless, this is a not an accurate reflection of the biblical text.

Jesus is described as having “brothers and sisters (Matthew 13:55-56) and Mark 6:3 identifies them by name. The Catholic explanation for this is that “brother” could be understood to mean “cousin.” However, there is no other time in the New Testament that brother carries the meaning of a cousin and there is a time where Mark is referred to as “the cousin of Barnabas.” Catholicism discards the natural meaning of “brothers and sisters” for the uncommon meaning unnecessarily.

To think that Mary’s marriage to Joseph was not a marriage in the normal understanding would have been unthinkable to the Hebrew or the Greek culture. Like any marriage, the marriage of Mary and Joseph would be expected to be consummated. This would certainly be the normal understanding of marriage in the Bible. We ought to expect to find something in the Bible to explain this doctrine of her perpetual virginity if it were true since it would contradict the normal consideration for a marriage. To have a doctrine such as the Immaculate Conception rest upon no valid Bible text is testimony to the priority Catholicism gives to its tradition over the Scripture.

### 3. Alleged apparitions of Mary

An apparition is a physical manifestation of a physical object or person, whereas a vision is something that occurs in the mind. A vision is not an actual appearance, but an apparition is an actual appearance. Biblical examples of apparitions would be the appearance of angels to various people.

There have been a very large number of apparition claims regarding Mary, certainly many hundreds at the least. The Catholic Church has established a procedure for evaluating these claims that includes an investigation conducted by the local bishop. If the bishop is favorable to the apparition he will form a commission that will evaluate the evidence in favor of the authenticity of the apparition. This includes interviews, alleged healings or miracles, consistency with Catholic doctrine and increased spiritual devotion.

One example of this consideration is a series of alleged apparitions in Medjugorje, Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1981. As recently as May of 2017, Pope Francis expressed his doubts regarding these series of alleged appearances of Mary but a few days later a commission established by Pope Benedict in 2010 voted 13-1 to confirm the first seven apparitions. The final decision by the Vatican is expected by the end of 2017.

The conclusion of the investigation is normally many years in the making. Often the outcome is further consideration without a declaration. Rarely does the investigation result in recognition by the Vatican or even by a bishop.

#### a. Positive apparitions

The Catholic Church, through approval of a bishop and some recognition by the Vatican, has recognized all of the following alleged appearances of Mary as authentic revelations:

- Guadalupe, Mexico (1531)
- Lezajsk, Poland (1578)
- Siluva, Lithuania (1608)
- Laus, France (1664)
- Paris, France (1830)
- Rome, Italy (1842)
- La Salette, France (1846)
- Lourdes, France (1858)
- Fillpps Dorf, Czech Republic (1866)
- Pointmain, France (1871)
- Gletzwald, Poland (1877)
- Knock, Ireland (1879)
- Fatima, Portugal (1917)
- Beauraing, Belgium (1932)
- Banneux, Belgium (1933)
- Kibeho, Rwanda (1981)

In addition to these apparitions with some form of direct Vatican approval there are 11 with only bishop approval and another 24 approved by bishops for “expressions of faith.” So there are degrees of positive affirmation. The Vatican does not publish a complete list of official apparitions of Mary compiled by the Church but any with positive endorsement are worthy of pious belief in Catholicism.

These recognized apparitions by the Church are usually referred to as “Our Lady of” as in “Our Lady of Guadeloupe.” They will have a shrine built at the location of the apparition and will be visited by popes and bishops.

b. Unrecognized apparitions

Most apparitions are under investigation or not evaluated. The position of the Church regarding these is neutral but since these are not rejected they are considered to be consistent with Catholicism and there is no object to shrines to them being visited and many of these are revered by many Catholics and have received unofficial acceptance when priests, bishops or even a pope visits them.

There are perhaps several hundred other alleged apparitions of this less official type. Just in the United States during the twentieth century alone there were 79 alleged apparitions of Mary, from Sandy, Utah (1910) to Houston, Texas (1999). This number does not include many that are considered not supernatural by some Catholic authority. Multiple claims of apparitions of Mary occur annually worldwide.

Since the Catholic Church has given its approval for some of these apparitions of Mary, it is very difficult for them to declare an apparition is false. In addition, when many Catholics flock to locations where Mary is sincerely thought to have appeared, it is difficult to dampen their enthusiasm. So the vast majority of claims remain indeterminate.

c. Apparitions declared not supernatural

Any apparition that conflicts with the Catholic faith, or which is considered to be inauthentic for some reason by a Catholic authority, is the final category of apparitions of Mary. An apparition may be rejected because it has caused division and disunity within the Church.

The closest apparition claim to Lancaster falls in this category and is in California City, California. Since 1989, “Our Lady of the Rock” attracts hundreds of people on the 13<sup>th</sup> of each month as Mary allegedly appears to Maria Paula Acuna ten miles north of Cal City. This has continued in spite of Cardinal Roger Mahoney of the diocese of Los Angeles rejecting these apparitions and warning that Catholics are being misled.

Claims of apparitions of Mary have increased dramatically during the past two centuries. This has corresponded with the increased attention the Catholic Church has given to the veneration of Mary.

#### 4. Veneration of Mary

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “The Church’s devotion to the Blessed Virgin is intrinsic to Christian worship.” The veneration of Mary is the way the Catholic Church describes the devotional life toward the mother of Jesus in order to deflect any claims of worship of something other than God alone.

From the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 A.D. the Catholic Church has taught that there exists three degrees of devotion.

- The first and highest degree of devotion is *latria*, which is Latin for adoration. This term is understood to be worship and is reserved for God alone.
- A second form of devotion is *dulia*, or veneration. This is devotion offered to the saints.
- Another type of devotion is hyperdulia, or *hyperveneration*. This devotion is offered only to Mary.

This attempt to make a distinction between worship and veneration is trying to analyze a feeling. How does a person distinguish between worship, veneration and hyperveneration? This subjectivity leads many Protestants to view the Catholic exaltation of Mary as idolatrous.

In practice, the Roman Catholic Church advocates doing things with regard to Mary that one does to God alone. For example, prayer to Mary and to the saints, which is a practice reserved to address God alone in the Scripture. In the Bible it is only the pagans who pray to anything other than God. Songs are sung to Mary, shrines are constructed in her honor, pilgrimages are made in her name,

The feast days in honor of Mary populate the Catholic calendar. Three of these days rise to the place of a holy day of obligation where the faithful are required to attend Mass. These are the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God (January 1), the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (August 15), and the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (December 8). Other prominent feast days celebrate apparitions or events in Mary’s life.

For many Catholics, the enthusiasm for their devotion to Mary appears to exceed that of Jesus Himself. God is viewed as distant but Mary is viewed as near. This type of attachment makes for degrees of sensitivity with Catholics that we may know. Discussions regarding Mary may encounter emotional resistance.

Other Catholic doctrines will be easier to evaluate with Catholics we may know in light of the Scripture than the doctrines that involve Mary. The best approach is to focus on the biblical teachings regarding Christ. As people gain a greater appreciation of the person and work of Jesus Christ and of the Scripture, they will be in a much better position to reevaluate their devotion to Mary.

## 5. Conclusion

Whether the Catholic doctrines concerning Mary undermined the essence of what is essential for salvation in Jesus Christ has been debated among Protestants. We can view whether Jesus had actual brothers and sisters or only cousins to be a fine piece of Bible trivia without any significance for our present life. Many will see the Catholic doctrines of Mary as no reason over which to separate churches.

However, what cannot be disputed is that many of the erroneous doctrines of Mary negatively affect other doctrines that are essential to the Christian faith. These are hardly inconsequential. The sum total of all of these doctrines when taken together forms a glorification of a person whose humble life was the total opposite.

Rather than supporting the veneration of Mary, Luke 11:28 opposes it. In Luke 11:27-28, “one of the women in the crowd raised her voice, and said to Him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts at which You nursed.’ But He said, “On the contrary, blessed are those who hear the word of God, and observe it.’ ”

Mary was blessed but those who followed the Lord as revealed in the Scripture are also blessed. Those who promote the doctrines of man over the Word of God undermine the opportunity of people to experience that blessed life of God.