

Mary the Mother of God

January 1st, 2020

In the summer of 431 there was a celebration in the City of Ephesus, the Turkish domain where Mary settled with St John, sometime after the Death, Resurrection and Ascension of the Lord. Through the streets of the city on that balmy evening, there was a torch lit procession celebrating a decision that the Bishops of the church had made after weeks of deliberation.

In the 420s a controversy arose over the teaching of Nestorius, who was the patriarch of Constantinople, one of the most influential Episcopal Centres of the early Church. Therefore he was a much-revered theological figure. Influenced by the school of Antioch, (the first place the followers of Jesus were called Christians - Acts 11:26) by the 5th century Antiochene Christians placed a great stress on the humanity of Jesus. Reflecting their teachings, Nestorius said that in Christ two distinct persons—one divine and one human—come together in a kind of moral union; the opposite of what the Nicene Creed teaches. It states Jesus is one person with two natures, human and divine. Nestorius argued that Mary, who was responsible only for the human element in Jesus, could be called Christotokos (mother of Christ) but not Theotokos (mother of God). In fact, Nestorius argued, the use of that latter title would be the height of blasphemy, since it would imply that a mere human being had a sort of primacy over God.

Cyril, the bishop of Alexandria, and another theological heavyweight was so outraged by Nestorius's position that he called the bishop of Constantinople a heretic. The ecumenical council of Ephesus was summoned in order to resolve this controversy. After much discussion and debate during the summer of 431, the council fathers taught that Jesus ought not to be understood as a human person with a particularly intense relationship to the person of God, what Nestorius taught. This would make Jesus a kind of supreme saint but not the incarnate Son of God. And if he were not himself divine, he would require a saviour as much as anyone else. Rather it was decided that in the unity of his person both divinity and humanity come together. And this meant Nestorius was wrong to deny Mary the title *Theotokos*, for if Jesus was divine and Mary was the mother of Jesus, then Mary could and should be called the Mother of God.¹

So, this Solemnity that ushers in the New Year has very ancient origins and every time we say the "Hail Mary", we declare with the Ephesian Council of 431 that Mary is the Mother of God.

Why is it important for us to affirm this title for Mary: Mother of God?

First of all because it is biblical; secondly because it inspires us to venerate her; and thirdly to renew our commitment to daily ask for her intercession.

¹ Barron, Robert. Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith (p. 96). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

1. *It is biblical:*

It is important to state that the biblical understanding of Mary the Mother of God does not mean she is a divine person. As biblical scholar Brant Pitre has commented in his book *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary*:

Mary is a mere human being, a creature. Furthermore, Mary is not the mother of God the Father; nor is she the mother of the Holy Spirit—much less of the entire Trinity. What Theotokos means is that Mary is the mother of the divine Son who became man. The title “Mother of God” is meant to illuminate the mystery of the incarnation.²

Although the New Testament does not call Mary the “mother of God,” it’s important to remember that the title given to Mary at the Council of Ephesus was not exactly “Mother of God” but “God Bearer” (Greek *Theotokos*). Far from being “unbiblical,” *Theotokos* is a compound word that comes straight from the Bible. In order to see this, it’s important to know a little Greek. The Greek word for “God” is *theos*, and the word “bearer” (Greek *tokos*) comes from the verb “to bear” (Greek *tiktō*). With this in mind, listen to this famous verse from Matthew 1:23:

“A virgin shall conceive and bear (Greek tiktō) a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel,” which means, God (Greek theos) with us. (Matthew 1:23)

There it is on the first page of the New Testament. Mary is the virgin who will “bear” (*tiktō*) the child who is “God (*theos*) with us.” In other words, Mary is the “God-bearer” (Greek *Theotokos*), -that is the Mother of God.

2. *Inspires us to Venerate Her:*

Because Mary is the Mother of God, she is also the “Holy Mary”, Mother of God, and therefore worthy of our veneration but not our worship. “Holy” means to be set apart, something we do with the special honour paid to Mary. But please note the following. We do not offer sacrifice to Mary; we do not offer the Eucharist. For Catholics worship consists above all in the offering of the Eucharist. And the Eucharist is always offered to God alone. Since ancient times, Christians have recognized the fundamental difference between the devotion given to Mary and the adoration given to God. Christians have long honored her as “Mother of God,” but they do not worship her as God.³

This is why the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches in paragraph 971:

The Church rightly honors “the Blessed Virgin with special devotion. From the most ancient times the Blessed Virgin has been honored with the title of ‘Mother of God,’ to whose protection the faithful fly in all their dangers and needs...This very special devotion...differs

² Pitre, Brant James. *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary* (p. 91). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

³ Pitre 98-99

essentially from the adoration which is given to the incarnate Word and equally to the Father and the Holy Spirit,”

3. Ask daily for her Intercession.

We have seen that the title Mother of God is biblical that therefore inspires our veneration of Mary which invites us to then ask for her intercession. That is, to have Mary pray for us. From earliest times we have evidence of Christians asking for the intercession of Mary. Listen to this prayer discovered in Egypt, dating from the 3rd Century:

***We take refuge in your mercy, Mother of God (Greek Theotokos). Do not disregard our prayers in troubling times, but deliver us from danger, O only pure one, only blessed one.
(Anonymous Christian prayer [3rd–4th century A.D.]***

In addition to this ancient Christian prayer to Mary as “Mother of God,” we have solid evidence from the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. that Christians who believed in the divinity of Jesus also asked for Mary’s intercession. For example, the Eastern church father Gregory of Nazianzen praises a Christian virgin named Justina, who in the face of danger, “took refuge in God” and spent time “imploring the Virgin Mary to bring her assistance, since she too was a virgin and in danger.” Notice the direct link in these examples between belief in the divinity of Jesus, Mary’s identity as “Mother of God,” and asking for her intercession. It is precisely because she is the mother of Jesus that it makes sense to ask for her prayers.

Now with all of this in mind, listen to the Hail Mary:

“Hail Mary full of Grace the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus.”

This part of the Hail Mary is taken from Holy Scripture, the Gospel of According to Luke, stating the Angel Gabriel and Elizabeth’s Greetings to Mary. The second half of the Hail Mary,

“Holy Mary Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death”,

is the part I have focused on today, finding its origins in Scripture and full articulated at Ephesus in 431.

May we be inspired by the gift of this Solemnity to pray with renewed purpose the Rosary. We join with the shepherds who returned glorifying God for all they had seen and heard. We join with Mary who treasured all these things in her heart.

What a grace it is to honour our Lady the Mother of God so that through her intercession we can worship the Blessed Trinity, Father Son and Holy Spirit with deeper Adoration in 2020.

