

Mary of Nazareth

Arthur David Canales

Mary of Nazareth (ca. 18 BC—AD 50), the mother of Jesus of Nazareth, is without a doubt one of the most influential figures in all of Christianity. Revered by most, venerated by some, but respected by all Christians worldwide, and for good reason, she was after all chosen by God to bring forth the Savior of the world. Throughout the centuries every culture has interpreted Mary—or Miriam, as she would have been known in Hebrew—in different ways. Miriam of Nazareth has been portrayed in stories, icons, sculptures, paintings, music, songs, prayers, liturgies, spiritual writings, theologies, and official Church doctrines.

Feminist Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson notes, “The image of Mary in its many forms is woven throughout the life of the Church and her importance is expressed in doctrine, liturgy, [spirituality], and theology.”¹ Many aspects of the Blessed Virgin need to be taken into consideration; and although not all Christian denominations agree on everything about Mary’s role in the Christian community, there is a common understanding that she was a woman of prayer and a woman of faith. Mary’s role as the mother of Jesus is rich and complex.

Biblical Depictions of Mary

Various images of Mary appear in the New Testament, but there are not many Scripture pericopes. The most scrutinized texts pertaining to Mary are the two infancy narratives found in Matthew (1:16,18–25) and Luke (1:26–56). There are two Johannine accounts: Mary at the wedding at Cana (2:1–12) and Mary at the Crucifixion at Calvary. In the Pauline corpus there is the significant phrase in Galatians 4:4: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law.” Finally, in the Book of Revelation, the “Woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. . . . She gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod” (12:1,5) refers to Mary.

Mary appears in all four Gospels, and as a group of writings they represent a primary historical testimony. Each of the Gospels portrays Mary a little differently. In Mark’s Gospel, Mary appears in only one scene, a line that briefly states, “[Jesus’] mother and his brothers arrived, and as they stood outside they sent word to him to come out” (3:31). In the passage that follows (3:32–35), Jesus goes on to make a distinction between his eschatological family and his earthly family. In Matthew’s Gospel, Mary appears at the end of a long genealogy list. Mary never speaks in Matthew’s Gospel, which pays more attention to Mary’s husband: “Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary. It was of her that Jesus who is called the Messiah was born” (1:16). In Luke’s Gospel, Mary is depicted as a woman of faith, who responds favorably to the glad tidings she receives. Mary joyfully states, “I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say” (Luke 1:38). It is mainly from Luke’s Gospel that Christianity has built up its strong Marian tradition. In John’s Gospel, Mary is described as the “mother of Jesus”; indeed, that is all John ever calls her. Mary appears twice in John’s Gospel: once near the beginning, at the wedding at Cana; and once near the end, as she witnesses her Son’s Crucifixion.

With such diverse interpretations from all four Gospels, interpretations that cannot always be harmonized, it is easy to speculate about Mary. To peek at the real Miriam of Nazareth, the actual historical person behind the veil of twenty-first century Catholicism, is a rather tricky and fragile task. It is important to explore the history of the Church’s teachings on Mary, in order to understand the theological significance of Mary and her role upon the Christian community.



History of the Church's Teachings About Mary

In the beginning of the second century, the early Church began to conflate biblical depictions of Mary. The ancient apocryphal non-canonical writing known as the *Protevangelium of James*, or the Book of James, offers a legendary account of Mary's ancestry, youth, and marriage. In this work, two Marian feast days or holy days find their origins: (1) the Immaculate Conception and (2) the birth of Mary.ⁱⁱ Many theologians and saints from the early Church also wrote eloquently about Mary and helped to shape and develop the doctrine about her: Justin the Martyr, Ambrose of Milan, Augustine of Hippo, Cyril of Alexandria, and Nestorius of Constantinople. During the early Church period, while bishops were combating Christological heresies, the debate expanded to include Mary as well, specifically her unique role in conceiving Christ.

The Council of Ephesus (AD 431) definitively proclaimed that Mary was *Theotokos*, Greek for "Mother of God" or "God-bearer." This title began to give significant impetus to Marian devotion and Marian spirituality. The council bishops strongly stated, "Thus [the holy fathers] have unhesitatingly called the holy Virgin 'Mother of God' (*Theotokos*). This does not mean that the nature of the Word or his divinity received the beginning of its existence from the holy Virgin, but that, since the holy body, animated by a rational soul, which the Word united to himself according to the hypostasis (*kath' hypostasin*), was born to her, the Word born according to the flesh."ⁱⁱⁱ This statement clearly meant that Mary is the Mother of God: not because of Christ's divinity, but because the Word or Logos was united to Jesus' humanity by being born of Mary—a poor, peasant Jewish adolescent—and that, therefore, the Word was born of the flesh (John 1:1–14). Consequently, the divine and human natures are united in Jesus the Christ, thereby making Mary of Nazareth the Mother of God.

The medieval church produced an array of Marian images and prayers. In this atmosphere there began to emerge a new Marian piety or spirituality that was reflected in prayers, art, and music, through the work of figures such as Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), Saint Francis of Assisi (1182–1226), and Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109). The Middle Ages saw the rise of prayers like the *Salve Regina*; the Praise of Mary; Mary, Queen of Heaven; the Hail Mary; and the origins of the Rosary.

It was also during the medieval period that the motif of Mary as Mediatrix of God's grace to unworthy sinners came to the forefront. As Marian piety grew, so did her popularity among common Catholics, and so did her privileges in a way commensurate with her powers.^{iv} Because of her status as *Theotokos* and because of her popularity, Mary began to have a cult following, and these developments led to the widespread notion of Mary as Mediatrix, or as our little mediator interceding with the big Mediator—her Son, Jesus the Christ. The common rationale behind this understanding asks, What good and loving son would refuse to grant a request from his mother? Therefore, in popular religiosity within Catholicism even today, Mary is asked to pray for or to intercede on behalf of a person's request to her Son.

The modern Church's teachings on Mary really begin with the teachings from the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), which wanted to move Marian tradition in harmony with Scripture, liturgy, and patristic theology. The eighth chapter of the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)* is titled "The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church" to reflect Mary's role as a member of the People of God and to emphasize that her role is viewed as a model of the Church and a model of Christian discipleship.

Since the Second Vatican Council, documents regarding Mary have included several papal encyclicals and apostolic letters:

- *Marialis Cultus (For the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary)*; 1974, by Pope Paul VI



- *Redemptoris Mater (The Mother of the Redeemer; 1987)*, by Pope Saint John Paul II
- *Rosarium Virginis Mariae (On the Most Holy Rosary; 2002)*, by Pope Saint John Paul II

Each of these documents emphasizes the continuing significance of Mary for Christian life and explores her relationship with the Church and her place in theology.

Theological Significance of Mary

The theology of Mary has always reflected tensions between those who hold a more pious image of Mary and those who hold a more contemporary view of Mary. Pre-Vatican II theology emphasized Mary's role as the Mediatrix of all graces, which used to pose a problem for Protestant and Evangelical Christians, some of whom saw this as incorrectly elevating Mary to a divine role. But the Second Vatican Council, in its wisdom, was careful to place Mary and her mediation role within the framework of Christ and the universal Church: "The maternal duty of Mary towards [people] in no way obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power."^v Although the Catholic Church clearly teaches that Jesus the Christ is one and only Mediator between God and humanity (1 Timothy 2:3–6; Colossians 1: 13–20),^{vi} Mary's title "Mediatrix" does deserve some attention.

Mediatrix

Technically, the term *mediatrix* is a title bestowed on Mary, not a theology in itself, but the term and what it means are usually discussed when Protestants and Catholics gather in dialogue about the theology of Mary.

The title "Mediatrix" originated in the East with Saint Andrew of Crete (d. 740) sometime in the early eighth century. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes, "The Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix" (no. 969). What exactly do these titles mean? When church documents state that Mary is Mediatrix (and similar titles), the Church means two things: (1) Mary's title neither detracts from the dignity and efficacy of Christ nor enhances anything to contrary; and (2) Mary's intercession is caught up with her and Christ's unique mediatorship and privileged relationship on behalf of humanity.^{vii} The rationale is simple: Mary, who is so uniquely close to her Son, can and does intercede for her other children (see John 19:26), an intercession that is addressed to Jesus Christ, the one and only Mediator of God.

In contrast to the traditional Marian view is the more contemporary view of Mary as a model of discipleship.

Discipleship

Probably the most important theological development regarding Mary since the 1990s is the Church's new awareness of Christian discipleship, including the view of Mary as the model of Christian discipleship. Catholic theologian Kathleen Coyle observes, "Mary's commitment to God's plan for her at the annunciation and her identifying herself with Jesus' mission establish her as the central figure representing the kingdom of God."^{viii} Mary was always faithful to God's plan of salvation through her Son; and she too had to come to Easter faith in her son, which models for all Christians an authentic path of discipleship.

Pope Paul VI (1974), in *Marialis Cultus*, addressed Mary's discipleship: "She is held up as an example for the way in which, in her own particular life, she fully and responsibly accepted God's will (see Luke 1:38), because she heard the word of God and acted on it, and because charity and a spirit



of service are the driving force of her actions. She is worthy of imitation because she was the first and most perfect of Christ's disciples."^{ix} Mary is a model of discipleship for several reasons. She assented to God's plan for her virgin birth of the Savior of the world; she was a person of great prayer; she was a person of great faith; she exemplified morality and ethical behavior; she was involved in her religious community; she was a leader in the community; she demonstrated service and outreach; she had a rich spirituality; and she was a person of stewardship.^x

Catholic priest Robert Barron writes about Mary's discipleship, "Mary said yes to the angel, even when she had no clear idea what accepting that invitation meant. Placing her own desires aside, she agreed to be an agent of the divine desire."^{xi} This was Mary's great contribution and model for discipleship: to be simultaneously Jesus' mother and his follower, who carried forward his mission. Mary's life therefore becomes a model for all Christians: not only for women who might desire to emulate her femininity, but also for men who desire to be faithful to God's call. Mary is an excellent example for single, married, and widowed women today, for people who are financially poor and spiritually poor, and for those who earnestly want to follow God.

Four Doctrines About Mary

Four doctrines or teachings belong exclusively to Mary. Each of these doctrines demonstrate Mary's incredible role in salvation history and illustrate why she is held in such high esteem in Christianity and exalted by Catholics and Orthodox. The four doctrines involve (1) Mary's motherhood, (2) Mary's virginity, (3) Mary's conception, and (4) Mary's Assumption.

The first doctrine involves Mary's motherhood and her title "Mother of God" or "*Theotokos*." The word "*Theotokos*" combines two words: "*Theos*" (God) and "*tokos*" (a creature who gives birth). The theological implications here are that Jesus came to life in Mary's womb and that Jesus' birth—or his "emptying himself, taking the form of a servant" (Philippians 2:7)—is the central figure and symbol of the new community that experiences a new reality of salvation. Coyle puts it like this: "God, present in Jesus by means of woman's flesh, is now present especially in the poor and the marginalized of history."^{xii} In and by the flesh of Mary, God has entered the world and become part of humanity, with all its flaws, suffering, and pain, which fulfills the prophecy that "all humanity shall see the salvation of our God" (Luke 3:6).

The second Marian doctrine centers on her virginal conception and her perpetual virginity. Coyle says, "The teaching on Mary's virginity and her virginal conception of Jesus states that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit without the intervention of a human father."^{xiii} Christians who recite the Nicene Creed or Apostles' Creed during Sunday worship say that Jesus was "born of the Virgin Mary." By the time of the Council of Ephesus (AD 431), belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary was firmly formulated. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' document *Behold Your Mother: Woman of Faith* affirms the perpetual virginity of Mary: "The truth that Mary remained always a virgin, that is, that she had no other children and never used her marital rights, emerges clearly in the Church's consciousness in the fourth century, when 'ever-virgin' became a common description of her. This truth was accepted by all Christians until the Reformation."^{xiv} The teachings regarding the virginal conception of Jesus and the perpetual virginity of Mary are doctrines that rely not only on biblical support (see Annunciation narratives in Luke and Matthew) but also on the constant and consistent faith of the Catholic Church.

The third doctrine that describes the greatness of Mary is the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Fundamentally, this teaching states that Mary was free of Original Sin from the first moment of her existence or conception. The Immaculate Conception became an infallible doctrine of



the Catholic Church under Pope Pius IX on December 8, 1854. The doctrine teaches that “the Blessed Virgin Mary ‘was, from the first moment of her conception, by the singular grace and privilege of almighty God and in view of the merits of Jesus Christ the Savior of the human race, preserved free from all stain of original sin.’”^{xv} The theological implication of the Immaculate Conception is the victory of God’s unconditional grace: freely given in Jesus Christ, and particularly in God’s victory over the powers and principalities of this world, as Mary came into being as a woman of faith and hope for the world.

The fourth doctrine concerning Mary centers on her miraculous Assumption into heaven. Mary’s Assumption means that Mary’s earthly body did not experience or undergo any corruption or decay and was assumed, or taken up by God, into heaven. The Assumption of Mary has been part of Catholic doctrine since the 1950 papal encyclical *Munificentissimus Deus* or *The Most Bountiful God*, promulgated by Pope Pius XII. Pope Pius XII’s encyclical was issued *ex cathedra* (literally “from the chair of Saint Peter”), meaning it was an infallible papal pronouncement. It read, “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.”^{xvi} Theologically, the Assumption of Mary centers on God’s eschatological victory and saving grace, which in the final analysis saves the total person—body and soul. The Second Vatican Council’s *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum, 1964)* noted this regarding Mary’s Assumption: “Mary shines forth on earth, until the day of the Lord shall come, as a sign of sure hope and solace for the pilgrim People of God.”^{xvii} Through the Assumption of Mary, God demonstrates, once again, that Mary is not only a model for Christians to live by but, through her death, gives hope and joy to generations of people.

Liturgical Celebrations of Mary

The Catholic Church celebrates and commemorates the Virgin Mary more than any other Christian denomination. There are fifteen Marian holy days in the liturgical year of the Church. Each holy day celebrates various aspects or attributes of Mary. The Marian holy days are ranked from highest to lowest—solemnities, feasts, memorials—according to their proximity to the saving events of Jesus’ life.^{xviii}

- **Four Solemnities:** Mary, the Mother of God (January 1); the Annunciation of Our Lord (March 25); the Assumption (August 15); and the Immaculate Conception (December 8).
- **Three Feasts:** The Visitation (May 31); the Birth of Mary (September 8); and Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12).
- **Eight Memorials:** Our Lady of Lourdes (February 11); the Immaculate Heart of Mary (June—the Saturday after the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus [dates vary because of Easter]); Our Lady of Mount Carmel (July 16); Dedication of Saint Mary Major Basilica (August 5); the Queenship of Mary (August 22); Our Lady of Sorrows (September 15); Our Lady of the Rosary (October 7); and the Presentation of Mary (November 21).^{xix}

Clearly the Catholic faith has developed a rich spirituality of Mary that the liturgical year accentuates and articulates. Liturgically, May is the month that is associated with Mary. During May, Marian processions, devotions, and communal recitations of the Rosary form a vibrant part of Catholic parish and diocesan life.



Conclusion

Catholic liturgical life is rich with Marian devotion, allowing the People of God to express their public admiration of and affection for the Virgin. Marian devotion is part of Catholic identity and spirituality, and Catholics are called to respect and honor Mary not only as the Mother of Christ and the Mother of God (*Theotokos*), but as our mother as well. Therefore, when we honor Mary, we honor her son, Jesus, and in honoring Mary we are brought closer to her Son. It has been said that Catholic devotion to Mary is so prevalent throughout the world that the Hail Mary prayer is recited daily by approximately 500 million people worldwide. This author is proud to be counted as one of them.

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Endnotes

- ⁱ Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Blessed Virgin Mary," *Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995, p. 832.
- ⁱⁱ . Campbell, *Mary and the Saints: Companions on the Journey*, Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2002, p.14.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, In J. Neuner and J. Dupuis edit, New York: Alba House, 1981, p. 149, article. 605, no. 251.
- ^{iv} Johnson, "Blessed Virgin Mary," 1995, p. 835.
- ^v *Lumen Gentium, Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents, Study Edition*. In Austin Flannery, general editor, Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1992, n. 60.
- ^{vi} Interdicasterial Commission, *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second Edition*. Vatican City, Italy: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997, n. 65.
- ^{vii} Kathleen Coyle, *Mary in the Christian Tradition*, Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1996, pp. 71–72.
- ^{viii} Coyle, p. 103.
- ^{ix} Pope Paul VI. *Marialis Cultus* (1974). Located in *Mary in the Church: A Selection of Teaching Documents*. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003, n. 35.
- ^x Arthur David Canales, "Integrating Christian Discipleship IS Franciscanism," *The Journal of the Association of Franciscan Colleges and Universities*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2004, pp. 35-46. Canales addresses the various components of Christian discipleship that are characteristic of all Christian disciples, which can also be found in the life of Saint Francis of Assisi. Although Canales does not specifically make reference to Mary of Nazareth in that essay, the attributes that are found in the life of Francis are also found in the life of Mary, and in the life of Jesus too, for that matter. Such an examination on Mary and Christian discipleship would make for a great research topic, since many Catholic authors indicate that Mary is a model of discipleship without specifically going into any real detail.
- ^{xi} Robert Barron, *The Strangest Way: Walking the Christian Path*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002, p. 122.
- ^{xii} Coyle, p. 25.
- ^{xiii} Coyle, p. 26.
- ^{xiv} United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Behold Your Mother: Woman of Faith* (1973). Located in *Mary in the Church: A Selection of Teaching Documents*. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003, n. 49.
- ^{xv} Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Immaculate Conception," pp. 655–656.
- ^{xvi} Pope Pius XII. *Munificentissimus Deus*. Found at www.vaticancity.org /library /papaldocuments; p. 14, n. 44.
- ^{xvii} *Dei Verbum. Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents, Study Edition*. In Austin Flannery, general editor, Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1992, n. 68.
- ^{xviii} Robert M. Hamma, "The Feasts of Mary," *Catholic Update*, (May 1992), p. 2.
- ^{xix} Hamma, p. 2.

