

Lesson 61: The Marian Dogmas

OUTLINE

Roman Catholic Mary
Protestant Mary

INTRODUCTION

When we talk about the Marian Dogmas we are usually referring to 4 specific teachings, the teaching of Mary as the 'Theotokos', the Mother of God; Mary's immaculate conception, that she was preserved from the pollution of original sin; Mary's perpetual virginity, that she had no children apart from Christ and that her virginity was miraculously maintained through childbirth; and the Assumption of Mary, that she was taken body and soul into heaven experiencing what we would call her glorification/resurrection. If you are a Protestant of any historical understanding and conviction, the Roman Catholic teachings about Mary are a trigger. Sadly, there is a large and long history of Mariolatry in the history of Christianity. Some of our reactions are justified as we test all things against Scripture; and some of our reactions are overreactions as many Christians ignorant of Church history reject things like the orthodoxy in declaring Mary, the Mother of God. For the most part Protestants are largely ignorant and neglectful of this area of theology that we call Mariology. Since we have recently visited the doctrine of the Virgin Birth we are going to take the opportunity to think about the other teachings around Mary. Firstly, I will present the Roman Catholic version of Mary, I will not try to nuance this with where the Orthodox agree or disagree, but focus on the Catholic view. Then I will look at the Protestant view of Mary and what we need to learn from her.

Roman Catholic Mary

The late Richard Bennett, who was a Dominican priest for 20 years but converted to Protestantism, has helpfully laid out the parallel that Mary has to Christ and the Holy Spirit in Roman Catholic teaching. Christ was sinless, Mary was sinless; grace and salvation are in Christ alone, Mary has a role in grace and salvation; Christ ascended in glory as the King of heaven, Mary was assumed into heaven and is the queen of heaven; Christ is the one mediator between God and man, Mary is called a mediatrix; the Holy Spirit is the believer's Helper and Advocate, Mary is the believer's helper and advocate.¹

The Catholic Catechism 491, quoting the pronouncement by Pope Pius IX from *Ineffabilis Deus*, says of Mary's sinlessness, 'The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin.' There are two children of Adam who have been kept free from the pollution of original sin, Christ and Mary. But there is more, 493, 'The Fathers of the Eastern tradition call the Mother of God "the All-Holy" (*Panagia*), and celebrate her as "free from any stain of sin, as though fashioned by the Holy Spirit and formed as a new creature". By the grace of God Mary remained free of every personal sin her whole life long.' This sinlessness on the part of Mary is necessary in order that she might be the virgin who can conceive the sinless Christ, and to make her the one who is 'full of

¹ Richard Bennet, Catholicism, East of Eden, p204.

grace' and fit to be joined to Christ in His saving office. No doubt you are stunned at such a shocking assertion that has no biblical backing. As with all their teachings on Mary they are driven by a ludicrous logic not biblical warrant. Here is a denial that, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Mary herself made the sacrifices for her purification, Luke 2:23-24, and called God her Saviour, Luke 1:46-47.

This of course raises questions like could Mary get sick? Could Mary die of natural causes being subject to the curse? Some have so wanted to remove Mary from any sin or effect of the curse that they also teach that her birth was without any pain or injury. This brings us to the Perpetual Virginity of Mary. This was a prevalent view in the early church and among the early Reformers. Luther; Zwingli; Bullinger; Cranmer; Beza; Bullinger, and even Wesley all believed in the perpetual virginity of Mary, and the Lutheran Smalcald Articles; and 2nd Helvetic Confession affirms it as well. The title 'Aeiparthenos' 'ever-virgin' was a title approved at the 2nd Council of Constantinople 553. This was the result of a view arising in the second century being fought for by people like Athanasius indicting that it was not universally believed, and put into a council by the authority of the Magisterium of the Church. Later Reformers and Bible scholars have since rejected this teaching that was widespread in the church once again because the biblical evidence is not there and in fact points in another direction. Matt. 1:18 assumes that Mary and Joseph came together after Christ was born, 'Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.' The same assumption is taught in 1:24-25, 'When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.' Mark 6:3, 'Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offense at him.' Some have tried to explain this away claiming that this is a different Mary, Catholic Catechism 500, and therefore Jesus cousins or fellow Israelites; or that they are children from Joseph's first marriage, and no there is no biblical evidence for this. The claim is that Mary and Joseph both made vows of celibacy, sadly this teaching was being believed at the same time that monasticism was taking root and wrong ideas about celibacy. Sadly Mary is used more as an example for nuns and priests than as a model young woman, wife and mother.

So far these doctrines of Mary protect her sinlessness to make Christ's conception sinless, an understandable instinct, though we must endeavor to defend the truth in biblical ways not by making up unbiblical ideas. Her perpetual virginity smacks more of superstition and misconceptions around virginity. The real problems surface as we move into her function. These doctrines of her immaculate conception, being the all holy ever virgin serve as a foundation for her role in salvation. By virtue of her sinless conception and life, she was full of grace; by which she gave her consent to conceive Christ, her words of Luke 1:38, 'Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word,' are not seen as words of submission but permission, not a passive acceptance but active obedience. This made her 'the Mother of God' and so by this office and by her fullness of grace, she cooperated in every stage of Christ's work for our salvation making her a co-sharer in Christ's salvation of the church. 968-9, 'Her role in relation to the Church and to all humanity goes still further. "In a wholly singular way she cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope, and burning charity in the Saviour's work of restoring supernatural life to

souls. For this reason she is a mother to us in the order of grace;" "This motherhood of Mary in the order of grace continues uninterruptedly from the consent which she loyally gave at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the cross, until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect. Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation. ... Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix." At a popular level though not an official level this has led many to proclaim Mary a Co-Redemptrix, for she by her obedience provided the flesh by which Christ redeems us.

Mary is seen as the mother of the church; the queen of heaven, and her assumption into glory to continue to intercede on our behalf is how the Roman Catholic Church portrays her as fitted her for this task. Her assumption is spoken of as a participation in Christ's resurrection, making her the great hope of the church and what we look forward to, and now by her prayers she is able to deliver us from death.

This of course leads to devotion to Mary and prayers to Mary. The official teaching of the Catholic Church insists that there is a difference between devotion to Mary and adoration to God, though we see thousands of examples of this difference breaking down, where adoration, prayers, praise, faith, and all that is owed to God alone is given to Mary. Anyone raised in a Roman Catholic context will have learnt the Ave Maria:

'Hail Mary, full of grace,
The Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou amongst women,
And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God,
Pray for us sinners,
Now and at the hour of our death. Amen.'

The first part of the prayer is loosely based on Luke 1:28, and 1:42; the later part about praying for sinners and at the hour of death was officially added during the time of the Reformation. But even the language of 'full of grace' is wrongly understood, Mary is not a reservoir of grace by virtue of her sinlessness, she is literally a 'graced one,' someone who receives grace. She does not have a surplus of merit to offer in prayer for others, this is a false and unbiblical conception. Nor is she appointed to the role of mediator, 1 Tim. 2:5, 'For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.' In our salvation we do not need a Mother, we need a mediator and highpriest. There is only one Mediator, who is our prophet, priest and king, Jesus Christ alone. It is in His name we pray not Mary's, or the angels or the saints; it is through His righteousness and merits that we receive God's grace not Mary's; it is through His sinless obedience that our salvation is secured and no other. Prayers to Mary for the dead are bound up with the false teaching of purgatory as well, so we reject praying to Mary on account of the fact that Jesus alone is our Mediator, and secondly, after death comes the judgement, there is no so called purgatory that Mary's works of supererogation or prayers can speed them through.

As Protestants we find it hard to believe the amount of honour bestowed upon Mary. Mary is seen as a new Eve, and where Eve contributed to the death of the human race through her disobedience, Mary contributed to it by her obedience. No doubt Mary is the fulfilment of the promise of Gen. 3:15 that through the

Seed of the woman, which was Mary, the Saviour who would crush Satan would come. Sadly, Mary is co-opted into every saving action of Christ as if the promise terminated in her and Jesus Christ equally and not in Christ alone. It should not be doubted that Mary is an Eve-like figure who fulfills the promise but the NT is clear that we have a last Adam not a last Eve by which we are saved, there is no legal or representative powers in her role, only an instrumental one. Mary is constantly put in the foreground by trying to build up a biblical typology of Mary. She is spoken of as the Ark of Noah because in her was life for the world; that she was the burning bush in whom the presence of God dwelt without burning it up; that she was Jacob's ladder the connection between heaven and earth and the place that God descended to be among us; that she is the temple of God where the presence of God dwells among His people, and the woman with the 12 stars upon her head preserved in the wilderness against the dragon in Rev. 12. This creative joining of dots and logical inference may show some creativity and convenient agreement, but there is no biblical warrant to extrapolate in this fashion. Jesus revealed to his disciples that the scriptures spoke about Him not Mary, Luke 24:27.

When it comes to apparitions of Mary, what do Protestants make of these so called miracles? Many of them we believe are simply fake, self-deceptions or lies. But we allow that some may be genuine supernatural experiences, but not Mary. We believe that the devil is a deceiver and enabled to deceive those who refuse the truth. We are commanded to test the spirits, what is the message of these apparitions? Take one of the more prominent and Church approved apparitions the appearance of Mary of Fatima to 3 children aged 6, 8 and 9 in 1917. Mary appeared to them and revealed three secrets to them. But she also had a message. 'Our Lady also asked at Fatima for reparation for sins, outrages, and blasphemies committed against her Immaculate Heart. This could be accomplished by praying the Rosary and by attending First Saturday devotions. The First Saturday devotions include going to Confession, receiving the Eucharist, praying the Rosary, and meditating for 15 minutes on one or more of the mysteries of the Rosary on the first Saturday of five consecutive months.... What exactly are sins committed against the Immaculate Heart of Mary? In 1930, our Lord explained these to Sr. Lucia, the same Fatima child visionary who had subsequently become a nun. Sins against the Immaculate Heart of Mary, he said, involve:

- (1) Those who deny the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Mother
 - (2) Those who deny Our Lady's virginity
 - (3) Those who deny Our Lady's Divine Maternity and role as Mother of all of Mankind
 - (4) Those who cause children to have indifference, contempt, or hatred towards Our Lady
 - (5) Those who commit outrages against holy images of Our Lady
- Our Lady, too, promised assistance at death to those who would make the Five First Saturday devotions.'² We reject these visions as false or demonic deceptions.

Protestant Mary

In Protestantism Mary is a fellow saint, and a humble believer. She is our example not our mother in grace. 'Mary's humble faith is seen in v38, 'And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your

² <https://www.thedivinemercy.org/articles/our-lady-fatimas-message-resonates-107-years>

word." And the angel departed from her.' Let me first draw your attention to the way in which Mary sees herself. There are many who have exalted her, who pray to her, who hold her up as a super saint who has extra merit to spare and lend to the needy. She sees herself as the servant of the Lord. The Greek word here is the word for slave. Not only does she view God rightly and respond with trust but she also views herself rightly and sees herself as God's servant.

I draw your attention to this because of the consumeristic mentality we bring to everything in our lives. We live our lives with the assumption that everything and everyone should be ordered to please me. Friendships, church, relationships are all evaluated on the basis of this self-serving assumption. Here however is a teenage girl who sees herself as a slave. This has various connotations which we need to confront our natural selfishness with. Firstly, it means to live for the pleasure of another not for oneself. She does not argue although this miracle will make her life difficult she accepts God's will. Secondly, the notion of a slave in the ancient world meant that you were not your own but another's property. Slaves did not have the luxury of deciding when they wanted to eat or have a holiday they were at the disposal of their owners. Thirdly, the idea of being a slave comes with the idea of loyalty. Jesus said that no one can serve two masters, that you either hate the one or love the other. To be God's slave is to be His wholeheartedly. No sharing, no compromise, no negotiation but total devotion.

But notice not only how she sees herself before God but the attitude that she has to God's will for her, 'let it be to me according to your word.' This is the strongest language of faith any believer can ever utter. No matter what God says, if God says it, let it be. This miracle would no doubt cause some very real problems for Mary. She was engaged to be married and had no assurances that her future husband would not reject her and her life be without any prospects of marriage because of the possible shame attached to her situation. Who would believe that a teenage girl was pregnant miraculously? This language of faith can be found in Job when he says, 'Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?'" (2:10). A quiet resignation to the will of God no matter how painful or costly is what is conveyed here by Mary. She does not fret the details or the possible ramifications she submits.

This resignation is not the result of a mind that is unaware of the pain that is coming. We can see that Mary is indeed a very thoughtful individual, this is evident from the spiritual depth of her song. Nor is the resignation to the will of God something that you have to force yourself into by ignoring the realities or pretending they are real. This resignation is not a posture of indifference where you keep a stiff upper lip and just bear it. No, Christian submission to whatever God sends comes from knowing that God is good. This is the way Joseph learnt contentment with his lot, Gen. 50:20, 'As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.' Examine her song and see how much she sings about God's mercy, goodness, grace and faithfulness. Her confident submission is not a defeated cowering but a glad submission. She does not throw her hands up in the air because it is beyond her power to change it, but deliberately bows her will and shapes her will to God's.

It is worth emphasizing that this is a teenager teaching us all how to submit to God. The teen years are not years of license and indulgence but years that we can serve and submit to God rendering God glorifying obedience. Being a teenager does not give you the right to not obey God.

As we look at Mary's worship in the presence of Elizabeth we see that Mary is our example not only in humble submission and servanthood but in faith and worship as well. Luke 1:46-47, 'And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.' Mary is worshipping because of her experience of God's gracious salvation. This is an important point because there are those who believe in the immaculate conception of Mary, that she like Christ was born without sin and was therefore able to give birth to a sinless Son. But here we see that she acknowledges her need for God as a Saviour. That she like every other child of Adam is lost and weak and needs God to intervene to save. Salvation is not a nice thing that happens to other people, she knows, 'I am a sinner, and I need a Saviour.' Do you realise that you need a Saviour? We can see that she understands that God has saved her by grace. She is also not worshipping because she has a baby but a saviour. As nice as it is to have a baby she is more concerned about the fact that He is going to save His people. Next she pleads her humble estate. 'For He has looked on the humble estate of His servant,' v48. We must hear Mary's own opinion of herself to be clear. She is worshipping because she knows she does not deserve it but is receiving grace. 'humble estate' refers to her low social standing, and 'servant' is a term implying submission not authority. It is because she is so low that the amazing privilege of being called blessed by all generations is so amazing to her. Hear the emphasis in the her words, 'For He who is mighty has done great things for me.' The God before whom angel's fall to worship, the one that all eternity is not long enough to declare His praise, He considers me. What is man that you are mindful of him, this is Mary's sentiment. The second part of Mary's song moves from appreciating what God does for her personally to what He does for His people in general. Her worship is fuelled by more than the benefits that she receives but the benefits that all God's people receive, v51-53. We are to imitate Mary in her joy in God's saving of others, we should not direct our attention to her.