

What About the Marian Dogmas?

Why Every Claim the Church Makes About the Mother Is a Claim About the Son

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I. What the Church Claims, and What She Does Not

Of all Catholic teachings, those concerning the mother of Jesus provoke the quickest objection and the least patient hearing. “You worship Mary.” “Show me the Immaculate Conception in Scripture.” “The Assumption was invented in 1950.” The objections are understandable, and some of them have been earned by the excesses of popular devotion. But they are almost always aimed at a doctrine the Church does not teach.

So it is worth stating plainly what is claimed. The Church holds four things about Mary as matters of faith: that she is the Mother of God; that she was conceived without original sin; that she remained a virgin; and that she was taken up, body and soul, into heaven. She holds in addition that Mary may be honored and her prayers asked, as the prayers of any member of Christ's body may be asked.

And here is what the Church does not claim, in terms as flat as they can be made. Mary is not divine. She is not a fourth person of the Trinity. She is not the source of grace, and she did not redeem anyone. She needed a Savior and had one — her own Son. She is not to be worshipped, and any Catholic who worships her has sinned against the first commandment, not fulfilled Catholic teaching.

What follows argues that the four doctrines are not additions to the faith about Christ but defenses of it, and that Scripture says considerably more about His mother than a hurried reading notices.

II. The Woman of Genesis

Begin where the objection usually begins, because it is the easiest to answer and the answer opens everything else. At the wedding in Cana, Christ addresses His mother as “woman” (John 2:4). From the cross He does it again: “Woman, behold your son” (John 19:26). Surely, it is said, this is distance if not rebuke.

It cannot be, for a reason that ought to settle the matter before any subtler argument is attempted. The fourth commandment requires a son to honor his mother. Christ kept the whole Law and was without sin (Matthew 5:17; John 8:46; Hebrews 4:15). If “woman” were disrespect, He broke the commandment, and if He broke the commandment He is not the sinless Redeemer. The objection, pressed, costs more than it gains.

What then does the word do? The answer lies in a detail that is easy to pass over and impossible to unsee. In the whole of John's Gospel, the mother of Jesus is never once called Mary. She appears twice, at the beginning of His ministry and at its end, and both times she is “the mother of Jesus” or “woman.” John, who took her into his own home, plainly knew her name. The omission is deliberate.

It points back to the first pages of Scripture. After the fall, God says to the serpent:

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” (Genesis 3:15)

This is the *protoevangelium*, the first announcement of the gospel: a woman will come, and her seed will crush the serpent. John frames his entire Gospel between two

appearances of that woman — at Cana, where Christ says “my hour has not yet come,” and at Calvary, where the hour has come and He speaks to her again by the same title. The last book of the New Testament completes the figure with a woman clothed with the sun, whose child is caught up to God and against whose remaining offspring the dragon makes war (Revelation 12).

John is not being cold to his Lord’s mother. He is telling us who she is.

III. Mother of God

The oldest of the four doctrines is the one most often misheard, and the misunderstanding is usually a misplacement of what is being claimed. To call Mary the Mother of God is not to say that she is the origin of the divine nature, or that she existed before God, or that deity has a mother. It is to say something about the identity of the child she bore.

The argument is three lines long. Jesus is God. Mary is the mother of Jesus. Therefore Mary is the mother of God.

The only way out is to say that she was mother of His humanity but not of His Person — that she bore the man Jesus but not God the Word. That was precisely the position of Nestorius, and it was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431 when the Church defined the title *Theotokos*, God-bearer. The condemnation had nothing to do with elevating Mary and everything to do with refusing to divide Christ into two subjects. Mothers do not bear natures; they bear persons. If the Person born of Mary is God, His mother is the mother of God, and if she is not, then the Person born of her is not God.

This is why the title is a wall built around the Incarnation rather than a compliment paid to a woman. To deny it is, in the end, to deny that the child in the manger was God — which is exactly the denial that makes the doctrine controversial among those who reject the divinity of Christ in the first place. Their objection to the mother is a consequence of their objection to the Son.

IV. The New Eve in the Fathers

The pattern set in Genesis 3:15 was recognized very early. Within a lifetime or two of the apostles, Christian writers were drawing the parallel between Eve and Mary as deliberately as they drew the parallel between Adam and Christ — and they treated both as received teaching rather than as their own discovery.

Justin Martyr, writing about the middle of the second century, observes that Eve, a virgin and undefiled, conceived the word of the serpent and brought forth disobedience and death, while Mary, a virgin, answered the angel’s word with faith and so brought forth Him by whom God destroys the serpent. Irenaeus, writing about 180 and standing two

steps from the apostle John through Polycarp, develops it into a principle: “the knot of Eve’s disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary.” Tertullian makes the same contrast a generation later.

The argument is not decorative. If Paul may call Christ the second Adam (Romans 5:12–21; 1 Corinthians 15:22, 45), then the appearance of a second Eve beside Him is not an embellishment but the completion of the type. And it is worth noting when this appears. Irenaeus is writing more than a century before Nicaea, in a work whose whole purpose is to distinguish the apostolic tradition from novelty, and he offers the Eve–Mary parallel as an example of what the Church everywhere holds.

V. The Ark of the New Covenant

Luke’s account of the Visitation contains a series of correspondences with the account of David bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, and once they are seen together the deliberateness is difficult to deny.

David arises and goes to the hill country of Judah to fetch the Ark (2 Samuel 6:2); Mary arises and goes to the hill country of Judah (Luke 1:39). David dances and leaps before the Ark (2 Samuel 6:14, 16); John leaps in Elizabeth’s womb at Mary’s greeting (Luke 1:41, 44). David cries out, “How can the ark of the Lord come to me?” (2 Samuel 6:9); Elizabeth cries out, “Why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Luke 1:43). The Ark remains in the house of Obed-edom three months (2 Samuel 6:11); Mary remains with Elizabeth about three months (Luke 1:56). And the house of Obed-edom is blessed because of the Ark; Elizabeth declares Mary blessed among women.

The Ark held the tablets of the Law, a jar of manna, and Aaron’s rod that budded (Hebrews 9:4) — the word of God, the bread from heaven, and the sign of the true priesthood. Mary carried the Word made flesh, the living Bread, and the eternal High Priest. Revelation makes the identification explicit in a verse whose chapter division has obscured it: the ark of God’s covenant is seen in heaven, and the next sentence describes a woman clothed with the sun (Revelation 11:19–12:1).

This bears directly on the doctrine treated next. The Ark that carried the word in stone was overlaid with pure gold within and without, and could not be touched by unconsecrated hands; when Uzzah put out his hand to steady it, he died (2 Samuel 6:6–7). If God required that of a box, the question of what preparation was fitting for the woman who carried the Word made flesh is at least a reasonable one to ask.

VI. Preserved, Not Exempted

The Immaculate Conception is the doctrine that Mary was preserved from original sin from the first instant of her existence. Two misunderstandings should be cleared away immediately. It is not about the conception of Jesus, which was virginal but is a different subject. And it does not make Mary independent of Christ, since the preservation was granted, in the words of the definition itself, “in view of the merits of Jesus Christ.”

That last point answers the objection most often raised — that Mary called God “my Savior” (Luke 1:47), which a sinless woman would not have needed to do. She needed a Savior and she had one. The question is only how His salvation reached her. A man may be saved by being pulled out of a pit, or by being caught before he falls into it; the second is not a lesser rescue but a greater one, and in both cases the rescuer saves. Mary is redeemed by Christ in the most perfect manner possible, not exempted from redemption.

The same answers the objection from the offering at the Temple (Luke 2:22–24). The Law’s purification requirements were not confessions of personal sin, and Christ Himself submitted to a baptism He did not need — “thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15).

The other text pressed against the doctrine is Paul’s rule that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). But Paul’s “all” is doing a particular job in that argument: he has spent two chapters proving that Jews and Greeks alike are under the power of sin (Rom. 3:9), and it means all without distinction rather than all without exception. Scripture’s “all” regularly admits exceptions: “all the country of Judea” went out to John, “and all the people of Jerusalem” (Mark 1:5), yet not every last inhabitant did; Christ Himself never sinned, though He is a man; and infants below the age of reason commit no personal sin, yet fall within “all.” A rule with acknowledged exceptions cannot by itself forbid the one exception God had reason to make—and the Immaculate Conception does not even claim Mary escaped the rule’s point, which is that everyone needs redemption in Christ. She needed it and received it, more completely than anyone.

There is a positive indication as well, in the angel’s greeting. Gabriel does not address Mary by name but by a title: *kecharitōmenē*, usually rendered “full of grace” or “highly favored.” The form is a perfect passive participle, which in Greek denotes a completed action with a continuing result — she has been graced, and stands in that condition. It is an unusual way to greet anyone, and it is the only place in Scripture where the word is used of a person in this way.

None of this amounts to a proof text, and honesty requires saying so. The doctrine is a conclusion drawn from the fittingness of the Incarnation, the typology of the Ark, and the

language of the Annunciation, held by the Church long before it was defined. What can be said is that nothing in Scripture contradicts it, and a good deal points toward it.

VII. The Brothers of the Lord

Against the perpetual virginity stand two objections that look decisive in English and much less so in Greek.

The first is the word “until”: Joseph “knew her not until she had borne a son” (Matthew 1:25). In English this implies a change afterward. In Scripture it regularly does not. Michal had no child “until the day of her death” (2 Samuel 6:23), which plainly does not mean she had one after it. Christ promises to be with the Church “until the close of the age” (Matthew 28:20) without implying He will then depart. The construction marks a point up to which something was true; it makes no claim about what follows.

The second is the “brothers” of Jesus, named in the Gospels as James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas, with sisters mentioned as well (Matthew 13:55–56; Mark 6:3). The Greek *adelphos* is not the narrow English word. Hebrew and Aramaic had no distinct term for cousin, nephew, or kinsman, and the Greek of Jewish writers inherited the breadth: Lot is called Abraham’s *adelphos* in the Septuagint (Genesis 13:8; 14:14) though Genesis 11:27 makes him his nephew. Laban calls Jacob his brother when he is his uncle (Genesis 29:15).

Two of the four named brothers can be traced. Matthew, having listed James and Joseph among the brothers in chapter 13, later identifies at the crucifixion “Mary the mother of James and Joseph” — a different Mary standing beside the mother of Jesus (Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40). Whatever these men were, at least two of them had another mother.

The strongest evidence, though, is not lexical but narrative, and it is easy to miss. From the cross Christ commits His mother to the care of John, and John takes her into his own home (John 19:26–27). In first-century Jewish society the obligation of a surviving son to a widowed mother was absolute, and the shame of neglecting it considerable. If Mary had four other sons standing somewhere in Jerusalem, the act is close to unintelligible — and Christ, dying, would have been publicly dishonoring them.

VIII. The Assumption and the Silence of the Relics

The Assumption is the doctrine that at the end of her earthly life Mary was taken up, body and soul, into heavenly glory. The Church has deliberately left open whether she died first, and the definition of 1950 does not settle it.

Three considerations support it. The first is that bodily assumption is not without precedent in Scripture: Enoch “was not, for God took him” (Genesis 5:24), and Elijah went

up by a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11). Whatever difficulty attaches to the doctrine, it is not that God has never done such a thing.

The second is theological fittingness. Bodily corruption is bound up with sin (Genesis 3:19; Romans 6:23). If Mary was preserved from original sin, then her exemption from the corruption of the grave follows as a consequence rather than arriving as an additional privilege. The doctrines hang together; this is why they were not defined at random.

The third is an argument from silence, and it is unusually strong because of what the early Church was like about relics. Christians of the first centuries treasured the bones of the martyrs, built altars over them, fought over their possession, and recorded their locations with care. Rome claims Peter and Paul, Ephesus claims John, Compostela claims James. No city ever claimed the body of Mary. No tomb was venerated, no relics circulated, no rival churches disputed possession. For the most honored woman in Christian history to leave no bodily remains anywhere, in a culture that collected such things, is a silence that wants explaining.

The title pressed hardest against her, Queen of Heaven, is answered by the difference Jeremiah himself states. His goddess received sacrifice—cakes, incense, libations poured out (Jer. 7:18)—and sacrifice to anyone but God is exactly what the Church calls idolatry. Mary receives no sacrifice; what is asked of her is her prayers. Her royal title comes not from Babylon but from David's throne room, where the queen was the king's mother: Solomon rises, bows to Bathsheba, and seats her at his right hand (1 Kings 2:19). To call Mary queen is to say something about her Son—and a shared phrase proves nothing by itself: Baal means "lord," and Scripture calls God Lord on every page.

The doctrine was not invented in 1950. Liturgical celebration of Mary's falling asleep and assumption is attested in the East from the sixth century and probably earlier, and homilies on it survive from the seventh and eighth. The 1950 definition settled the status of a belief the Church had held and celebrated for well over a millennium.

IX. All Generations Will Call Me Blessed

One text bears on the question of honor more directly than any argument from fittingness, and it is spoken by Mary herself. Elizabeth, "filled with the Holy Spirit," calls her blessed among women and blessed for her faith (Luke 1:41–45). Mary answers with the Magnificat, and in the middle of it says this:

"For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name." (Luke 1:48–49)

Notice the shape of the sentence. She does not say that God will be praised on her account, which any believer might say and which would raise no difficulty. She says that *she* will be called blessed, and not by one generation but by all of them.

A Christian reading that verse has to do something with it. If it is merely a prediction that people will remember her kindly, it is oddly emphatic. If it is what it appears to be — a prophecy, uttered under the same Spirit that had just filled Elizabeth, that the people of God would honor her in every age — then a communion in which no generation ever calls her blessed has not been more scrupulous than Scripture. It has left a prophecy of Scripture unfulfilled.

And the second half of the verse governs the first. She is called blessed *because* He who is mighty has done great things for her. The honor is real, and every ounce of it is derived.

X. Honoring Is Not Worshipping

The gravest charge is the charge of idolatry, and it deserves a direct answer rather than a soft one. The Church does not offer Mary the worship due to God, has never permitted it, and condemns it where it occurs.

The tradition keeps three words distinct. *Latria* is the adoration owed to God alone; to give it to any creature is idolatry in the strict sense. *Dulia* is the honor owed to excellence, and to God's work in a human life. *Hyperdulia* is the highest degree of *dulia*, given to Mary alone — and it remains *dulia*. The difference between it and *latria* is not one of degree but of kind, in the way that admiring a painting and worshipping it are not points on a single scale.

The objection from the one mediator (1 Timothy 2:5) has already been met in the companion essay on the saints, and the answer is the same here: Paul urges that “supplications, prayers, intercessions” be made for all men three verses earlier (1 Timothy 2:1), and asks for the prayers of his converts in nearly every letter he writes. If requesting another's prayer encroached on Christ's mediation, the apostle encroached on it constantly.

That leaves the text most often quoted at Catholics, and it repays a closer look than it usually gets. A woman in the crowd calls out, “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!” Christ answers: “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” (Luke 11:27–28). This is read as a correction, a redirection of honor away from His mother.

The Greek particle is *menoun ge*, and it is not a word of denial. It carries a corrective or an intensifying force depending on context, and the lexica give “rather,” but also “indeed,”

“certainly,” “on the contrary — yes, and more so.” Paul uses it at Romans 9:20 and 10:18 without contradicting what precedes.

And consider what Christ actually names as the ground of blessedness: hearing the word of God and keeping it. Luke has already shown us, twice, who did that better than anyone. “Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (Luke 1:45). Christ is not moving blessedness away from His mother. He is explaining why it belonged to her in the first place — and He locates it, characteristically, in her faith rather than in her biology.

XI. What the Reformers Believed

It is often assumed that Marian doctrine is the dividing line between Catholics and the Reformation. On the points most disputed today, it was not.

Luther held the perpetual virginity of Mary throughout his life, preached on the Magnificat with great warmth, and continued to call her the Mother of God. Zwingli defended her perpetual virginity explicitly. Calvin, more reserved about devotion than either, nonetheless rejected the reading of Matthew 1:25 and the “brothers” texts that is now standard among their heirs, regarding the inference that Mary had other children as unwarranted.

The point is not that the Reformers were secret Catholics; they were not, and their objections to Marian devotion were real and sometimes fierce. The point is narrower and more useful: the specific exegetical arguments now advanced as the plain sense of Scripture were not thought plain by the men who broke with Rome over the authority of Scripture. That is worth knowing before treating those readings as obvious.

XII. Late Definition Is Not Late Invention

The last objection is chronological. Ephesus defined the Mother of God in 431; Pius IX defined the Immaculate Conception in 1854; Pius XII defined the Assumption in 1950. Doctrine, it is said, is visibly accumulating.

The dates are correct and are not in dispute. What is in dispute is what a date of definition indicates. The Church defines a doctrine when it is denied, not when it is first believed, and the pattern is consistent across every subject. The canon of the New Testament was not settled until the late fourth century; nobody concludes that the Gospels were written then. The word *Trinity* is not used before Theophilus around 180; nobody concludes that the doctrine was invented in the second century. Nicaea defined the Son’s divinity in 325 because Arius had denied it, not because it was news.

Definitions are responses. Ephesus spoke in 431 because Nestorius had raised a question nobody had needed to answer before. The nineteenth and twentieth-century definitions came at a time when the beliefs they concerned were being contested rather than assumed. A doctrine's history is found in what the Church believed and prayed, not in the year a council finally wrote it down.

XIII. Conclusion: The Moon and the Sun

Take the four doctrines together and a pattern is visible in each of them. Mother of God keeps Christ one Person rather than two. The Immaculate Conception says that the Incarnation was prepared rather than improvised. The perpetual virginity marks His birth as something that happens once and cannot be repeated. The Assumption shows in one creature, already, what He has promised to all of them. Not one of them terminates in Mary. Every one passes through her to her Son.

That is the answer to the charge of rivalry, and it is why the charge misses. If the moon is shining brightly on a clear night, nobody accuses it of stealing light from the sun. It has no light of its own; every particle of its brightness is borrowed, and the brighter it shines the more it testifies to the source. Mary said so herself, in the first words of the song in which she prophesied her own honor: "My soul magnifies the Lord." Magnifies Him. Not herself.

And her last recorded words in Scripture are of a piece with it. At Cana, having brought the need to her Son, she turns to the servants and says the only thing she ever says to the Church: "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5). Every honor the Church has ever paid her ends where she pointed.

Endnotes

1. On what the Church does and does not claim, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§487–507, 963–975. The four doctrines held as dogma are the divine motherhood, the Immaculate Conception, the perpetual virginity, and the Assumption.
2. Exodus 20:12 (the fourth commandment by the Catholic enumeration); Matthew 5:17; John 8:46; Hebrews 4:15 on Christ's sinlessness and fulfilment of the Law.
3. John 2:1–11 and 19:25–27 are the two scenes; the mother of Jesus is named nowhere in the Fourth Gospel. Genesis 3:15 is the *protoevangelium*; compare Revelation 11:19–12:17.
4. The Council of Ephesus (431) against Nestorius. The controversy was Christological in origin: Nestorius objected to *Theotokos* because he wished to distinguish two subjects in Christ. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§466, 495.

5. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 100; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.22.4 and 5.19.1 (“the knot of Eve’s disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary”); Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ* 17. On Irenaeus’s link to the apostle John through Polycarp, *Against Heresies* 3.3.4.
6. The Visitation parallels: 2 Samuel 6:2 with Luke 1:39; 6:14, 16 with 1:41, 44; 6:9 with 1:43; 6:11 with 1:56. On the contents of the Ark, Hebrews 9:4. On Uzzah, 2 Samuel 6:6–7.
7. Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854): the preservation was granted “in view of the merits of Jesus Christ.” See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§490–493.
8. Luke 1:28. *Kecharitōmenē* is a perfect passive participle of *charitoō*; the perfect denotes a completed action with an abiding result. Luke 2:22–24 concerns the purification prescribed at Leviticus 12, which is not a confession of personal sin; compare Matthew 3:15.
9. On “until,” 2 Samuel 6:23; Matthew 28:20; compare 1 Corinthians 15:25. On *adelphos* for kinsmen generally, Genesis 13:8 and 14:14 in the Septuagint with Genesis 11:27; Genesis 29:15. On James and Joseph as sons of another Mary, Matthew 27:56 with Mark 15:40.
10. John 19:26–27. On the obligation of a son to a widowed mother, the practice is assumed throughout the Old Testament and is presupposed by Christ’s rebuke of the corban evasion at Mark 7:9–13.
11. Genesis 5:24; 2 Kings 2:11 for bodily assumption. Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950), which deliberately leaves open whether Mary died. On the liturgical attestation of the Dormition and Assumption in the East from the sixth century, see the standard histories of the liturgical year.
12. Luke 1:41–49. Elizabeth speaks “filled with the Holy Spirit” (v. 41), which bears on the standing of the exchange that follows.
13. On *latria*, *dulia*, and *hyperdulia*, Augustine, *City of God* 10.1; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 84, a. 1, and q. 103, a. 3–4. See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§971, 2096–2097.
14. 1 Timothy 2:1–5 read as a unit; the companion essay on the communion of saints treats the argument at length. On *menoun ge* at Luke 11:28, compare Romans 9:20 and 10:18, where it does not deny what precedes.
15. Luther, *Sermon on the Presentation of Christ in the Temple* (1546) and the *Commentary on the Magnificat* (1521); Zwingli, *Eini Predigt von der ewig reinen Magd Maria* (1522); Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists* at Matthew 1:25 and 13:55.

16. On definition as a response to denial rather than a mark of origin, compare the settlement of the canon in the late fourth century, the coining of *Trias* by Theophilus of Antioch about 180, and the definition of the Son's divinity at Nicaea in 325 against Arius.

For Further Reading

Behold Your Mother—A Biblical and Historical Defense of the Marian Doctrines, by Tim Staples.

Rethinking Mary In the New Testament, by Edward Sri.

Mary and the Fathers of the Church—The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought, by Luigi Gambero.

Mary at the Crossroads of History, by Rev. Francis J. Hoffman, J.C.D.

Hail, Holy Queen: The Mother of God in the Word of God, by Scott Hahn.

A Complete Mariology, by C. X. J. M. Friethoff, O.P.—out of print; available used via AbeBooks.

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*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Catholic doctrines concerning the Blessed Virgin Mary*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.