Marian Dogmas

THE PASTOR'S CORNER-- On The Immaculate Conception
By: Rev. Mark T. Spruill, Obl.S.B.

I would like to examine those particular teachings of the Catholic Church commonly known as the Marian Dogmas. These four doctrines describe our central beliefs about Mary, including: The Immaculate Conception, The Assumption, The Perpetual Virginity of Mary and the title of Mary as "Mother of God."

We begin with the Immaculate Conception, which was formally defined by Pope Pius IX in 1854. Some people claim the doctrine was "invented" at this time, but they are mistaken. Actually, the Church dogmatically defines doctrines only when there is a controversy that needs to be resolved or when the Magisterium (the teaching office of the Church; cf. Matt. 28:18–20; 1 Tim. 3:15, 4:11) emphasizes existing beliefs.

This doctrine is first implied in scripture when the angel Gabriel says, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28). "Full of grace" translates the Greek term Kecharitomene, in the perfect tense it indicates that Mary was graced in the past, but with continuing effects. So, the grace Mary enjoyed was not a result of the angel’s visit, but extended over her whole life, from conception onward.

Some "Inaccurate Misconceptions:" This dogma does not refer to Christ’s conception in Mary’s womb without the intervention of a human father; that is the Virgin Birth. It also does not mean Mary was conceived "by the power of the Holy Spirit," like Jesus. The Immaculate Conception states that Mary was conceived in the normal way, but without the stain of original sin—that’s what “immaculate” means, "without stain." Mary is preserved from these defects by God, at the moment of her conception.

Common objections arise from scripture verses like "all have sinned" (Rom. 3:23) and when Mary says, "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:47). Since only sinners need a Savior, how could Mary be sinless at her conception? Consider this analogy: A man falls into a mud pit and someone reaches down, pulls him out and washes him off. The man has been "saved" from the pit and washed clean by his savior. Now, imagine a woman about to fall into the mud pit, but at that very moment, someone grabs her and prevents her from falling. She too has been "saved" and is clean because she was prevented from getting stained by the mud in the first place. We are like the man, saved by Christ after the fall and being washed clean of the stain of sin at baptism. However, Mary is saved by Christ’s preventive grace, at her conception, before she is stained with original sin.

The objection is then raised that if Mary is conceived without sin, she is equal to God. However, in the beginning, God created Adam, Eve, and the angels all without sin, but not equal to Himself. Sin does not make us human; on the contrary, it is when we are clean of the stain of sin that we are fully what God intends us to be. So, let’s pray that we might all be a little more immaculate this week.
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THE PASTOR'S CORNER-- OnThe Assumption
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The Marian Dogma of the Assumption proclaimed by Pope Pius XII in 1950 states that "Mary, Immaculate Mother of God ever Virgin, after finishing the course of her life on earth, was taken up in body and soul to heavenly glory." The doctrine does not say how the transition from Mary's earthly state to her heavenly state happened. However, the opinion that Mary passed through death as did her Son, has strong support in tradition.

The Assumption has been a part of the Church's spiritual and doctrinal patrimony for centuries, both in theological reflection and through the sense of the faithful in the liturgy. Moreover, this doctrine is the logical conclusion of Mary's Immaculate Conception. After all, if Mary is conceived without sin, then it would follow that she would not suffer corruption in the grave, which is a consequence of sin (cf. Gen. 3:17, 19).

This dogma also reflects Mary’s union with God as a consequence of her Divine Motherhood. Being uniquely united to her Son on earth, it is fitting for Mary to be uniquely united with God the Son in heaven where her active involvement in salvation history continues. As the Second Vatican Council affirms: "Taken up to heaven, she did not lay aside her salvific duty....By her maternal love she cares for the brothers and sisters of her Son who still journey on earth" (Lumen Gentium).

Over the centuries, the Fathers and the Doctors of the Church spoke often about the privilege of Mary’s Assumption in connection to the honor that was given to the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the manna (the bread from heaven), the stone tablets of the ten commandments (the word of God), and the staff of Aaron (the symbol of Israel’s high priesthood). Because of its contents, it was made of incorruptible wood. Now, if this vessel was given such honor, how much more should Mary be kept from corruption, since she is the New Ark—who carried the true bread from heaven, the incarnate Word of God, and the high priest of the New Covenant, Jesus Christ. As Psalm 132:8 says, "Arise, O Lord, and go to thy resting place, thou and the ark of thy might."

Some wrong assumptions:

A distinction must be made between the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ, which are signs of His divine power, and the Assumption of Mary, body and soul, into heaven by the grace of God. Mary is not raised by her own power and is not treated as a goddess. On the contrary, glorified in body and soul by God, Mary is held up by her son as a sign to all believers of the state that will be ours after the resurrection of the dead. We are all called to share in God’s glory; so let’s celebrate the Assumption of Mary on August 15th in joyful anticipation what awaits those who unite themselves to our savior in faith.
HONOR THY MOTHER…
The Dogma of Mary's Divine Motherhood was officially proclaimed by the Church at the Council of Ephesus in 431. In this doctrine, she is called "Mother of God" which is a translation of the Greek term Theotokos, which literally means "God-Bearer."

To understand why the Church honors Mary with this title Mother of God, we first need to look at the Council's declaration that in Christ there are two natures, one divine and one human, but only one person. Since that person is the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, He is a divine person; He is the Word of God and He is God. Therefore, according to the Council, “the Virgin Mary is the ‘Mother of God’ since she begot according to the flesh the Word of God made flesh.”

This decision was further explained by the Council of Chalcedon in 451, which says: "The Son is begotten from the Father before the ages as regards his Godhead, and in these last days, the same, because of us and because of our salvation is begotten from the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, as regards His manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten...."

As we see, Mary's Divine Motherhood is not the object of an independent dogmatic declaration. The statement is embedded in texts defining the person and natures of Jesus Christ and this makes the doctrine of her Divine Motherhood an integral part of the Christological Dogma. In other words, to deny that Mary is the Mother of God is to deny that Christ is God. And this denial of Christ’s divinity is precisely the heretical position that the Council of Ephesus was called to rebuke.

The Council noted that the divinity of Christ is explicitly revealed in scripture when the Angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will conceive a son and that He is to be the Son of the Most High God. One might object and say any devout Jew could be called a son of God. However, the revelation that is unique comes when the Angel tells Mary that this child will reign over the House of Jacob forever; right then she knew He was to be the Messiah. Moreover, the Angel also says that the Holy Spirit, the power of the Most High, will "overshadow" Mary (Luke 1:35). That is the same word used in the Old Testament to describe the Divine Presence of God over the Ark of the Covenant (cf. Exodus 40:35). Therefore, Mary likely knew of her son’s divinity, especially if she recalled the words of the prophet Isaiah: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel,” which means, "God with us" (Isaiah 7:14).

In affirming that Christ is truly God, the Church also affirms that Mary is truly the “Mother of God” and rightly honors her with this title.
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THE PASTOR'S CORNER—On The Perpetual Virginity of Mary
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The Dogma of the Perpetual Virginity of Mary was defined at the Lateran Council in 649, which stated: Mary conceived our Lord "without any detriment to her virginity, which remained inviolate even after his birth." And the Church, in the Second Vatican Council re-affirmed the teaching that Christ's birth did not diminish Mary's virginal integrity, but sanctified it (cf. Lumen Gentium #57). In other words, Mary remained a virgin, before, during and after the birth of Christ. These councils simply defined as a matter of doctrine what the Church had taught since the first formulations of the faith in the second century.

From the earliest baptismal rites and professions of faith, such as the Nicene Creed, the Church has continuously affirmed that Jesus Christ was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit alone in a virginal conception, that is, without the intervention of a man, which the gospels of Matthew and Luke make clear.

A perpetual problem:

Though most Christians accept that Mary was a virgin until Christ was born, some claim that she bore children other than Jesus. To support this claim, they refer to biblical passages which mention the "brethren of the Lord." Yet, neither the Gospel accounts nor the early Christians themselves attest to the notion that Mary bore any other children besides Jesus. The faithful knew, through the witness of both Scripture and Tradition, that Jesus was Mary’s only child and that she remained a lifelong virgin.

To better understand how the Perpetual Virginity of Mary has always been reconciled with the biblical references to Christ’s brethren we need a proper understanding of the meaning of the term "brethren." The understanding that the brethren of the Lord were Jesus’ stepbrothers (children of Joseph) rather than half-brothers (children of Mary) was common until the fourth century when Saint Jerome introduced the possibility that these “brethren” were actually cousins.

Jerome noted that the same Hebrew word could be used for brothers or cousins because it conveyed only the general idea of family relationship. We in the South may be familiar with the word kinsmen or kin’ which has the same broad meaning. For that matter, we even use the word brother in general for members of a fraternity. Therefore, when the Gospels speak of the "brothers and sisters" of Jesus, they do not have to mean other children of Mary. As the official Catechism of the Catholic Church says, Jesus Christ was Mary’s only child. The so-called brethren are close relations (cf. C.C.C. 499-507).

Alas, some people today are unaware of these early beliefs regarding Mary’s Perpetual Virginity and the proper interpretation of "the brethren of the Lord." Yet, the Catholic Church and even major Protestant Reformers, such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli all historically honored the Perpetual Virginity of Mary and recognized it as the teaching of Scripture. So, this week why don’t we all join together as brothers of the Lord Jesus Christ and show the proper respect due to our Mother in the faith, the Blessed Virgin Mary.
As we have seen, the Marian Dogmas are given to us by the Church to help us better understand our relationship with our Creator. It is important to remember that these teachings about Mary's Immaculate Conception, her Perpetual Virginity, Mary as the Mother of God, and her Assumption, must always be interpreted within the context of the more fundamental teachings of the Church about God. For example, the Catholic Church consistently proclaims God alone, is to be worshipped (cf. Mt. 4:10, Ex. 20:1-3, and Lk. 4:8). Therefore, we do not worship Mary!

Yes, Catholics follow the Biblical command in Luke 1:48 to honor Mary, but that highest form of honor, called adoration (from the Latin "latria") is reserved to God alone. However, there are lesser forms of honor that God does require us to give to others. For example, God commands us to honor our mother and father in Matthew 19:19. The Church uses the Latin term "dulia" to distinguish this lesser form of honor given to our parents and to our brothers and sisters in Christ, both here on earth and in Heaven, commonly called the Saints or "holy ones" because they are united to the Body of Christ.

Because of her Assumption and as the Mother of God, Mary has a special role among the Saints so the special honor given to her is called "hyper-dulia," an honor that is greater in degree, but still of the same kind as that given to all the other saints.

The purpose of all Marian devotion is to help us to love God more. Therefore, we are encouraged to ask Mary to pray for us as we continue our spiritual journey through this life in hope that we too will remain open to God’s grace and be more conformed to His will. As the Second Vatican Council states, “Mary’s function [in interceding on our behalf]...in no way obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power.” (Lumen Gentium, 60-62).

One way in which we ask Mary to help us is by praying the Hail Mary. This is the most familiar of all the prayers used by the Church in honor of our Blessed Lady. It is commonly described as consisting of three parts. The first part, "Hail (Mary) full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou amongst women," embodies the words used by the Angel Gabriel when greeting the Blessed Virgin (Luke, 1:28).

The second, "and blessed is the fruit of thy womb (Jesus)," is from the greeting of Elizabeth (Luke 1:42).

Finally, the phrase "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen" is a petition for our Blessed Mother to pray to her son Jesus for us in our time of need "...both for this present life and for the life to come, which has no end" (cf. Council of Trent).

So we see, Mary does not detract from God’s glory, in fact, Mary is proof positive that Christ’s redemptive work is infinitely greater than our sin or even death itself. Holy Mary, Pray for us…!