

Mariology: Doctrine of the Mother of Jesus  
by Justin Killam

The Immaculate Conception, Mary as Aei parthenos or Ever-Virgin, Mary as the Theotokos or God Bearer and the Assumption of Mary. The four accepted doctrine of Mary which comprise the bulk of Mariology, although by no means the only thought in the theological study of Mary, The Blessed Virgin. Although there is very little scriptural bases for these doctrine there is of course a great deal of interpretational support as well as a long history of theological debate, deduction and discussion. This does raise the question of why, why is there such a rich tradition of theological interest in Mary in Christianity? The immediate answer that comes to mind is of course the intimate role she plays in the coming of Jesus, from which Christianity comes from. To understand further the relationship and role of Mary is to further understand Jesus Christ. Perhaps, but when the sheer magnitude of near-worship of Mary is taken into account, there would seem to be more. What is the attraction of Mary that calls so many to adore her and the consequences of this adoration?

The doctrine of Mary starts with the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception. This is often misinterpreted to be about the birth of Christ when in actuality is concerned with the birth of Mary herself. Mary as Immaculate holds that Mary was conceived and born preserved from the taint of original sin. Exactly what this means must be further looked at as it has always been a deeply argued proclamation, of which there have been many non-supporters. The primary concern against the Immaculate Conception of Mary is that, being born free of the taint of original sin, she would have no need for a savior figure. Christ was born to free humanity from the taint of original sin and show the way for humanity to accept God's redemption, to save us all. Without this taint, Mary would have no need for Christ. However, if the terminology of the defined Dogma is looked at closely, it can be seen that this has been taken into consideration, thought of and concluded before being accepted fully as Dogma on December 8, 1854 by Pope Pius IX in the *Ineffabilis Deus*:

We declare, pronounce and define that the doctrine which holds that the Blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her conception, by a singular privilege and grace of the Omnipotent God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of mankind, was preserved immaculate from all stain of original sin, has been revealed by God, and therefore should firmly and constantly be believed by all the faithful.

The most important term in this definition is preserved. Mary is preserved from the taint of original sin, but not free of its effects. Just as Adam and Eve do not have the taint of sin, but still have the freedom to choose evil over good and thus, are able to sin, so too can Mary sin. Mary is preserved from the influences of original sin, but is still free to sin. This answers the problem of Mary needing no savior, while she may be preserved from the taint, she can still sin and being human is bound to make mistakes and sin sometime during her life, thus she shall need Jesus Christ as much as the rest of humanity.

The specifics of just what the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception says about Mary is now better understood, however it remains unclear the reasons that this is so important. Preserved or not preserved, Mary needs Jesus Christ just as everyone else. In the Gospel of Luke there is a specific event that is crucial to the understanding of why this doctrine came about. In Luke 1:26 to 38 the birth of Jesus is promised to Mary by the angel Gabriel. In this Gospel account of the promise, Mary answers the revelation of the angel, "I am the Lord's servant," said Mary; 'may it be as you have said.' Then the angel left her," (Luke 1:38) with an acceptance of God. Mary is given a choice, as are all of humanity given the freedom to accept or reject God, and she accepts him faithfully. The Christ

even itself, in which Jesus brings salvation to humanity, is a reversal of the fall of Adam and Eve, in which Adam brings original sin to all of humanity. Jesus saves humanity from original sin. In the fall however, Adam did not do this alone, it was a woman, Eve, that first chose between good and evil, it was Eve who first made the choice to accept or reject God and with her choice, the fall began. For the Jesus event to fully mirror the event of the fall, it must begin with a woman who makes a choice. That woman is Mary and she begins the possibility of salvation of humanity by accepting God and the child she must bear. Jesus' status as free of the taint of original sin is never questioned, he is the son of God, he is God himself, the Word made flesh, thus he is not tainted by original sin. But Mary is human and again it is in order to completely mirror the event of the fall, in which both the man and woman involved were free of sin, that Mary must be free of sin like Eve. This is the reason the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception was developed and was so important, so that the Jesus event would completely mirror the fall event and reverse it. Mary is born free of sin, but with the free will to sin and when she is given the choice to accept or reject God, instead of sinning she accepts God and her acceptance puts into motion the event that will save humanity instead of tainting it.

With the acceptance of this doctrine comes a change in who and what Mary was, no longer was she human in quite the same way that the rest of humanity is. This is not the only doctrine that calls into question the humanity of Mary. Another doctrine that was largely debated was the title of Mary as mother of God, mother of Jesus or God bearer. The doctrine that was finally accepted gives her the title of Theotokos, which is commonly translated as mother of God. The debate of these titles was in no way a rejection of Mary as the one who gave birth to God as Jesus, but over the specific terminology of that title and the consequences of one specific title. Mother of Jesus as a title was thought to place too much emphasis on the humanity of Jesus Christ. Mother of God as a title was thought to indirectly give Mary a sort of divinity as the creator of God in Jesus. The title of Theotokos, "derives from the Greek terms: Theos / 'God'; and tiktein / 'to give birth'. Mary is the Theotokos, the one who gave birth to God." (The Mary Page, Faq #19) This was acceptable because, while it can mean mother of god, it doesn't literally translate to such, instead translates directly to mean "the one who gave birth to God" or God Bearer. Such a concern over small slights of terminology seem foolish, since Theotokos ends up meaning Mother of God anyway even if it doesn't translate directly to mean such, however it brings to light an important aspect of Mariology. In the exploration of Mary, theologians are greatly concerned that their thought does not alter her into something she is not, or that any change of view of Mary as a greater understanding of her does not alter Jesus into something that he is not. The consequences of any theological thought are thoroughly contemplated, discussed, argued and studied before made Dogma, indeed many are still debated even after they are made Dogma.

Now that Mary is Immaculate and Theotokos, the doctrine concerning her virginity must be looked at in its many aspects of before, during and after the birth of Jesus Christ. In this doctrine Mary gains yet another title, "The official acts of the Fifth Ecumenical Council held at Constantinople in 553 refer to Mary as *aeiparthenos*," (The Mary Page, Faq #18) or the ever virgin. The virgin status of Mary before giving birth to Jesus is fairly straight forward in its importance. She conceives a child in a miraculous event of divine will. Mary being a virgin emphasizes as well as supports the divine nature of the child Jesus Christ. It is interesting that in many other cases throughout the Bible in which children are conceived miraculously by divine will, this is the only one that involves a virgin birth. The other events involve giving a man and woman the ability to conceive where before they could not. This gives a particular importance to this birth, again giving

support to the providence of God in this miraculous event and the significance of the child and his future as Christ.

An interesting line of thought that is part of the doctrine of Mary as ever virgin is that she remained a virgin throughout the birth of Jesus. In all honesty I could not find the particular details of this line of theological thinking, however it makes sense that for Mary to be *Aeiparthenos*, she would have to remain a virgin throughout the birth. It makes even more sense when backed up by the fact that if she was preserved from the taint of original sin, she would be preserved from the punishments handed to Eve and all women because of the fall, "To the woman he said: 'I shall give you great labour in childbearing; with labour you will bear children. You will desire your husband, but he will be your master.'" (Genesis 3:16) Thus would Mary give birth without pain and remain virginal even during the birth.

Of particular interest to theologians is the continued virginity of Mary even after giving birth to Jesus. Support for the continued virginity of Mary can continue to come from the fact that as preserved from original sin and the punishments for that sin, Mary would not only have a painless birth of Jesus, but would not, "desire your husband, but he will be your master," (Genesis 3:16) and her life could instead be devoted solely to God. Even without the support from the Book of Genesis, it is a demonstration of Mary's devotion to God, as a positive role model for everyone, not just women. The emergence of this theological thought gained continued support as aesthetic celibacy grew in popularity as a demonstration of faith and worship, devoting one's life fully to the Lord. This support continues despite the apparent proof otherwise from scripture when, "his mother and his brothers arrived," (Mark 3:31) to see Jesus. True to the tradition of strong interpretation, this has been explained to mean cousins of Jesus, but not true brothers. However this is where I begin to have serious difficulties in accepting the theological thought of the doctrine of Mary and its consequences. Already Mary has demonstrated a truly incredible faith and devotion to God, more than enough to be a positive influence to people, both women and men, who would be faithful to the Lord. To maintain that Mary was virginal throughout the rest of her life undermines this by placing her abstinence from sex into the spotlight and losing sight of the rest of her devotion, especially since she was married to a faithful husband when sex was not only acceptable, but a part of holy marriage. The support based on her preservation from original sin and its punishments falls somewhat short as well since Mary is not free of sin, merely preserved from the taint of original sin. She had the free will to sin, to fall under the influences of original sin. Especially in this case does the support based on her preservation fall short since there was no choice between sin or devotion at all, for it would not have been a sin to have sex with her husband. The fact that the Bible clearly states that Jesus had brothers, I think the limits of biblical interpretation have seriously been stretched in denying this, should be considered greatly if nothing else. Finally, this extreme form of devotion takes a step into what might be a serious problem with Marian devotion. It makes her slightly less human in that there was no reason for her to continue to be a virgin, to have brought Jesus into the world and watch him give himself for all of humanity, the very humanity that wrongly judged and murdered him, to do all that is already incredibly devout. Having Mary remain celibate doesn't seem to make her anymore devout or faithful. It is difficult to best being the mother of God.

Finally does the last doctrine of Mary unfold, dealing with the end of Mary's life, the assumption. This Dogma states that Mary did not die, but ascended to Heaven like Jesus after his resurrection, suffering not a worldly death. As with the rest of Marian doctrine, there is no direct scriptural demonstration that this happened, however there are arguments of scriptural support such as, "Arise, O Lord, into thy resting place: thou and the ark, which thou hast sanctified," (Psalm

131:8) which doesn't seem to really lend any support, but is explained in that, "Mary was also likened to the Ark of the Covenant; since she contained the Eternal Word in her Womb. Hence, arising to rest with the Lord could allude to Mary's Assumption." (The Mary Page, Yq14) However one of the greatest and at times most annoying aspect of the Bible is the ability to interpret whatever one wishes to find within its passages. Though I find the proposed support weak, I can draw support of the Dogma of the assumption from a continued interpretation of Mary's preservation from original sin and its consequences. Death was the first and harshest punishment handed down to Adam, Eve and all of humanity, but if it is continued to be followed that Mary is preserved from these punishments then she would also be spared a worldly death, instead ascending from earth directly to Heaven.

The doctrine of the assumption does seem to fit with the developed and accepted Dogma of Mary, however once more I have difficulties with the conclusions and consequences of this doctrine. To argue against myself again, the preservation of Mary from original sin was a preservation only and in order to maintain that she would need a savior figure in Christ as all of humanity would, the preservation would not bar her from choosing sin so it is not unreasonable to believe that Mary would be susceptible to the same as the rest of humanity and die a worldly death. The consequences of this doctrine are a second step for Mary as ever virgin, away from a more human nature and starting to get dangerously close to the development of a divine nature.

The Immaculate Conception of Mary, Mary the Theotokos or God Bearer, Mary the Aeiparthenos or Ever Virgin and the Assumption of Mary have all developed into a strong theology made official Dogma of Christianity. It continues to develop further, as theological thought on such an important figure will do. Yet there seem to have developed problems as the four doctrine have come together. The doctrine of Mary portrays a Mary that was free of the taint of original sin, but if she had not been preserved of this taint, would not her acceptance of God's will been even more exceptional in its reversal of the fall of Eve. Instead, it requires that Mary be altered, made different from the rest of humanity in order for her to be able to accept his will. The doctrine continues to alter Mary away from a human nature by proclaiming that she choose a life of celibacy when she was properly engaged in the holy sacrament of matrimony. Finally the doctrine pushes the nature of Mary dangerously close to divine instead of human when she does not die a worldly death, but ascends to Heaven as Jesus did after his resurrection. The doctrine begins with the development of a Mariology that aids in the understanding of a truly inspirational woman who's faith is a affirmation of human possibility. It then goes too far in proclaiming Mary's nature as beyond our own, transcending humanity towards divinity. It doesn't reach divinity, but it comes close and that closeness has influenced a veneration for Mary instead of leaving her to be an inspiration.

The number of visions or apparitions of Mary and the strong devotion to her of some groups does seem to support this conclusion, however before I made my final conclusions end on the paragraph preceding this one, I thought of something that should be taken greatly into consideration, faith. Faith is defined as,

a supernatural gift and is not the necessary outcome of assent to the motives of credibility. No amount of study will win it, no intellectual conviction as to the credibility of revealed religion nor even of the claims of the Church to be our infallible guide in matters of faith, will produce this light in a man's mind. It is the free gift of God. (Catholic Encyclopedia)

Faith is a gift, given freely to all of humanity. Humanity may have the free will to accept or reject this gift, but it is still given to all of Humanity and is required before anyone can find salvation. The theological presentation of faith as a gift greatly alters previous views of the doctrine of Mary.

Although it might at first appear to be a greater achievement for Mary to have accepted God's will without being preserved from the taint of original sin, this would not be an accurate depiction of how God's will works, humanity cannot save themselves. It is God and the gifts that he gives freely to us all that allow us to choose the good, to choose him. God demonstrates this by gifting Mary with this protection from the influences of original sin, in Mary he gives humanity a second chance to choose, unfettered by sin. In reexamining my previous conclusions I found that there was more to take into consideration that I had failed to do. In the teaching of Jesus about the coming of the Kingdom of God it is proclaimed that it is already here, but not yet fully realized. That closeness of the Kingdom of God places an emphasis on spiritual concerns over worldly ones, for the world was soon to be over. Mary's virginity even after the birth of Jesus is a demonstration of this, her marriage on earth was not important since the world would soon be over and what time she had left would be better spent preparing for the Kingdom of God. Finally the assumption is the clearest demonstration of the Kingdom of God in that Mary, someone that is human and in no way divine, is taken into Heaven, body and soul, instead of a worldly death. The Marian Dogma as it was accepted becomes clearly understood for what it represents once these idea's are taken into consideration. Although there remains a veneration for Mary that can be seen as being too close to worship, I do not think that it is so. Mary becomes, when fully understood through the Bible and accepted doctrine, the greatest and most inspirational demonstration of human possibility in history. She is what we all have the potential, through God, to achieve.

#### Endnotes

Pope Pius IX *Ineffabilis Deus*.

The Catholic Encyclopedia Webpage

The Mary Page

The Oxford Study Bible, Oxford University Press, New York.

Genesis 3:16, Psalm 131:8, Luke 1:38 and Mark 3:31.