

Understanding Catholic Teaching on the Blessed Virgin Mary

FAITH BASICS

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by Tom Perna



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*To my parents, Tom and Joyce, for your constant
prayers, guidance, and support. Your encouragement
inspired me to begin writing.*

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Introduction

Many Catholics, without really knowing much about Marian Theology (also known as Mariology), that is, the theology that focuses on the Blessed Virgin Mary, have a devotion to her either through the Holy Rosary or one of the many titles attributed to her over the centuries. If you were to ask many Catholics if they are familiar with the four Marian dogmas, some would say yes, but few would know how to articulate them or why it's important to study Mariology. While not a separate course of study, it is an essential element of the grand scope of Catholic theology.

When we have a better intellectual understanding of Mary, it can catapult us into having a more Marian spirituality, which is a fundamental aspect of the Christian life of prayer. If our disposition

towards God is Marian, as in her *fiat*, her yes to God at the Annunciation, then we will come to a better understanding of God's will for our life. Like Mary, we should align our wills with the will of God. Mary's obedience to God every day of her life is what we must emulate every day of our lives.

On March 25, 1988, the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord, the Congregation for Catholic Education promulgated a letter titled, *The Virgin Mary in Intellectual and Spiritual Formation*. The document provides an overall basis for why studying Marian theology is so important. At the conclusion of the letter, the congregation provides three advantages of studying Marian theology for the formation of one's faith.

The first advantage is the intellectual level, which states, "so that the truth about God, about Man, about Christ and about the Church are understood the more in understanding the 'truth about Mary.'" The second advantage is the spiritual level. It states, "so that such information will help a Christian to welcome the Mother of Jesus and 'bring her into everything that makes up his inner life.'" The third advantage is the pastoral level, which says, "so that the Mother of the Lord may

be strongly felt as a presence of grace among the Christian people.”

The Catholic Church has declared four Marian doctrines *dogmatic*: Mother of God, Perpetual Virginity, Immaculate Conception, and the Assumption into Heaven. So what’s the difference between a dogma and a doctrine?

A dogma is a truth immediately revealed by God that has been *solemnly* defined by the teaching Church and is to be believed by the faithful. A dogma can be defined in two ways. First, the pope can define it with an *ex cathedra* (from the chair) statement, which means that the pope speaks infallibly, without error. Second, an Ecumenical Council can make a statement that is then confirmed by the Holy Father.

A doctrine is a teaching that is theologically certain, for which the magisterium guarantees its truth but *has not solemnly* defined its truth. Even though some doctrines have not been solemnly declared dogmatic by the magisterium, they are still to be believed and followed by the faithful.

With that brief introduction on the importance of studying Marian Theology, as well as understanding the differences between a dogma and a

doctrine, let us turn to the four Marian dogmas: the Mother of God (*Theotokos*), Perpetual Virginity, Immaculate Conception, and the Assumption of Mary into Heaven.

The Relationship Between Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition

On the relationship between Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states,

“Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together, and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing, and move towards the same goal” [*DV* 9]. Each of them makes present and fruitful in the Church the mystery of Christ, who promised to remain

with his own “always, to the close of the age” [Mt 28:20]. (80)

Since I cite Tradition in this booklet often, I would like to briefly explain what Sacred Tradition is and how it relates to Sacred Scripture. The word *tradition* means “to transmit” or “to deliver.” It comes from the Latin term *tradere*, which means to “to hand over an object.” Tradition is the whole outline in its simplest form of salvation history. Tradition is not something that was just developed in the past two thousand years of the Church, but Tradition has been an on-going development from the Old Testament into the New Testament and throughout the history of the Church.

In the light of Christianity, Tradition can be seen as a doctrine and as fellowship. By way of doctrine, Christianity is what God gives to His Son, then what Jesus hands to the Apostles, then what the Apostles give to the churches as they found them—this being first and foremost the Gospel. Within fellowship, Tradition can be described as teaching, since through fellowship we teach others. When we teach, we transmit the truths that Christ

has given to us and we hand down those truths to others. 1 John 1:1–3 states,

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

At the heart of the debate between Catholics and non-Catholics are the disagreements between Scripture and Tradition. Non-Catholics claim that the Holy Scriptures are all you need to understand God's Word. This is known as *sola scriptura* or Scripture alone. An important fact to point out here is that no Scripture verses ever claim this

point. The Scriptures contain what was transmitted orally by the Apostles and then later written down.

Where the non-Catholics completely ignore the Traditions of the Church, Catholics embrace those Traditions, for they understand that the Word of God is both Tradition and Scripture and they work together as the Deposit of Faith. In his book, *The Meaning of Tradition* (New York: Hawthorn, 1964), Yves Congar, O.P. makes this point when he says,

What follows, in fact, will show us that apart from certain most exceptional ecclesiastical traditions—and not always even then!—there is not a single point of belief that the Church holds by tradition alone, without any reference to Scripture; just as there is not a single dogma that is derived from Scripture alone, without being explained by tradition.

Furthermore, the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* states, "Sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the

Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church.”¹

Understanding the Scriptures properly can only be understood by reading them through the eyes of the Church and her Traditions. Just as one needed to enter the Hebrew community and learn their traditions to understand the Pentateuch and other Old Testament Scriptures, so today one must enter the Church and read the Scriptures through her Traditions. The early Church Father Origen, writing early in the third century, states,

The true disciple of Jesus is he who enters the house, that is to say, the Church. He enters it by thinking as the Church does and living as she does; this is how he understands her Word. The key to the Scriptures must be received from the tradition of the Church, as from the Lord himself.

The Catholic Church is the “proprietor” of the Scriptures since they belong to her. It is only through the Catholic Church where the fullness of truth

1. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), 10.

can be guaranteed. It is through the community of Christians and the teaching office of the Church, the magisterium by way of Apostolic Succession, who transmits the truths given by Christ as they were handed down to the apostles. *Dei Verbum* states,

The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. (10)

Reading the Scriptures alone, apart from Tradition, does not explain them explicitly. When non-Catholics take away Tradition and focus solely on the Scriptures, they are destroying the harmony that exists between the two. It would be like dividing a drum and bugle corps. Removing the bugles from the band would allow you to hear music, but it would not be complete unless the bugles were providing the harmony for the drums. The two together are complete and sound. In the same

manner, Congar says, “Tradition creates a totality, a harmony, a synthesis. It lives by and teaches others to live by the comprehensive spirit of God’s plan, from which unfolds and develops the whole structure of the economy . . .”

In the end, we need to completely understand the Word of God as God intended. We must see the clear relationship that exists between Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. As the written words of Sacred Scripture remain permanent, it is the living Tradition that enables the Church to grow through the centuries. As Pope Benedict XVI says, “Ultimately, it is the living Tradition of the Church which makes us adequately understand sacred scripture as the word of God.”²

2. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI, *The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church Verbum Domini* (September 30, 2010), 17.

Mary, the Mother of God

The Nestorian Heresy

The genesis of the Nestorian heresy begins with Nestorius, Bishop of Constantinople. Nestorius was a well-educated monk known for his great preaching ability. He was trained in Antioch, a city fundamental in the organic growth of the Catholic Church in the early centuries. Because of Nestorius' great skills as an orator, Emperor Theodosius II, in AD 428, elevated him to the See of Constantinople. Nestorius was fifty years old.

As Nestorius begins his new role as bishop, he speaks to the emperor about the routing of the many heresies that still remained in the city of Constantinople. He also writes to Pope Celestine I about the many challenges he faced. In one of his

letters to the pope, Nestorius speaks of this particular issue that has arisen among good orthodox Catholics, monks, and the clergy in Constantinople: the “meaning of the belief that Christ is God.”

In his letters to Celestine I, Nestorius writes about how the people don’t properly understand the great mystery that Christ is equally God and man. He says that the people think the humanity of Christ was divine, and that they believe God was both born and buried. He continues to say that the people profess that Mary, the ever virgin who brought God forth, is the Mother of God, the Greek term *Theotokos*.

Simply, the Nestorian Heresy claimed that Jesus Christ was two separate persons, and not one person with two natures: divine and human (which would become the doctrine known as the *Hypostatic Union*). Nestorius believed that Christ was only a human person who was joined to the divine person (Son of God) and Mary was only the mother of Christ’s human person. Nestorius’ incorrect Christological understanding led him to an incorrect understanding of proper titles for Mary. Nestorius claimed that we shouldn’t call Mary the

Theotokos, God-Bearer, but rather *Christotokos*, bearer of the human person of Jesus Christ. A correct understanding of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ leads to a correct understanding of the motherhood of Mary. Correct Christology safeguards proper Marian titles.

The Church Answers

As Nestorius was prophesying his false doctrine, St. Cyril of Alexandria became aware of it and engaged him in a series of correspondence. The exchange of those letters did nothing to change the mind of Nestorius and actually led to some serious malcontent between the two men. These battles with the pen were not just about the right doctrine of the Church, but proved to be competitive because of the two rivaling patriarchal sees.

After minor gatherings in the West (St. Cyril requested assistance from Pope Celestine I) and minor gatherings in the East (Nestorius went to Emperor Theodosius II to plead his case) did nothing to remedy the false doctrine that clearly attacked the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and the

motherhood of Mary, a council was convened in the city of Ephesus.

Leading the charge for the Church at the Council of Ephesus was St. Cyril of Alexandria. Educated in the city of his name, St. Cyril lived as a monk for some time in the desert before serving as bishop for thirty-two years in Alexandria. He was considered a holy terror while his holiness remained hidden. He was forceful, dominating, and impatient. He had some enemies because of his personality, but as he gained in age and wisdom, Cyril learned to control his temper, and when needed, he showed that he could make concessions for the good of the Church.

Although Pope Celestine would not attend the council in Ephesus, he sent legates, papal diplomats, in his stead to hold fast to the position of St. Cyril and to condemn Nestorius' teachings.

A Dogma Declared

The Council of Ephesus began on Pentecost Sunday in the year AD 431. Although the papal legates were still en route from Rome, and other

bishops were not in attendance, St. Cyril opened the council in the Church of Saint Mary where he assumed the executive position. Nestorius and his supporters protested, refusing to attend this council, and convened their own anti-council.

As the Council of Ephesus proceeded, the letters of both St. Cyril and Nestorius were read aloud. In the end, all in attendance unanimously condemned the false doctrines professed by Nestorius. Following the lead of and in union with St. Cyril of Alexandria, the bishops at Ephesus stated,

If anyone does not confess that the Emmanuel [Christ] in truth is God and that on this account the Holy Virgin is the Mother of God [Theotokos] in as much as she gave birth to the Word of God made flesh . . . let him be anathema.

As a result, Nestorius was immediately excommunicated and unseated from his see as Patriarch of Constantinople. On June 22, as the bishops returned to their quarters for the night, the Catholic faithful living in Ephesus gathered and supported

the decision with great zeal, shouting: “Praised be the *Theotokos*.”

The proceedings of this council were a bit irregular. The council would not officially close until the late summer months of AD 431, and the papal legates would not arrive until after the council had declared its teaching. Once the papal legates did arrive, however, the emperor had both St. Cyril and Nestorius incarcerated while the situation was sorted out. In the end, the Church would allow the statements and doctrines declared to stand. The Council of Ephesus defined three important teachings of the Church. First, it articulated the dogma of the *Theotokos* (God-Bearer); second, it stated that the two natures of Jesus Christ, human and divine, cannot be separated but are united in *one divine person*; and third, the council not only defined Christology, that is to say *who Christ is*, but also took an important step in clarifying Marian theology (referred to today as Mariology).

Motherhood Defined

The doctrine that teaches Mary as the Mother of God was solemnly declared a dogma at the Council of Ephesus. The motherhood of Mary is an important aspect and one that some of the early Church Fathers focused on in their writings. So why is motherhood so important?

A woman, by an act of love, gives her offspring the exact nature that she holds. This gift is given by conception, gestation, and birth. The child is the fruit of this process, not just a body. The gift of motherhood refers to the same nature given to the child and also includes the complete human person. In the case of Mary and Jesus, Mary did not give Jesus His divine personhood and nature, since they had always existed. Mary did give Jesus His indistinguishable human nature that was equal to her own. Through the hypostatic union, Jesus' divine and human will are united as one. Mary truly gave birth to Jesus who is truly human and truly divine. Mary gave to Jesus "an immaculate human nature."

The key to her motherhood is, simply, that the human nature of Jesus is inseparably connected to

His divine nature. Mary gave to Jesus a nature of her own that is identical. Mary gave birth to a Son who is truly God, and therefore Mary is rightly called the Mother of God.

The Mother of God in Sacred Scripture

The Sacred Scriptures reveal Mary's role as the Mother of God in three places: Luke 1:31–35; 43 and Galatians 4:4. Let us examine each one carefully.

In the Gospel of St. Luke, at the Annunciation of Our Lord, the Archangel Gabriel appears to Mary and professes, “Behold, you shall conceive in your womb and shall bring forth a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. . . . therefore, the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.” The divine message from the heavenly Father delivered by Gabriel states two points. First, Mary, because of her Immaculate Conception, has been prepared by God to become the mother of Jesus; and second, the true and only son of God is Jesus. Understanding these two points, we come to the conclusion that

if Jesus Christ is God, and Mary is the mother of Jesus Christ, therefore Mary is the Mother of God. Being that Jesus is the true and only Son of God, and Mary is the *mother of Jesus* (frequently stated in the Scriptures: cf. Mt 2:13, 20; Jn 2:1, 3; Acts 1:14), we conclude that the Mother of God is Mary.

The second Scripture verse that focuses on Mary as the Mother of God is Luke 1:43, the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. We see Mary's cousin Elizabeth say the words, "mother of my Lord." This title used by Elizabeth to describe Mary is united to the dual mysteries of Jesus' divinity and the divine maternity of Mary. The term "Lord" in this context and in verse 45 always means God. Therefore, when Elizabeth says "mother of my Lord," she knows that Mary is the Mother of God.

The third Scripture verse that speaks of Mary as the Mother of God is found in St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians. In his letter, St. Paul confesses, "When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman" (4:4). St. Paul is saying that since Mary gave birth, and her flesh, to the Son of God, she can rightly be called the Mother of God.

The Mother of God in Sacred Tradition

Not only do the Sacred Scriptures reveal Mary as the Mother of God, but Sacred Tradition also sheds light on this first important dogma. The Apostles' Creed is a first-century doctrinal creed that predates the Nicene-Constantinople Creed (AD 325–381) and is commonly believed to hail from the Apostles themselves; hence its name, “the Apostles' Creed.” This creed states that the early Church's faith believes in “Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.”

Furthermore, beginning with St. Irenaeus of Lyons in the middle of the second century, many early Church Fathers such as Origen, St. Athanasius of Alexandria, St. Cyril of Alexandria, St. Augustine of Hippo, Pope St. Gregory the Great, St. Peter Chrysologus, and many others declared in their writings that Mary is the Mother of God. The Church was aided in large part by these writings in defining what she believed during the early years of Christianity.

Decades before the Council of Ephesus, St. Athanasius of Alexandria, in his document *On Virginity*, uses the term *Theotokos* and states, “Christ being God, became man for our sake and was born of Mary, Mother of God, to free us from the devil’s power.” In *Against the Arians*, he also states, “It is for our sake that Christ became man, taking flesh from the Virgin Mary, Mother of God.”

From his *Fourth Homily at Ephesus against Nestorius* (ca. 428–431), St. Cyril of Alexandria says,

Hail, we say, O holy and mystic Trinity, who have called us together in this church dedicated to Mary, Mother of God. We hail you, O Mary Mother of God, venerable treasure of the entire world, inextinguishable lamp, crown of virginity, scepter of orthodoxy, imperishable temple, container of him who cannot be contained, Mother and Virgin, through whom it is said in the holy Gospels: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (Mt 21:9).

St. John Cassian responds to Nestorius in his *Seven Books on the Incarnation of the Lord* (ca. 420–429), and says,

And so you say, O heretic, whoever you may be, who deny that God was born of the Virgin, that Mary the Mother of God of our Lord Jesus Christ ought not to be called *Theotokos*, i.e., Mother of God, but *Christotokos*, i.e., only the Mother of Christ, not of God. For no one, you say, brings forth what is anterior in time. And of this utterly foolish argument whereby you think that the birth of God can be understood by carnal minds, and fancy that the mystery of His Majesty can be accounted for by human reasoning, we will, if God permits, say something later on. In the meanwhile we will now prove by Divine testimonies that Christ is God, and that Mary is the Mother of God.

Paragraph 495 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church quoting the Sacred Scriptures and the

Council of Ephesus states,

Called in the Gospels the “mother of Jesus,” Mary is acclaimed by Elizabeth, at the prompting of the Spirit and even before the birth of her son, as “the mother of my Lord” [Lk 1:43; Jn 2:1; 19:25; cf. Mt 13:55; et al]. In fact, the one whom she conceived as man by the Holy Spirit, who truly became her Son according to the flesh, was none other than the Father’s eternal Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Hence the Church confesses that Mary is truly “Mother of God” (*Theo-tokos*) [Council of Ephesus (431): DS 251].

Mary, The Perpetual Virgin

The Definition

The second dogma of the Blessed Virgin Mary defined by the Catholic Church is her perpetual virginity. Many of the early Church Fathers, which we will see shortly, without question, understood and taught this dogma to be truth since the early days of the Church. It was also affirmed by papal and council documents.

The dogma of the Perpetual Virginity of Mary professes that she was a virgin before the birth of Christ (*ante partum*), during the birth of Christ (*in partu*), and after the birth of Christ (*post partum*). This dogma was declared at the Lateran Synod in

AD 649 by Pope Saint Martin I. As an article of the faith, the Holy Father professed, “The blessed ever-virginal and immaculate Mary conceived, without seed, by the Holy Spirit, and without the loss of integrity brought Him forth, and after His birth preserved her virginity inviolate.”

Virgin Before the Birth of Christ in Sacred Scripture

The first segment of the dogma, Mary as virgin before the birth of Christ, is clearly seen in the Sacred Scriptures in two places. The first is in the Old Testament, Isaiah 7:14, and the second place is in a number of verses in the first chapter of the Gospel of St. Luke.

Isaiah 7:14 states: “Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign. Behold a [“the” in some translations] virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel.” In the Hebrew language, the word *virgin* (the Hebrew *almah*) can be translated into the word *maiden* (unmarried woman) as well, but the term *maiden* always has a virginal context to it. In the Septuagint

(Greek translation of the Old Testament), the word *parthenos* can only mean virgin. In the end, the words *almah*, *virgin*, and *maiden* overlap one another in their meaning. The two important words in this Scripture verse are *bearing* and *conceiving* since they are the same words that St. Luke uses to explain Mary's virginity in his Gospel.

Although this Scripture passage from Isaiah is fulfilled with the birth of Jesus Christ in chapter 1 of St. Matthew's account, it is St. Luke's account that clearly defines for us the virgin *bearing* and *conceiving* Emmanuel—"God with us"—with the exchange of the Annunciation between Mary and the angel Gabriel. Now let us examine the dialogue of Scripture verses in the New Testament that fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah: Luke 1:26–27, 31, and 35.

Luke 1:26–27 says, "In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary." As the conversation continues between Mary and Gabriel, the virginity of Mary is confirmed again in Luke 1:31 as the angel

says, “You will conceive in your womb and bear a Son.” Mary responds not with doubt but with perplexity since she does not fully understand how she will conceive: “How will this be since I know not man?” (Lk 1:34). To answer her, Gabriel then says, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (Lk 1:35).

Luke 1:35 means that Jesus’ conception within the womb of Mary (different than “to receive in her womb” or “to have in her womb” by way of a man giving himself to the woman) was a supernatural conception. This conception is the result of God’s work within Mary through the Holy Spirit. It is the same term used in Genesis 40:35 when Yahweh “overshadowed” the tabernacle and God’s presence was in Israel. Mary is the new tabernacle, the New Ark of the Covenant, for in her womb is the presence of God.

Virgin Before the Birth of Christ in Sacred Tradition

Now that we have seen the places in the Sacred Scriptures where the virginity of Mary before the

birth of Christ is written, let us turn to Sacred Tradition. The first source of Tradition that mentions Mary's virginity before the birth of Christ is the Apostles' Creed. We also find extensive writings by nearly every early Church Father about Mary's virginity. That's how important this teaching was to the early Church.

The Apostles' Creed professes that Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and *born of the Virgin Mary*. Since it is one of the earliest creeds of the Church, we can understand that the Apostles of Jesus knew this to be true and even taught it orally to the early Christians.

The second source of Tradition that focuses on Mary's virginity before the birth of Christ is the many writings of the early Church Fathers. Although we could quote nearly all of the Fathers, let us read the words of St. Hippolytus of Rome, St. John Chrysostom, and Pope St. Leo the Great.

Focusing on the mystery of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, St. Hippolytus of Rome (early third century) asks the Virgin Mary herself to shed light on it:

Tell me, O blessed Mary, whom did you

conceive in your virginal womb? Yes, even from the firstborn of God, who came down from heaven into you and was formed, the firstborn of man, in your womb, so that the firstborn Word of God might appear united with the firstborn of man. (*Eranistes*, Dialogue 1)

Writing on the Old Testament Scripture verse from Isaiah 7:14, in his *Commentary on Isaiah* (late fourth to early fifth century), St. John Chrysostom says,

If she had not been a virgin, there would have been no sign, since a sign has to be something out of the ordinary and beyond the laws of nature, something new and unexpected, something that makes an impression on those who see it and hear of it. That is why it is called a sign, because it stands out . . . therefore, in the beginning of his speech, he did not say simply: Behold, a virgin, but: Behold, *the* Virgin. By adding the article, he indicates a unique virgin, distinct from all the others.

In number 22:2 of his *Sermons*, Pope St. Leo the Great (mid fifth century) speaks about how Christ's nativity is unique when he says,

And by a new nativity [Christ] was begotten, conceived by a Virgin, born of a Virgin, without paternal desire, without injury to the mother's chastity. . . . The origin is different but the nature like: not by intercourse with man but by the power of God was it brought about: for a Virgin conceived, a Virgin bare, and a Virgin she remained.

Paragraph 497 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church states,

The gospel accounts understand the virginal conception of Jesus as a divine work that surpasses all human understanding and possibility [cf. Mt 1:18–25; Lk 1:26–38]: “That which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit,” said the angel to Joseph about Mary his fiancée [Mt 1:20]. The Church sees there the fulfillment of the divine

promise given through prophet Isaiah:
“Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son.” (Also see 496 and 498)

In the above Scripture reference to Matthew 1:20, the term translated as “fiancée” comes from the original Latin *sponsam*, meaning wife, bride, betrothed. Due to the inherent limitations of the English language, and translations in general, an explanation is in order regarding the use of the word “fiancée.” *Sponsam* is the past participle of *sponso* (to become betrothed/engaged to marry). In short, the modern English word “betrothed” does not carry the same definition that it did in the ancient Jewish vocabulary and culture. As Pope St. John Paul II explains in *Redemptoris Custos* 18: “According to Jewish custom, marriage took place in two stages: first, the legal, or true marriage was celebrated [i.e. “the betrothal”], and then, only after a certain period of time, the husband brought the wife into his own house. Thus, before he lived with Mary, Joseph was already her ‘husband.’ . . . Addressing Joseph through the words of the angel, God speaks to him as the husband of the Virgin of Nazareth. What took

place in her through the power of the Holy Spirit also confirmed in a special way the marriage bond which already existed between Joseph and Mary. God's messenger was clear in what he said to Joseph: 'Do not fear to take Mary your wife into your home.'"

Virgin During the Birth of Christ in Sacred Scripture

The definition given to us by Pope St. Martin I during this part of the dogma specifically speaks about the event, the appointed time of history, where the Blessed Virgin Mary gave birth to Jesus Christ. At this point, when heaven and earth unite at the Nativity in Bethlehem, without removing Mary's physical virginity, Jesus left the womb of Mary. Through the power of the Almighty God, Jesus Christ exited the womb of Mary without physically violating her seal of virginity (*virginitas in partu*).

As light passes through glass without damaging the glass, so too did our Lord Jesus Christ pass through the birth canal of his mother, the Virgin Mary, without violating her perfect body. This act by God reveals to the world that Mary's virginity is

the perfect sign of her interior and exterior virginity, a pure body and soul. The Church has taught this from its earliest centuries.

The second part of this dogma is in reference to Mary's physical virginity during the birth of Christ. Before examining the references of Sacred Tradition as we did with the first part of this dogma, let us first examine the Sacred Scriptures yet again.

Like the first part of the dogma, the Scripture verse that specifically speaks about Mary's virginity is from Isaiah 7:14. This prophecy by one of the major prophets in the Old Testament speaks of a virgin not only conceiving a child, but also bearing a son: "Behold a virgin shall conceive, and *bear* a son." Isaiah 7:14 not only speaks of the conception by a virgin, but also speaks to the actual *birth* itself.

Virgin During the Birth of Christ in Sacred Tradition

Since the Catholic Church teaches that Mary's virginity remained perfectly intact even during the birth of Christ, let us briefly look at some of the early Church Fathers who taught this doctrine from the

early centuries. For this section we will read from St. Augustine of Hippo, St. Peter Chrysologus, and St. John Damascus.

In a letter, St. Augustine writes about the supreme power of God and our lack of knowledge on the virginal birth of Christ, stating:

That very greatness of His power, which feels no narrowness in narrow quarters, enriched the Virgin's womb, not by an externally caused but by an intrinsic child-birth. . . . That same power brought forth the body of the infant from the inviolate virginal womb of the mother, as afterward the Body of the Man penetrated closed doors. . . . Let us grant that God can do something which we confess we cannot fathom. In such matters the whole explanation of the deed is in the power of the doer. (*Letters* [pre-AD 430], no. 317)

Speaking in a sermon about the difference between the virginal birth of Christ and the birth of children through other women, "the golden-worded"

Church Father, St. Peter Chrysologus states,

Where are they who think that the Virgin's conception and giving birth to her child are to be likened to those of other women? For, this latter case is one of the earth, and the Virgin's is one from heaven. The one is a case of divine power; the other of human weakness . . . the blood was still, and the flesh astonished; her members were put at rest, and her entire womb was quiescent during the visit of the Heavenly One. . . . The Virgin conceives, the Virgin brings forth her child, and she remains a virgin. (*Sermons* [pre-AD 450], no. 117)

In his book, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* (early to mid-eighth century), an Eastern Church Father, St. John Damascus, writes about Mary's virginity being intact before and during the birth of Christ:

But just as He who was conceived kept her who conceived still virgin, in like manner also He who was born preserved her virginity

intact, only passing through her and keeping her closed. . . . For it was not impossible for Him to have come by this gate, without injuring her seal in any way. The ever-virgin One thus remains even after the birth still virgin, having never at any time up till death consorted with a man. (Book 4, Chap. 14)

Over the course of the centuries, popes, ecumenical councils, and catechisms have continued to have the same continuity of teaching we see with the early Church Fathers on this part of the dogma. Bl. Pius XII writes about the miraculous birth of Jesus Christ in his encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*, stating: “within her virginal womb Christ our Lord already bore the exalted title of Head of the Church; in a marvelous birth she brought Him forth as the source of all supernatural life.”

In chapter 8 in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, from the Second Vatican Council, the Council Fathers professed, “this union of the mother with the Son in the work of salvation is made manifest from the time of Christ’s virginal conception . . . then also at the

birth of Our Lord, *who did not diminish his mother's integrity but sanctified it*" (no. 57, emphasis added).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church in paragraph 499 professes, "The deepening of faith in the virginal motherhood led the Church to confess Mary's real and perpetual virginity even in the act of giving birth to the Son of God made man [cf. DS 291; 294; 427; 442; 503; 571; 1880]."

Virgin After the Birth of Christ in Sacred Scripture

Now that we have examined the first two parts of this dogma, the virginity of Mary *before* and *during* the birth of Christ, let us turn to the final and third part, the virginity of Mary *after* the birth of Christ. This part of the dogma specifically speaks of the earthly life of the Blessed Virgin where she did not have any sexual relations with St. Joseph, even following the birth of Jesus Christ.

Let's first examine this teaching in the Sacred Scriptures. One Scripture verse implicitly references that Mary was a virgin *after* the birth of Christ. In her amazement and awe she asks the

angel Gabriel this question: “How will this be since I know not man?” (Lk 1:34).

We have a clear understanding that Mary is a virgin from the words of Gabriel in Luke 1:26–27, 31, and 34. Questioning the Angel, Mary uses the word “know” in reference to sexual relations. The Greek translation of “I do not know man” is referencing Mary’s *virginal status* rather than her *marital status*. Mary is a virgin *now* and desires to remain one in the *future*. She is also wondering how God will bless her with a son while still remaining a virgin. Mary’s betrothal to St. Joseph was a marriage that was legally bound by Jewish law; her only worry was that even in marriage she wanted to remain a virgin. And, as we’ll see below, two early Church Fathers believed that Mary took a lifelong vow of virginity when she was a young girl.

Virgin After the Birth of Christ in Sacred Tradition

Although this entire dogma was passionately defended by many of the early Church Fathers when non-believers denied this teaching, it was this

part of the dogma that was defended the most. The reason why the Church Fathers fought so much for this part is because for all eternity, Mary's virginity would protect the divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ. She would safeguard the importance of the Incarnation, and it would define her as the perfect example of discipleship, selfless love, and immaculate model of the Church.

In Sacred Tradition, we read the robust words of St. Ephraem, St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, and many others who defended Mary's virginity, but it was specifically St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Augustine of Hippo who taught that Mary, as a young girl, took a lifelong vow of virginity and would remain faithful to keeping that vow with God.

St. Gregory of Nyssa (fourth century), the Cappadocian Father and first to claim that Mary took a vow of virginity, says,

What is Mary's response? Listen to the voice of the pure Virgin. The angel brings the glad tidings of childbearing, but she is concerned with virginity and holds that her virginity should come before the angelic

message. She does not refuse to believe the angel; neither does she move away from her convictions. She says: I have given up any contact with man . . .

For if Joseph had taken her to be his wife, for the purpose of having children, why would she have wondered at the announcement of maternity, since she herself would have accepted becoming a mother according to law of nature?

But just as it was necessary to guard the body consecrated to God as an untouched and holy offering, for this reason, she states, even if you are an angel come down from heaven and even if this phenomenon is beyond man's abilities, yet it is impossible for me to know man. How shall I become a mother without [knowing] man? For though I consider Joseph to be my husband, still I do not know man. (*On the Holy Generation of Christ*, 5)

It wasn't just the "eastern lung" of the Church who believed Mary took a vow of virginity, but

we also read words from the western lung of the Church, in the Bishop of Hippo, St. Augustine. He thinks that if Mary was going to lead a normal life where she would give up her virginity to her husband in marriage, the amazing question she asks would have never entered her mind nor left her lips:

Because she had made a vow of virginity and her husband did not have to be the thief of her modesty instead of its guardian (and yet her husband was not its guardian, since it was God who guarded it; her husband was only the witness of her virginal chastity, so that her pregnancy would not be considered the result of adultery), when the angel brought her the news, she said: "How can this be, since I do not know man?" (Lk 1:34). Had she intended to know man, she would not have been amazed. Her amazement is a sign of the vow. (*Sermons* 225, 2)

Confirming the teaching of the Fifth Ecumenical Council that took place in Constantinople in 553, also known as the Second Council of Constantinople,

and *Lumen Gentium* of the Second Vatican Council, the Catechism states,

The deepening of faith in the virginal motherhood led the Church to confess Mary's real and perpetual virginity even in the act of giving birth to the Son of God made man [cf. DS 291; 294; 427; 442; 503; 571; 1880]. In fact, Christ's birth "did not diminish his mother's virginal integrity but sanctified it" [LG 57]. And so the liturgy of the Church celebrates Mary as *Aeiparthenos*, the "Ever-Virgin" [cf. LG 52]. (499; see also 500–507)

The dogma of the Perpetual Virginity of the Blessed Virgin Mary is supported in both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. Even the Protestant Reformers such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, and Ulrich Zwingli believed in Mary's perpetual virginity. The individuals who denied it were the same heretics who taught that Jesus was not divine. The most famous are the followers of Arius, known as Arians, and the Ebionites who

also claimed this false teaching, as do the rationalists of today.

The Three Most Common Objections to Mary as Perpetual Virgin

Objection #1: The Brethren of the Lord.

Since there is no word in the ancient Hebrew language for *cousin*, the term *ab* in Hebrew or *adelphos* in Greek are the terms used when a brother relationship cannot be established. These two terms can be translated into brother, cousin, near relative, and kinsmen. In the Scriptures, the word “brother” does not always mean two male siblings having the same parents. In Genesis 13:8, Abraham refers to Lot as his “brother,” but in regards to familial relationships Lot was his nephew. Similarly, we can say to each other, “we brothers and sisters in Christ,” although this does not imply that we are all blood related. When Jesus asks who are His mother and brothers [brethren] (Mt 12:46–50), He is speaking in a spiritual sense, not a literal sense.

Furthermore, if Mary had other sons after Jesus, it would have been the norm for them to have

taken custody and care of her after Jesus was crucified on the Cross, not St. John the Apostle (Jn 19:26–27). Given the important role of family in the Hebrew culture, it's highly unlikely that our Lord would have entrusted His mother to someone not blood related.

Objection #2: Matthew 1:25—"Knew her not until."

In the original Greek, "until" is translated with the term *heos*, which implies that sexual relations between Joseph and Mary did not happen prior (before Jesus' birth) or thereafter (after Jesus' birth). This phrase is also translated as "to" or "till" to show a point of time, without it changing in the future. St. Matthew is making the point that Joseph did not have anything do with Mary's pregnancy *before* the birth of Jesus. Simply because something is said not to have occurred *before* a specific point in time, does not necessarily mean that it occurred *after* that point in time. It is not intended to say anything about the future beyond that point. A couple Scripture examples should suffice: In 2 Samuel 6:23, are we to understand that Michal had

children after she died? “And Michal the daughter of Saul had no child to [until] the day of her death.” Or in 1 Timothy 4:13, are we to understand that Timothy is to stop teaching after Paul arrives? “Till [until] I come, attend to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching, to teaching.”

Objection #3: Mary and Joseph are not truly married.

The objection that Mary and Joseph were not married is based on an erroneous idea of marriage and canon law. The essence of marriage is the lifetime vow of fidelity to Christ. According to canon law, consent (the vows) is what makes it a marriage. The gift of body is the expression of the vow, but not the essence of the vow. Mary and Joseph are truly married because they give themselves as total gift to one another, but not bodily. Over the centuries the Church has allowed for certain spiritual marriages; however, they are very rare. Even in the Sacred Scriptures we have examples of couples renouncing their marital relations at the request of God (Ex 19:5; 1 Sam 21:5; 1 Cor 7:5).

The Immaculate Conception

Before the Papal Definition

While the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was not solemnly declared until the middle of the nineteenth century, it has been a doctrine believed by the faithful of the Church going back to the early Church Fathers. Although theologians and even some of the doctors of the Church, including St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bernard of Clairvaux, denied this teaching, it does not take away from the beauty and theological balance that this dogma brings to the life of the Catholic Church.

In his work, *On the Immaculate Conception*,

published four years before the dogma would be solemnly declared, the French Benedictine Dom Prosper Guéranger states,

Thus, then, today we believe in Mary's Immaculate Conception because the various methods of theology united to demonstrate the truth towards which the Catholic conviction already inclines itself. . . . On the day when this truth is defined as a dogma of faith we shall believe it on the word of God transmitted by the Church, and it would be then that, *with complete freedom*, we would render Mary, on this point, the highest honour it could ever be in our power to offer her. (Chap. 7)

The Papal Definition

For many years the Church's magisterium discussed the points that some had against this doctrine. After corresponding with the bishops of the world, and with the great effort and works from Bl. Dons Scotus (d. 1308), on December 8, 1854

Bl. Pope Pius IX declared in *Ineffabilis Deus*,

Wherefore, in humility and fasting, we unceasingly offered our private prayers as well as the public prayers of the Church to God the Father through his Son, that he would deign to direct and strengthen our mind by the power of the Holy Spirit. In like manner did we implore the help of the entire heavenly host as we ardently invoked the Paraclete. Accordingly, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, for the honor of the Holy and undivided Trinity, for the glory and adornment of the Virgin Mother of God, for the exaltation of the Catholic Faith, and for the furtherance of the Catholic religion, by the authority of Jesus Christ our Lord, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by our own: **We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God,**

in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful. (Emphasis added)

In this statement from Pius IX, there are four detailed points that are fundamental to understanding Mary's Immaculate Conception: from the very moment of her conception, in the womb of her mother, Mary's soul was created, and infused into her own body. Her soul was then preserved from the corruption of original sin, which allowed her to enter the human race in a state of perfection, complete with sanctifying grace.

With the fall of Adam and Eve, original sin enters the world and becomes a generational sin for all of humanity, except for the Virgin Mary. The sanctifying grace that was intended for all souls, which we don't receive at our conception, was preserved and given to Mary at her conception. For us, the Sacrament of Baptism, given to us by Jesus Christ, restores our life and fills us with God's grace.

According to Pius IX, the uniqueness of Mary's Immaculate Conception, given by God to her alone, is "a singular privilege." In order for Mary to be the God-Bearer (*Theotokos*), she who bore God Himself in her womb, she had to be free from all sin and the effects of sin. Her perfected nature also allowed her to give Jesus an immaculate nature. Since God is perfect and without sin, He needed a perfect and immaculate vessel to be born into this world as man. That immaculate vessel is Mary.

Three Primary Gifts Given to Mary

Since Mary does not have original sin, she holds on to the natural gifts, the preternatural gifts, and the supernatural gift given to Adam and Eve by God. Where these gifts are imperfect for us, since we are conceived with original sin, these gifts remained perfect and complete with Mary. The natural gifts are human intellect, will, body, and soul. The preternatural gifts are *integrity*, perfect harmony between emotion and reason; *infused knowledge*, supernatural knowledge of God's

providence, that is, seeing God's hand at work in life, history, the world; and *natural immortality of the body*, no material corruption of the body at death. The supernatural gift is sanctifying grace in the original state of perfection.

Blessed Duns Scotus and Preservative Redemption

Mary is conceived and receives sanctifying grace in view of the foreseen merits of Jesus Christ on the Cross. Like all human beings, Mary needed to be saved; however, she was saved in a higher fashion than any other human being.

To answer the scholastic theologians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, who had difficulties understanding Mary's Immaculate Conception in light of Jesus Christ's universal redemption as written by St. Paul in Romans 5 (all humanity must be saved because of original sin), Bl. Duns Scotus developed the principle of "preservative redemption."

Preservative redemption is the idea that Mary's Immaculate Conception, which kept her free from

original sin, was a gift from God that provided graces from the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the Cross. Because of the merits performed by Jesus on the Cross, Mary was saved and conceived with sanctifying grace. Since God is outside of time, He has the power to give the graces needed to redeem one person in different points of history. This is what God did for Mary at her conception.

Where our souls are tainted with original sin at our conception, Mary, by her Immaculate Conception, was preserved from receiving that sin through the application of sanctifying grace given by God through Jesus Christ on Golgotha. In reality, Mary received a higher form of redemption from her Son. Where we are redeemed after receiving the sacramental grace of Baptism, Mary was saved and redeemed at her conception before original sin could affect her soul. It can be said that Mary owed more to the redemption of Jesus Christ than anyone else. As Mary stood at the Cross watching her Son die, she received the merits of His actions at the point of her conception before the effects of original sin could occur.

The Immaculate Conception in Sacred Scripture

Now that we have a primary understanding of the definition of the Immaculate Conception, let us turn to understanding the scriptural teachings of the dogma. There are two Scripture verses that speak directly to Mary's Immaculate Conception. The primary verse is Genesis 3:15 and the secondary verse is Luke 1:28.

Genesis 3:15 says, "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." In this Scripture verse, God is addressing the serpent (*nahash*, the Hebrew term for dragon). We read that there will be complete "enmity" or separation between the serpent and the woman, between the seed of the serpent and her seed. She and her seed will crush the head of the serpent with their heel.

To understand this passage a little better, the serpent is Satan; the seed of the serpent is sin, fallen humanity, and the fallen angels who chose to reject God. The seed of the woman is Jesus Christ,

He who conquers all sin, and the woman is Mary. We see this foreshadowed in Eve in Genesis 3:16. On the first day of the disaster, we already see God planning to redeem us. Genesis 3:15 is known as the *Protoevangelium* (First Gospel). It is here, for the first time, that we hear the Good News of God's saving power and redemption.

In his divine will, God gives Mary—as the New Eve—complete separation (enmity) from the woman (Eve) and Satan. Just as Jesus is completely opposed to all sin, so does Mary receive that very same opposition to Satan and all his evil wants. With this enmity that she receives from God, Mary never endures the effects of original sin. The seed that the woman will give birth to in the future will triumph over sin and death. This future woman will be completely free from sin. She will be “immaculate.”

The secondary verse of the Immaculate Conception is Luke 1:28: “And he came to her and said, ‘Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you.’” In this passage we don't see Mary's name used, but instead we see the angel address Mary with the title “full of grace.” As it is in the Scriptures, a person's

name is not just their identification, but it represents their mission to the world. Here, in Luke 1:28, it is no different with Mary. The term “full of grace” speaks directly to the very nature and mission of Mary.

In God’s divine economy, it was planned that Mary would be the Mother of God, but even before that role is established we see the angel addressing her as “full of grace.” This title speaks directly to her immaculate nature that was given to her when she was conceived in the womb of her mother. Without a perfect nature, she would not have been able to bring forth Jesus Christ untainted from her womb.

When speaking to Mary, the Angelic Messenger uses the term and past participle, *ke-charit[ō]men[ē]*, “having-been-graced-one.” It is stating the action was completed in the past but with a relevance to the present, such as: you who have been perfected in grace or you who have been transformed in grace. It is an action completed in the past but relevant to the present. The angel is using the term as a name for Mary and the event that has happened to Mary in the past (her Immaculate Conception). Pope St. John Paul II said that Mary

is full of Grace called upon to the mission of redemption. Where Eve brought death; Mary, the New Eve, brings life.

The Immaculate Conception in Sacred Tradition

As we have seen in the previous dogmas, from the earliest days of the Church the Church Fathers played an integral role in explaining Marian theology. Throughout the writings of the Patristic Fathers, we see them use a variety of terms to describe Mary's immaculate nature: "purer than the angels," "all holy," "most innocent," "all together without sin," and others.

In showing Mary's immaculate nature, the Patristic Fathers also wrote on pinpointing the differences between Eve and Mary (the New Eve). All the faults that Eve possesses after the Fall are redeemed with the New Eve. St. Irenaeus of Lyon says, "The knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience: what the virgin Eve bound through her disbelief, Mary loosened by her faith" (*Against Heresies*, 3, 22). Following along the

same theme, St. Jerome and others stated, “Death through Eve, life through Mary.”

Writing on Christ’s perfect nature, which is mirrored in Mary’s Immaculate Conception, St. Ephraem the Deacon says, “Truly you, Lord, and your mother are the only ones who are beautiful, completely so in every respect; for, Lord, there is no spot in you, nor any spot at all in your mother” (*Nisibene Hymns*, 27).

Focusing on the theme of the New Eve and how it relates to the Immaculate Conception, the mid-fifth-century poet, Caelius Sedulius, in his most famous text, *Carmen Paschale* (“Easter Hymn”) writes,

Because of one woman, the deadly door
opened; And life returned, because of one
woman. . . . We are the blind offspring
of the children of pitiful Eve, Bringing
with us the shadows born of an age-old
error. But when God deigned to assume
the mortal form of a human nature, then
came forth from the Virgin a world of
Salvation. . .

Citing the Second Vatican Council document *Lumen Gentium*, and St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, the Catechism says the following about the Immaculate Conception:

The “splendor of an entirely unique holiness” by which Mary is “enriched from the first instant of her conception” comes wholly from Christ: she is “redeemed, in a more exalted fashion, by reason of the merits of her Son” [LG 53, 56]. The Father blessed Mary more than any other created person “in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” and chose her “in Christ before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before him in love” [cf. Eph 1:3–4]. (492; see also 490–491 and 493)

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into Heaven

Before the Papal Definition

Before Bl. Pope Pius XII solemnly declared (in 1950) the dogma of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary into Heaven, he asked the bishops of the Church two questions: first, is the Assumption definable, and second, do you and your flocks desire such a definition? From the 1,232 bishops asked, 1,210 responded overwhelmingly with an affirmation of yes to both questions. It was the consensus of the Church that this doctrine be solemnly defined.

From 1854, the year the Immaculate Conception was solemnly declared a dogma, to 1946, the Vatican received over eight million petitions

from the universal Church asking for this dogma. The Council Fathers of the First Vatican Council (1869–1870) also signed a petition desiring that the Assumption of Mary into Heaven be declared dogmatic.

The Papal Definition

With the complete and total consensus of the bishops in union with the lay faithful of the Church, on December 1, 1950 Bl. Pope Pius XII spoke “*ex cathedra*” (“from the chair”) declaring,

For which reason, after we have poured forth prayers of supplication again and again to God, and have invoked the light of the Spirit of Truth, for the glory of Almighty God who has lavished his special affection upon the Virgin Mary, for the honor of her Son, the immortal King of the Ages and the Victor over sin and death, for the increase of the glory of that same august Mother, and for the joy and exultation of the entire Church; by the authority of our

Lord Jesus Christ, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by our own authority, we pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that **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.** (Emphasis added)

In this declaration, Bl. Pope Pius XII focuses on the Sacred Scriptures, with the primary Scripture verse being Genesis 3:15, given to him by the bishops of the Church as the main verse confirming this teaching. The Holy Father also draws on Sacred Tradition where we see Church Fathers, beginning in the fifth and sixth centuries, writing about Mary's Assumption and celebrating this common belief in the Eastern liturgies.

Furthermore, with the Assumption of Mary into Heaven we see the conclusion of her earthly life that began with her Immaculate Conception and led to her being the Mother of God. The Assumption of Mary is the clear natural effect of the Immaculate Conception.

The Assumption of Mary in Sacred Scripture

Now that we have a primary understanding of the definition of the Assumption of Mary, let us turn our attention to understanding the scriptural teachings of the dogma. There are two Scripture verses that speak directly to Mary's Assumption into Heaven. Like the Immaculate Conception, the primary verse is Genesis 3:15. In accordance with this Scripture verse, we also have the writings of St. Paul on sin. The secondary verse is Luke 1:28, but also in accordance with this verse is Revelation 11:19 and 12:1.

In Genesis, Mary shares the same victory over sin and death as does Jesus due to their mutual enmity with Satan and sin. St. Paul addresses this victory in Romans chapters 5–8, and again in Hebrews 2:14: “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil.” The effects of the seed of Satan are sin and death, therefore Mary had to triumph over sin and

death. Through the Immaculate Conception Mary triumphs over sin and through the Assumption into Heaven she triumphs over death.

The secondary verse supporting the Assumption of Mary we have learned about already. Luke 1:28 says, “And he came to her and said, ‘Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you.’” Being that Mary was “full of grace,” the effects of sin would not taint her, which would be bodily death. In union with Luke 1:28, we also have Revelation 11:19: “Then God’s temple in heaven was opened and the ark of the covenant was seen within his temple” and 12:1, “And a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.” In the heavenly Jerusalem, Mary is the New Ark of the Covenant and the woman crowned and assumed.

There are other Scripture verses that give support to a potential bodily assumption. 1 Corinthians 15:23 states, “But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then *at his coming* those who belong to Christ” (emphasis added). “At his coming” is in reference to when Christ will return and the bodies of the saints will rise in glory. Matthew 27:52

says, “the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.” Besides St. Matthew’s Gospel, there is nothing written about this in secular history. Verified by many (27:53), we don’t know who was raised, or the length of time, or what their bodies appeared like. Psalm 132:8 prophesies, “Arise, O Lord, out of your resting place: you and the ark which you have sanctified.”

Mary as the New Ark of the Covenant

The ark of the covenant in the Old Testament contained the Ten Commandments, a gold vessel (similar to a ciborium) holding the manna that fed the Israelites in the desert (read Ex 16:34), and the staff of Aaron that blossomed (read Heb 9:4). The ark was the visible sign of God’s presence and protection among the sons and daughters of Israel. A cloud, which also represented God’s presence, would *overshadow* the ark. This cloud became known as the *shekinah*, which means “Divine Presence” or “Divine Glory.” At the Annunciation, the Holy Spirit overshadows Mary, the New Ark

of the Covenant, just as the *shekinah* overshadowed the old ark of the covenant.

The New Testament is a covenant that is everlasting between God and all of humanity through the person of Jesus Christ. Mary, the God-Bearer (*Theotokos*), becomes the sacred vessel, for she is *immaculately* created by God to carry God Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. Just as the original ark was layered with gold, a precious metal that does not fade, so Mary, the New Ark of the Covenant, through her Immaculate Conception would not fade.

Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the articles that were placed in the ark of the covenant. He is the New Law (Beatitudes) that fulfills the Old Law (the Ten Commandments). He is the fulfillment of the manna come down from heaven that fed the Israelites. Jesus is the living bread come down from heaven (see Jn 6:51) to feed all of us with his Holy Eucharist (read Jn 6:22–71). He is the fulfillment of the staff of Aaron, as Aaron was the first high priest of the Levitical priesthood and Jesus is the eternal and Royal High Priest.

The Assumption of Mary in Sacred Tradition

Even though the Assumption of Mary was not declared dogmatic until 1950, recall that the Church has held this teaching sacred from her earliest centuries.

By the fifth and sixth centuries, the Eastern rites of the Church developed liturgies to the Blessed Virgin Mary celebrating her Assumption in Egypt and Syria. In the middle of the fifth century, the feast of the *Anapausis* (“fallen asleep”) or the Dormition of the Mother of God began to be celebrated in a basilica near Jerusalem, specifically Gethsemane, which tradition taught held her tomb and final resting place. By the end of the sixth century and reign of Emperor Maurice (AD 582–602), this feast had spread throughout the Eastern Empire and was to be celebrated on August 15.

After appearing in Egypt, the tradition of the Dormition of Mary made its way to France in the sixth century and was celebrated on January 18. During the pontificate of Pope Sergius I in the late seventh century, the Feast of the Dormition of

the Mother of God was commonly celebrated and eventually became known in the West as the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. By the twelfth century, the doctrinal teaching of the Assumption of Mary was accepted and celebrated in the universal Church in both the East and West.

The writings of St. Gregory of Tours, St. Germanus, Patriarch of Constantinople, and St. John Damascene also wrote about the Assumption (and Dormition) of Mary.

When speaking about Mary's departure from this earth in *De Gloria Beatorum Martyrum* (late sixth century), St. Gregory of Tours says,

When finally the Blessed Virgin had fulfilled the course of this life, and was now to be called out of this world, all the apostles were gathered together from each region to her house . . . and behold the Lord Jesus came with his angels and, receiving her soul, entrusted it to the Archangel Michael and departed. At the break of day the apostles lifted the body with the couch and laid in the sepulcher, and they guarded

in awaiting the coming of the Lord. And behold the Lord again stood by them, and commanded that the holy body be taken up and borne on a cloud into paradise, where now, reunited with (her) soul and rejoicing with the elect, it enjoys the good things of eternity which shall never come to an end.

In Praise of the Holy and Venerable Falling-Asleep of our Most Glorious Lady Mother of God Mary ever Virgin (pre-AD 730), Patriarch of Constantinople St. Germanus speaks about the appointed time of Mary's falling asleep:

When Christ had willed that His Mother, she who had borne Life Itself within her, should be taken upwards to Himself, He tells her, by the message of an angel who was already known to her, that the time of her *falling asleep* is now at hand. And this he did so that through the imitation of Her coming death, she might not be troubled at departure from the living; as will happen to the rest of mortal men. For we know

that the separation of the soul from the body can bring distress to the spirit of even strong men. Therefore, lest death, coming unawares, should trouble the natural instinct of the body, and so that His Mother might know beforehand of her own departure, He Who knows all things sent an angel to her, to give her strength of soul . . .

Speaking in his second homily of three given in Jerusalem on the Dormition of the Blessed Virgin, St. John Damascene says,

This day the Immaculate Virgin, unacquainted with early affections, and nurtured on heavenly affections, has not returned to earth; but, belonging truly to the life of heaven, she has taken up abode in heavenly dwellings . . . it crossed over to it by way of an earthly tomb. And first it was taken through the midst of the city [by the Apostles], like a bride in her beauty, but she is adorned in the unapproachable radiance of the Spirit, and thence it was born to

that most holy place, Gethsemani, angels overshadowing her with their wings, going before and with her and following after, together with the whole assembly of the Church.

Paragraph 974 of the Catechism states, “The Most Blessed Virgin Mary, when the course of her earthly life was completed, was taken up body and soul into the glory of heaven, where she already shares in the glory of her Son’s Resurrection, anticipating the resurrection of all members of his Body” (see also 966).

Did Mary Die?

From what the early Church Fathers have given us, now arises the question that has been debated for centuries and is still debated today: Did the Blessed Virgin Mary die? There are two positions on this question, one from the *Mortalists* and the second from the *Immortalists*.¹

1. The two terms were used by Dr. Mark Miravalle, professor of Theology and Mariology, in the class *Mary in the Modern World* at Franciscan University of Steubenville.

The Mortalists position is that Mary experienced a *temporary* separation of soul and body but *without* bodily corruption. Her soul would have assumed directly into heaven and her body remained on earth for three days [like her Son]. Pope St. John Paul II favored this position when he said, “The fact that the Church proclaims Mary free from original sin by a unique divine privilege does not lead to the conclusion that she also received physical immortality. The Mother is not superior to the Son who underwent death, giving it a new meaning and changing it into a means of salvation.” If our Lord endured death, then so did His mother.

The Eastern rites of the Catholic Church (and the Orthodox churches) celebrate this as the *Dormitio* or Dormition. When time had come for the *Theotokos* to pass from this life to the next, the Apostles, including St. Paul, traveled, gathered, and briefly spent time with her. St. Thomas arrived three days after Mary had *fallen asleep* (a term we use when someone passes into death) and wanted to see her. When the Apostles went to the tomb where she was placed, they found that it was empty. An angel of the Lord appeared to them saying

the *Theotokos* was assumed into heaven. By the fourth century, the majority of the East celebrated this feast.

The Immortalists position is that Mary with body and soul intact was assumed into heaven. Timothy of Jerusalem does not think Mary died and argues by saying, “Wherefore the Virgin is immortal up to now, because he who dwelt in her, assumed her to the heavenly regions.”

Between the two positions, the position of the Mortalists is the *stronger* theological position. Most of the theologians and doctors of the Church, from St. Augustine of Hippo to Venerable John Cardinal Newman, conclude that Mary did suffer death, but without bodily corruption. It was not a painful death, as some have claimed that she was martyred (Simeon’s prophecy), but as St. Francis de Sales says, it was a death “due to a transport of love.”

Conclusion

The four Marian dogmas should in no way take away from our relationship with Jesus Christ. Knowing these dogmas of the Virgin Mary will only increase and strengthen our relationship with our Lord each day. If you want to get to know a person, spend time with his mother. This is exactly what we need to do with the Blessed Virgin Mary. The more time we spend with her and learn about her, the more we will come to know and love Jesus. Don't be afraid to study Mary! Having a relationship with her will only improve our relationship with Him.

