

Mary for Today Part 10 of 10 – Mary in Church Dogma - Liturgical Feasts

Understand and Accept What?

The church has stated that there is 'a hierarchy of truths' and from the current scene one could easily get the impression that the Marian dogmas, for better or worse, do not have the priority and influence that they used to have. They are often the source of great difficulty with regard to their source - or lack of it! - in Scripture, as well as their contemporary relevance. The mysteries of faith as expressed in doctrines and dogmas are historically conditioned, with a meaning not always self-evident. They bear the marks of the philosophical and theological thinking of their own time and may not always be the most suitable for every time and place. Their meaning may even change from one historical period to another, because of the limitations of the language in which they are expressed. [*Mysterium Ecclesia: On the Historical Conditioning of Dogma*, (1973), speaks of 'bearing the changeable conceptions of a given epoch'].

Historical Priorities

History is a good teacher. Saints Bernard, Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure explicitly rejected the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception; it was totally unknown to the Church Fathers; the Holy Office in Rome in 1644 forbade the use of the title 'Immaculate Conception'. Our three saints can hardly be said to be wanting in authentic faith. In this area of dogma we are standing on sacred, delicate and shifting ground.

Marian doctrine did not emerge till some centuries had passed, until Ephesus in 431 declared Mary to be *Theotokos*, the God bearer. The church was busy with other matters; a huge doctrinal development was in progress through five centuries. The knowledge of the one, true, good God was replacing the multitude of gods. The birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Lord were now the defining points from which the reality of God was affirmed. Trinity and the truths about Jesus Christ had to be in place before those about Mary. The presence of Mary is so interwoven with the gift of Christ himself, with the grace of belonging to the Church and its mission, that they are virtually inseparable.

Limitations in Dogmatic Expression

Dogma does not reveal everything. It attempts to capture the faith of the community, but God is not confined in any formula which reflects the limitations of its time, language, and thinking. We have to learn to distinguish what has a universal value from what is situated only in the context of its era. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception reflects a certain view of original sin held around 1854, and thinking has greatly evolved since then; the dogma has to grow with the development of theology. The challenge they all present is how to make them speak to the 21st century rather than be confined to formulas that we nod our heads at without understanding them or seeing that they say anything to our time and world.

Dogma gives the impression of granting certain 'privileges' to Mary which makes her an exception. All of this has resulted in distancing and isolating Mary rather than making her more approachable. What do we know about these beliefs developed over the course of history? What are the values and the limits of each dogma? What was intended when it

was defined and what kind of attention should it receive? Dogma carries the seal of approval by the Church, manifesting a certain consensus of the faithful.

Marian Dogmas

How many have been proclaimed, and have they been defined in the same way? In our history as Church there are four major affirmations about Mary: 'Mother of God,' 'always a virgin,' immaculate since her conception, and fully participating in the Resurrection of Christ since the end of her earthly existence (Assumption). They are not all from the same period of time, nor do they have the same degree of relation to the Bible.

Recent Belief?

The dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption came late in Church History, in the 19th and mid-20th centuries, marking the beginning and closing of a remarkable century of Marian devotion. Behind the definitions lies a long history. The first questions concerning the Immaculate Conception of Mary (be clear, it is her conception the dogma speaks of rather than the virginal conception of her Son, an all too frequent misunderstanding that would be clarified by renaming the dogma as 'the Conception of the Immaculate Virgin') were raised in the middle of the 5th century in discussions on the sanctity of Mary between Augustine, Pelagius, and the cultured Italian bishop, Justin d'Eclane.

In the East, towards the end of the 7th century, the feast of the Conception of Mary was celebrated under different names: 'the Announcement of the Holy God-bearer', the 'Conception of St. Anne', her 'Conception of Mary'. In the Middle Ages, the great theologians were divided on the question. Thomas Aquinas objected on the grounds that the Immaculate Conception could be interpreted as Mary's being saved independently of Christ, without need of him. The feast of the Dormition (falling asleep) of Mary was celebrated in Jerusalem from the year 500, and a hundred years later in Constantinople by the decree of the Emperor.

Liturgical Feasts

Before the Council of Ephesus (431) there had been but one liturgical feast of Mary, the feast of the Purification, celebrated only in certain parts of the Eastern Church. But after Ephesus the feasts began to multiply. From the beginning of the 6th century various churches celebrated Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven. This was a belief that originated not from biblical evidence or even patristic testimony, but as 'fitting'. It was fitting that Jesus should rescue his mother from the corruption of the flesh, and so he must have taken her bodily into heaven. By the 7th century four separate Marian feasts were observed in Rome: the Annunciation, the Purification, the Assumption, and the Nativity of Mary. At the end of the century the feast of the Conception of Mary began in the East, but did not enter the West until the 11th century.

Unlike other Marian dogmas, Mary's divine motherhood has deep and solid scriptural roots. In 25 texts she is referred to as mother, while only two texts call her virgin. Mary's Son who

shares the Father's divinity from all eternity, begins to exist in her at the moment of incarnation; he is 'born of a woman'.

Year of Faith

John Paul II called Mary the Star of Evangelization—the first to bring Jesus to the world and to live with him the longest of any of his friends, apostles, and disciples. We are to celebrate a year of faith starting in October. We are not to forget that Mary marks our path as first disciple, model in faith, and the ideal to which the church aspires.

References

Coyle, K. (1998). *Mary in the Christian Tradition: From a contemporary perspective*. Twenty-Third Publications: Mystic CT.

Prevost, J-P. (1988). *Mother of Jesus*. Novalis: Ottawa.

Published in the *Marist Messenger* 1 December 2012.