

MARY

Catholic Perspective Catholics venerate and honor Mary because she is the New Eve, the God-bearing Ark, and the Holy Queen Mother of the Church. Catholics also believe in four defined doctrines: her Divine Maternity, her Perpetual Virginity, her Bodily Assumption and her Immaculate Conception.

Protestant Perspective Fundamentalists think Catholics give too much honor to Mary. They also reject the four defined Marian doctrines.

Mary, the New Eve

Mary plays a special role in the human salvation history. In Mary, God is solving the problem of sin that entered the world through Eve. The Fathers of the Church drew a parallelism between Eve and Mary as early as the 2nd century. St Irenaeus, who was a disciple of St Polycarp who was a disciple of St John the apostle, said, "The knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience: what the virgin Eve had bound through her disbelief, Mary loosened by her faith." (*Against Heresies*, 3,22,4)

The correspondence between Genesis 3 and Revelation 12 is striking. Each describes three protagonists. Other details linking the two scenes are the conflict between the woman and the ancient serpent, and the pain of childbirth for both women (Gen 3:16; Rev 12:2).

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|---------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Old Testament | The serpent (Gen 3) | Adam introduces sin to the world (Gen 3) | The disobedient Eve (Gen 3) |
| New Testament | The dragon : the ancient serpent (Rev 12:9) | Jesus : the new Adam brings life back (Rom 5:17-18, 1Cor 15:45, Rev 12:5) | Mary: the obedient new Eve (Lk 1:38, 1:45, Rev 12:5) |

John's point in Rev 12 is that Mary is the new Eve, and that her seed, Jesus, as the new Adam, brings about the defeat of the ancient serpent. Thus the ancient motto attributed to St Jerome, "death through Eve, life through Mary".

Mary, the God-bearing Ark

In the Old Testament, the ark of the covenant held three things : (1) the *Ten Commandments* tablets from Mount Sinai, (2) a jar of *manna*, and (3) the *staff of Aaron*, the first high priest of the old law. For Israelites, where the ark was, there also was the presence of Yahweh. It is a very precious vessel and must be handled with special care (it could only be handled by the Levites).

Mary, as the new ark, bore the presence of God. Mary holds in her womb Jesus the Messiah, who is the new law, the living bread from heaven, and the true high priest who offers His own life for us. The early Christians understood Mary as the new ark based on the following observations.

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| Old Testament | New Testament |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| David arose and went back to Judah (2 Sam 6:2) | Mary arose and went to the hill country of Judah (Lk 1:39) |
| How can the ark of the Lord come to me (2 Sam 6:9) | And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? (Lk 1:43) |
| House of Obed-edom (2 Sam 6:10) | House of Zechariah (Lk 1:40) |
| Ark there three months (2 Sam 6:11) | Mary stays three months with Elizabeth (Lk 1:56) |
| David rejoices (2 Sam 6:12) | Mary's spirit rejoices (Lk 1:47) |
| Shouting (2 Sam 6:15) | Loud cry (Lk 1:42) |
| Leaping and dancing (2 Sam 6:16) | The babe leaps in Elizabeth's womb (Lk 1:41) |
| Shekina, the spirit of God overshadows the ark (Ex 40:34) | The Holy Spirit comes upon Mary and overshadow her (Lk 1:35) |
| Mighty weapon in war (Num 10:35) | Mighty weapon in spiritual warfare (Rev 11-12: ark and woman revealed) |

It is obvious that Mary is alluded to be the new ark, and she has a place of honor in the liturgy and life of the new Israel, the Church. As God's masterwork, it is no wonder why all generations call her blessed.

Mary, the Royal Queen

In the Davidic kingdom, since each king had a lot of wives (Solomon had 700) but only one mother, the king's mother held the queenship (*gebirah*), the second most powerful position. In 1&2 Kings, almost every time a new king is introduced, it mentions the king's mother as well. The queen mother is a woman with authority (2 Kings 24:12, Jer 13:18,20). A good example is Bathsheba, who was humble as King David's wife (1 Kings 1:16-17,31), was later given the right hand seat by her son King Solomon (1 Kings 2:19-20), and had a unique share of the king's royal authority.

Mary's queenship is implied in several places in the Bible:

1. "A virgin shall conceive and bear a son" in the Davidic household (Is 7:13-14)
2. Gabriel told Mary she was to give birth to a new Davidic king (Lk 1:27, 31-33)
3. Elizabeth greeted Mary as "mother of my Lord" (Lk 1:43)
4. When the three kings came to honor Jesus, Mary took center stage and Joseph faded into the background (Mt 2:11)
5. The majestic woman crowned with twelve stars (Rev 12:1-2), who gives birth to the king (Rev 12:5).

Bathsheba also demonstrates one key way the queen mother exerted influence in the kingdom: as an advocate for the people. Adonijah asks Bathsheba to intercede for him because the king almost always "will not refuse" the queen mother (1 Kings 2:20). Mary, as our queen mother, has been a powerful intercessor since the wedding at Cana (Jn 2:1-11).

Mary's exalted position in the kingdom depends entirely on her son, Jesus. We exalt Jesus even more by honoring her as queen because in doing so, we praise Him for the great work He has done in her and through her queenship.

Mary, Mother of God

Protestants ask: How can Mary, a creature, be the mother of God the Creator? Catholics answer that when the eternal Son of God became man, He assumed a human nature, which made it possible for Him to be born of a woman just as we are. In fact, to deny that Mary is the Mother of God, is to deny Jesus' Incarnation.

Mary's title of Mother of God was not debated until 429 A.D. In that year a bishop named Nestorius promoted the heresy that Jesus was *two distinct persons*; and that Mary was only the mother of the human person, i.e. Mother of Christ. In 431 A.D., the Council of Ephesus condemned this heresy on sound biblical and traditional basis:

- (Lk 1:43) Elizabeth calls her "*mother of my Lord*"
- (Mt 1:23) "Behold the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name Him *Emmanuel*"
- (Lk 1:35) "the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of *God*"
- (Gal 4:4) "But when the fullness of time had come, *God sent His Son, born of a woman*"
- (St Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 110 A.D.) "For our *God*, Jesus Christ, was *conceived by Mary* in accord with God's plan..."
- (St Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 180-199 A.D.) "The Virgin Mary,... being obedient to His word, received from an angel the glad tidings that *she would bear God.*"

Luther and Calvin, both fathers of the Protestant Reformation, each affirmed Mary is the Mother of God. "In this work whereby she was made the *Mother of God*, so many and such good things were given her that no one can grasp them," wrote Luther¹. Calvin added, "Elizabeth calls Mary Mother of the Lord, because the unity of the person in the two natures of Christ was such that she could have said that *the mortal man engendered in the womb of Mary was at the same time the eternal God.*"²

Mary, Mother of the Church

One of the very last acts of Jesus was His giving His mother Mary to us as our Mother (Jn 19:26-27). By entrusting Mary to his most beloved apostle John's care, Mary was given to all of Christ's disciples as their Mother. Note how Jesus didn't mention any names, and used the symbolic title "woman". Jesus' action makes sense when understood as the symbolic-prophetic sign that Mary is the Mother of all Christians.

That is how John understands it. Apart from giving a careful description of this incident in his gospel, he wrote in Revelation 12:17: "Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the *rest of her offspring*, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus." John explicitly states that Christians are Mary's children, and thus Mary is the spiritual Mother of the Church.

Mary, the Ever-Virgin

Catholics believe that Mary was a Perpetual Virgin. This doctrine is often challenged by quoting Mt 13:55-56, in which it says that Jesus had brothers and sisters. Note that "brothers" in the Bible can also mean "relatives". The Hebrew and Aramaic languages spoken by Christ and His disciples do not have separate words for "brother", "cousin", or

¹ Weimer, *The Works of Luther*, English transl. By Pelikan, Concordia, St. Louis, v.7, p.572

² *Calvini Opera*, *Corpus Reformatorum*, Braunschweig-Berlin, 1863-1900, v.45, p.348, 35.

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“near-relative”. For example, in the original Hebrew, Lot is called Abraham’s “brother” (Gen 14:14). Yet we know that Lot was Abraham’s nephew (Gen 11:27). The Jews used the word “brother” for any near relative, without necessarily meaning “blood-brothers”. Two so-called “brothers” of Jesus (Mt 13:55) – James and Joseph – are identified as sons of another Mary, the wife of Clopas (compare Mt 27:56 and Jn 19:25). If Jesus had blood brothers, He would not have entrusted Mary to John, but to one of them.

According to some early Christian documents, such as the Protoevangelium of James (120 A.D.), Mary was a consecrated virgin. When the angel said that she would conceive and bear a son, she asked, “How can this be. Since I know not man?” (Lk 1:34) Since she was about to get married and should know how babies were made, her response seem like a silly question unless she had made a vow of virginity.

Mary’s perpetual virginity was not challenged in the early Church until the time of St. Jerome by Helvidius (380 A.D.). This doctrine was not rejected by the founders of Protestantism either. “It is an article of faith that Mary is the Mother of the Lord and *still a virgin*,” wrote Luther³. Zwingli also said he “firmly believe that Mary, according to the words of the gospel as a pure Virgin brought forth us the Son of God and in childbirth and after childbirth *forever remained a pure, intact Virgin*.”⁴

Mary, the Immaculately Conceived

Mary’s Immaculate Conception is not explicitly stated in the Bible. However, the doctrine was implied in the early history of the Church and never denied. In the Middle Ages, St Bernard raised the question as to whether the Immaculate Conception referred to St Anne, Mary’s mother. The Church was called upon to make its position clear, namely that the Immaculate Conception was not of St Anne but rather by St Anne in giving birth to the Blessed Mary. In 1854, the ancient doctrine was formally codified as infallible. (4 years later, Mary appeared in Lourdes and identified herself as “the Immaculate Conception”).

Early Church Fathers understand Mary as the “woman” who is full of grace and highly favored. She is the Ark of the Covenant made out of purest flesh to hold Jesus. Therefore, Mary is sinless. It does not mean that Mary didn’t need Jesus as her Savior. Like all the OT saints, Mary was saved through the anticipated merits of Jesus. Mary’s salvation was simply more perfect. By God’s grace, she was preserved from sin at her conception.

Mary, the Bodily Assumed

This is another doctrine that is not recorded in the Scripture, so Catholics depend on Apostolic Tradition for the belief. However, the Assumption is not anti-scriptural. The doctrine does not specify if Mary died; it merely states that after the completion of her life, she was taken body and soul into heaven. Note that Elijah and Enoch were assumed into heaven, just as the righteous will be at the end of time (Gen 5:24; 2 Kg 2:11; 1 Thess 4:17; Heb 11:5). The Church has long understood that Jesus loved his Mother so much that He granted Mary this privilege, raised her from the grave and bodily assumed her to heaven.

³ Works of Luther, v. 11, pp. 319-320; v. 6, p. 510

⁴ Zwingli Opera, Corpus Reformatorum, Berlin, 1905, v. 1, p. 424

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There is no historical reference to the relics of Mary, the corruption of Mary, or the place where her body still lies. The early Church was very conscious of the tombs of the saints, like those of St John the Baptist, St Stephen, Mark, Barnabas, Peter and Paul. However, nobody claimed Mary's remains, because all of them knew there are no bones and no tomb. In fact, the feast of the Assumption was already celebrated throughout the East by the 4th century. Even Luther included this feast on his list of liturgical celebrations. The doctrine was eventually infallibly defined in 1950.

Apparitions of Mary

There have been 80,000 apparitions of Mary reported, but only 7 have received recognition by the Catholic Church. (They are Guadalupe, 1531; Paris, 1830; La Salette, 1846; Lourdes, 1858; Fatima, 1917; Beauraing, 1932-33; Banneux, 1933) These apparition cases, often accompanied by bizarre miracles, were carefully investigated upon by Catholics and non-Catholics before they were declared valid. In all 7 appearances, Mary's message is always God-centered, and about deep love for others, living the cross and simplicity of life-style.

Although many Catholics believe that Mary has an important prophetic and evangelistic mission in our times, the Church does not require all its followers to believe in the approved apparitions or private revelations.

READING

Teenaged Protestants Study Mary (*This Rock, May 1998*)

Secret No More: Fatima, the Third Secret Explained (*This Rock, October 2000*)

Further Research

- Are you aware of "excessive veneration" of Mary in your Catholic parish?
- What do you know about the place of Mary in Eastern Orthodox Christianity? Is it much different from Catholic Beliefs? What about the Islamic faith and the Koran say about Mary?
- Matthew 1:25 states that Joseph had no relations with Mary until she bore a son. Wouldn't that imply that he knew her afterward, and Mary cannot be a Perpetual Virgin?
- Romans 3:23 says that "all have sinned". Does it mean that Mary could not have been freed from sin when she was conceived?
- If Mary is sinless, why do Catholics admit the possibility of Mary's death?
- Who invented the Rosary? Why do Catholics say it?
- Isn't the Rosary a kind of repetitious prayer condemned by Jesus in Mt 6:7?