

Contemporary Catholicism

Lesson Two—The One True God

The Virgin Mary

Luther's reference to the virgin Mary naturally leads us to consider the question of Roman Catholic doctrine regarding Mary. What does the Catholic Church teach about the virgin?

487 What the Catholic faith believes about Mary is based on what it believes about Christ, and what it teaches about Mary illumines in turn its faith in Christ.

1. How important is it for us to understand the Catholic position on Mary?

490 To become the mother of the Saviour, Mary "was enriched by God with gifts appropriate to such a role." The angel Gabriel at the moment of the annunciation salutes her as "full of grace". In fact, in order for Mary to be able to give the free assent of her faith to the announcement of her vocation, it was necessary that she be wholly borne by God's grace.

491 Through the centuries the Church has become ever more aware that Mary, "full of grace" through God, was redeemed from the moment of her conception. That is what the dogma of the Immaculate Conception confesses, as Pope Pius IX proclaimed in 1854:

The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Saviour of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin.

493 The Fathers of the Eastern tradition call the Mother of God "the All-Holy" (Panagia), and celebrate her as "free from any stain of sin, as though fashioned by the Holy Spirit and formed as a new creature". By the grace of God Mary remained free of every personal sin her whole life long. "Let it be done to me according to your word. . ."

2. What does it mean that "through the centuries the Church has become ever more aware"?
3. What is the Catholic doctrine of the immaculate conception? Why does the church hold that position?
4. What does the Catholic Church mean when it says that Mary was "holy"? How is that different from what Luther meant in the Smalcald Articles?

499 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. In fact, Christ's birth

"did not diminish his mother's virginal integrity but sanctified it." and so the liturgy of the Church celebrates Mary as Aeiparthenos, the "Ever-virgin".

5. What does the Catholic Church mean when it says that Mary remained a virgin?

6. Compare that to Luther's position in the Smalcald Articles.

511 *The Virgin Mary "co-operated through free faith and obedience in human salvation" (LG 56). She uttered her yes "in the name of all human nature" (St. Thomas Aquinas, S Th III, 30, 1). By her obedience she became the new Eve, mother of the living.*

973 *By pronouncing her "fiat" at the Annunciation and giving her consent to the Incarnation, Mary was already collaborating with the whole work her Son was to accomplish. She is mother wherever he is Savior and head of the Mystical Body.*

7. More important than the question of her virginity is the matter of the role Mary has in the lives of Christians. What part did she play in Jesus' work, according to these paragraphs?

964 Mary's role in the Church is inseparable from her union with Christ and flows directly from it. "This union of the mother with the Son in the work of salvation is made manifest from the time of Christ's virginal conception up to his death", it is made manifest above all at the hour of his Passion:

Thus the Blessed Virgin advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and faithfully persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross. There she stood, in keeping with the divine plan, enduring with her only begotten Son the intensity of his suffering, joining herself with his sacrifice in her mother's heart, and lovingly consenting to the immolation of this victim, born of her: to be given, by the same Christ Jesus dying on the cross, as a mother to his disciple, with these words: "Woman, behold your son."

8. According to the catechism, what else did Mary do for us?

966 "Finally the Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from all stain of original sin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, so that she might be the more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of lords and conqueror of sin and death." The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is a singular participation in her Son's Resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians:

In giving birth you kept your virginity; in your Dormition you did not leave the world, O Mother of God, but were joined to the source of Life. You conceived the living God and, by your prayers, will deliver our souls from death.

969 "This motherhood of Mary in the order of grace continues uninterruptedly from the consent which she loyally gave at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the cross, until the eternal fulfilment of all the elect. Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this saving

office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix."

9. What supposed event in the life of Mary do these passages describe?

10. According to the catechism, what is Mary's role now? What does that mean for the ordinary believer?

501 Jesus is Mary's only son, but her spiritual motherhood extends to all men whom indeed he came to save: "The Son whom she brought forth is he whom God placed as the first-born among many brethren, that is, the faithful in whose generation and formation she co-operates with a mother's love."

968 Her role in relation to the Church and to all humanity goes still further. "In a wholly singular way she cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope, and burning charity in the Savior's work of restoring supernatural life to souls. For this reason she is a mother to us in the order of grace."

11. What special role does Mary play in the lives of believers, according to the catechism?

971 "All generations will call me blessed": "The Church's devotion to the Blessed Virgin is intrinsic to Christian worship."⁵¹³ The Church rightly honors "the Blessed Virgin with special devotion. From the most ancient times the Blessed Virgin has been honored with the title of 'Mother of God,' to whose protection the faithful fly in all their dangers and needs.... This very special devotion ... differs essentially from the adoration which is given to the incarnate Word and equally to the Father and the Holy Spirit, and greatly fosters this adoration."⁵¹⁴ The liturgical feasts dedicated to the Mother of God and Marian prayer, such as the rosary, an "epitome of the whole Gospel," express this devotion to the Virgin Mary.

12. Look up Luke 1:48. What does this verse say? What does that mean?

13. Why does the Catholic Church teach people to venerate Mary?

14. What does it mean that this is "intrinsic to Christian worship"?

15. What difference does the catechism see between veneration and worship?

16. According to this paragraph and all those we have read, for what should we venerate Mary?

17. How does that differ from what we worship Christ for?