

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF MARIAN DOCTRINES

The primary focus of the Church, then as now, is Jesus. After the age of the apostles and the writing of the New Testament, the Church continued to explore its understanding of Jesus. The question of the identity of Jesus was at the heart of controversies within the Church well into the fifth century. The great councils of Nicaea 325, Constantinople 381, Ephesus 431, and Chalcedon 451 all concerned themselves with the identity of Jesus. Finally, at Chalcedon in 451 it was defined that Jesus was one person, the second person of the Trinity, with two natures, fully human and fully divine.

As a result of the theological process that led up to this affirmation, a deeper understanding of Mary also began to develop. Thus it was that the Fathers of the Council of Ephesus 431, who gathered to condemn Nestorius' view that there were two persons in Jesus, were also able to declare Mary as *theotokos*, (bearer of God), because in Jesus there is only one divine Person.

And so, in the fifth century, we do not find a developed mariology, but we see the beginnings of attempts to consider the person of Mary in her own right. The two doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption are not treated in Scripture, but are later theological developments.

In the early Middle Ages (5th - 8th centuries), the implications of the motherhood of Mary, as taught by the Council of Ephesus, expanded to include the idea that it was indeed "fitting" that the mother of God be morally perfect from the first moment of her existence and that her body should not undergo corruption. It may seem an odd way of reasoning, but for these theologians and for theologians throughout the Middle Ages, the argument for "fittingness" was considered a powerful argument.

As time went on, Western theology was based less and less on the Scriptures. Theological method was characterized by a rational, deductive approach. The argument for "fittingness" (also called the argument from convenience) was part of this approach. This is how it was formulated:

God (or Christ) *could* do something; it was *fitting* that he should; therefore, he *did* it. *Potuit, deuit, fecit*. This principle would play a large role in the development of medieval Mariology. (McBrien, p. 1086)

This reasoning process would eventually pave the way for the development of the idea of the Immaculate Conception -- God *could* preserve Mary from all sin, it was *fitting* that He do so and therefore He *did* it. The same process led to the idea of the Assumption.

These two Marian dogmas have a long history of development, however, what follows is simply a statement of their content and a brief explanation of their implications.

## THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

Note: Before considering this dogma, it is still important to remember that many people, Protestants and Catholic alike, often confuse the Immaculate Conception (of Mary) with the virginal conception (of Jesus). Some also misunderstand this dogma to mean that Mary herself was conceived virginally.

Briefly stated, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception (IC) states that Mary was free from original sin from the *first instant* of her conception. In the December 8, 1854 papal bull *Ineffabilis Deus* (“Ineffable God”), Pope Pius IX states:

We declare, pronounce and define: the doctrine that maintains that the Blessed Virgin Mary in the first instant of her conception, by the singular grace and privilege of almighty God and in view of the merits of Jesus Christ the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin.

The declaration stresses that Mary’s preservation from original sin was possible through the “grace” of God and the “merit” of Jesus. Because of Mary’s unique call to be the Mother of God, she was granted an exemption from original sin. What was not discussed was the nature of “original sin” itself which is still the focus of scholarly debate.

All Christians believed that all human beings, including Mary, are in need of salvation and that salvation comes in and through Jesus. Catholics explain that when the doctrine of the IC declares “freedom from sin” for Mary, this is the same “freedom from sin” that is offered to all Christians through Jesus and in their baptism.

For Catholics, baptism marks the forgiveness of original sin for adults and children, through the salvific power of God made manifest in Jesus. Thus, what it declared to have taken place in Mary in the IC is exactly what takes place in all Christians at baptism. The difference is that it took place in Mary first, at her conception. Thus the “special privilege” claimed by Catholics for Mary is one of timing, not of a unique freedom from original sin in itself.

Catholic mariology does not set Mary off from other members of the Church. All Christians share the same baptism. Nor does it make her “semi-divine” or more than human. Mary is in total solidarity with all Christians. Catholics simply declare Mary to be the first disciple, the first member of the Church. Like all Christians, Mary is in need of redemption and can only be redeemed by the power of Jesus. Like all Christians, Mary is freed from original sin by the power of Jesus in baptism. Like all Christians, Mary must make an act of faith to be redeemed and freed from the power of sin. Not only is Mary like other Christians, other Christians are like Mary in that they too can receive freedom from sin in the very same way -- in Jesus.

Thus, the IC does not set Mary off from the rest of Christians, but it proclaims that because she is the Mother of God she is the first among Christians, the first among disciples and thus the first member of the Church to be the beneficiary of the redemption

offered by her Son, Jesus. Only by the power of God in Jesus, does Mary receive her “favor”, “grace” and “blessings”. Given her stature as Mother of God and the first member of the Church, Mary can be held up as a model to be imitated and as one who calls for love and devotion from all Christians because of her unique relationship to Jesus.

## THE ASSUMPTION

Briefly stated, the dogma of the Assumption holds that Mary was assumed, body and soul, into heaven. After consultation with the bishops of the world, 98% of whom affirmed that the doctrine was possible and opportune, the promulgation was made on November 1, 1950 by Pope Pius XII in the papal bull *Munificentissimus Deus*. It states:

We do pronounce, declare and define as a divinely revealed dogma: The Immaculate Mother of God, Mary every Virgin, after her life on earth, was assumed, body and soul, to the glory of heaven.

The declaration made no statement about the manner or time of Mary’s death or her assumption or whether she had died at all. Nor did it discuss what an “assumed” or “resurrected” body might look like. St. Paul had experienced difficulty in speaking of the resurrected body of Jesus and theologians still have the same difficulty, the subject is open to theological discussion. This dogma was also considered infallible under the terms of Vatican I.

All Christians profess Jesus as universal savior who rose from the dead and through His victory over sin and death all believers will also rise from the dead. The assumption of Mary is the realization of the resurrection from the dead for her, the same resurrection of the body which will also be realized for all in due time.

The ancient Creeds of the Church profess a common belief in “the resurrection of the body and life everlasting”. In this context the dogma can be seen as a “prophecy of sorts” that given the reality of sin, suffering and death there is hope for resurrection and new life and that it has already happened, first in Jesus and now in one of us - Mother Mary.

In the New Testament, Mary was the first disciple to hear the word of God, to accept the word of God and to do the word of God. In her faith and through the power of God she has received the promised resurrection of the body. This does not set Mary off from other Christians as semi-divine or the only human that will enjoy the resurrection of the body. She is set off, however, in that she is the first disciple in the Church to partake in the resurrection of the body. Due to this special privilege she is the most honored of all the saints - the object of true devotion and imitation.

As in the case of the Immaculate Conception, what is claimed for Mary is the same that is claimed for all, except that because Mary is the Mother of God and because of her faith, she is first among the disciples of Jesus to be the beneficiary of His promise of

resurrection of the body. As Vatican II states: “she is the first flowering of the Church as she is to be perfected in the world to come” (Constitution on the Church, n. 68).