

SOLEMNITY OF MARY, MOTHER OF GOD (January 1, 2023)

First, I again want to wish all of you a very blessed Christmas as we continue to celebrate the great feast of the birth of Jesus—the Word that became flesh and dwelled among us. I also want to wish all of you a very happy and blessed new year on this New Year’s [Eve]/Day—may you receive all the grace and goodness that God desires for you in 2023.

In this Christmas season we today celebrate the feast, the solemnity of Mary under her title of ‘Mother of God’. This is a title that goes back to the earliest centuries of the Church’s life and that is part of our Marian devotion, part of the Catholic air that we breathe. How well we know these words from the “Hail Mary”: “Holy Mary, **Mother of God**, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.” It is also a title that many others find confusing or even scandalous: “how can you dare to call Mary the Mother of God? She was only a human being; surely she did not and could not exist before God!”

On first hearing, these do seem to be reasonable questions. But this title emerged very early in the Church’s life, and it did so because of the Church’s concern to preserve the truth about Mary’s child. In prayerfully reflecting on the apostles’ preaching and the New Testament scriptures, the Church was guided by the Holy Spirit to affirm ever more clearly her belief that the one Person Jesus Christ was fully divine and fully human—true God and true man—at one and the same time. We will once again profess that belief in the Creed in just a few moments. And as the Church reflected more fully on the mystery of this God-man Jesus, they began to realize more deeply the importance of Mary’s role in God’s plan for our salvation. In doing so, they began to call her the Mother of God, and reasonably enough. After all, if Mary is the mother of Jesus (which of course she is), and if Jesus is true God as well as true man (which of course he is), then it is only logical to conclude that Mary can be called the Mother of God.

An early fifth-century bishop named Nestorius, however, could not handle that. He declared that Jesus was two distinct persons—one divine and one human—and that Mary was only the mother of the human Jesus. The Church responded at the Council of Ephesus in 431 by affirming that Jesus is only one Person in which are combined his divine and human natures. Mary is certainly not the mother of Jesus’ divinity; there is no way she could be. But women do not give birth to natures—they give birth to persons. Mary is the mother of the person of Jesus Christ, he who was and is true God as well as true man. Therefore, it does indeed make sense, it logically follows that Mary truly can be called the Mother of God. It is said that when the people of Ephesus heard this decision from the council affirming that title for Mary, they celebrated with great joy by a torch-lit procession. Maybe they did not understand all the theological vocabulary of ‘person’ and ‘nature’. They did, however, have an instinctive notion that Mary’s child was no mere teacher or good man but was instead God incarnate and that Mary could therefore be honored with the title ‘Mother of God’—and their instinct was right on target.

I hope you will forgive me this brief history lesson, but it is important to understand what we believe, and why. When we call Mary the Mother of God, we are in no way saying or implying that Mary existed before God as mothers always exist before their children—that would be utterly impossible. Instead, this title of Mary’s is one of our strongest ways to affirm our belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ. To say that Mary is the Mother of God is saying a whole lot more

about Jesus her Son than what it says about Mary herself. She is indeed only a creature; Mary is no god or goddess. But God the Father is the one who wanted Mary to be the means by which his Son would be born into the world to save the human race; he is the one who chose her, and Mary freely consented to God's plan. Thus did God accomplish the miracle and the mystery of the Incarnation: God the Son becoming man in Jesus without losing in any degree his divinity, his 'God-ness'.

This title of Mary as Mother of God and the doctrine that it affirms regarding the divinity of Jesus—these are important ways to explain what we believe. But we must also keep in mind that we are dealing with mystery here in the truest sense of that word—mystery as something that we cannot fully grasp with our limited human language or intellect. And the Incarnation—God becoming man in Jesus—is one of the most basic mysteries of all. Sometimes we can get more of a glimpse of such things through the power of art and imagination. Maybe some of you have heard a song called “Mary, Did You Know?”; it is a beautiful set of reflections on what Mary might have known or imagined about her Son; one verse stands out in particular: “Mary...Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod? When you kiss your little baby, you've kissed the face of God.”

This is the mystery of the Incarnation that we celebrate during this Christmas season, the mystery of the divine maternity of Mary who is Mother of God because her Son is God. This newborn King is he who, as St. Paul said in our second reading, ‘when the fullness of time had come...[was] born of a woman.’ St. Luke tells us in his gospel that Mary reflected on all these things and pondered them in her heart; we would be well advised to join her in doing so. For this is indeed the mystery of Christmas, the mystery of the Incarnation, the mystery before which we can only bend our knee in humble awe and wonder and adoration.

