

Mary's Role in the Church

by Sebastian R. Fama

Mary receives special honor because she, who once cared for the physical body of Christ, now cares, through her intercession, for the mystical body of Christ (the Church). Devotion to Mary differs, just as devotion to family differs, from devotion to God. In no way does it imply equality with God. When we refer to Mary's power we are talking about the power of her intercession. As James 5:16 says: "the prayer of a righteous person has great power."

When we honor Mary we are only imitating Christ. Scott Hahn once noted: "Jesus fulfilled the Law perfectly. And that would include the fourth Commandment which tells us to: 'Honor thy Father and Mother.' The Hebrew word for honor is kabed. Kabed means to bestow honor and glory in a heavy manner. As Christians we imitate Christ."

Mary was the first Christian. Her life serves as a perfect illustration of what a Christian should be. She was willing to do whatever God asked of her. She was about 14 years old when the angel Gabriel told her that she would conceive a child by the power of the Holy Spirit. At that time a woman could be stoned to death for bearing a child that was not her husband's. Despite that Mary said yes. She didn't know what the future would bring but she knew that she could trust God. She was humble and obedient.

The Bible doesn't tell us a lot about Mary. However, she does appear or is mentioned at a number of critical points. Here are four that I think are important:

1. Her role in Salvation history is foretold (Genesis 3:15)
2. Jesus' first miracle is a result of her intercession (John 2:1-11)
3. At the foot of the cross her role as mother of the Church is implied (John 19:26-27)
4. She is portrayed as the ark of the New Covenant and the mother of all believers (Revelation 12)

In all four of these passages Mary is referred to as "woman." In Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, Woman is a term of respect. However, it is not a title that a son would normally use for his mother. By using the term Woman Jesus is referring to some other aspect of her existence. I believe He is referring to her role as Mother of the Church. As previously mentioned, this is what the Scriptures teach: "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**" (Revelation 12:17).

The Early Church was well aware of Mary's role in the Church. Irenaeus commented that: "the Word will become flesh, and the Son of God the son of man—the Pure One opening purely that pure womb, **which generates men unto God**" (*Against Heresies* 4:33:12 [A.D. 189]). Epiphanius remarked: "True it is . . . the whole race of man upon earth was born of Eve; but in reality, it is from Mary that Life was truly born to the world, so that by giving birth to the Living One, **Mary might also become the Mother of all the living**" (*Against Eighty Heresies*, 78,9 [circa A.D. 374]). Augustine summarized: "The Mother of the Head, in bearing Him corporally **became spiritually the Mother of all members of this Divine Head**" (*Of Holy Virginit*y 6, [A.D. 401 AD]).

As for the title of Co-Redemptrix, it must be noted that the Church did not give Mary this title but agrees with the theology behind it. The title comes from tenth century theologians who explain that redemption was accomplished in three steps: (1) The Incarnation, when the Word was made flesh, (2) The performance, Christ's death and resurrection (the essential sacrifice which redeemed man), and (3) The application, whereby redemption is communicated to believers.

Jesus alone accomplished the second step. Mary cooperated in the first and third steps. Indeed, we are all commanded to participate in the third step: "Make disciples of all nations" (Mark 28:19). In 1 Corinthians 3:9 we are referred to as "God's co-workers." Does that make us equal to God? Does our work have the same value as His? Of course not! We merely work with God for the furtherance of His kingdom. It is only in this sense that we can be co-workers or co-redeemers with Christ.

Marian apparitions are another area that attracts criticism. One accusation is that the apparitions are a manifestation of Satan. But is that really the case? The Bible records several occasions where an angel or saint was sent by God to deliver a message. Sometimes the visit would be in person while at other times it would be in a dream. In Genesis 19 two angels visit Sodom to help Abraham and his family escape God's judgment. In 1 Samuel 28 Samuel appears to King Saul. In 2 Maccabees Onias and Jeremiah appear to Judas Maccabeus. In Matthew 17 Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus on a mountain. In Luke 1:11 the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah. And finally, in Luke 1:26 the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary. So, apparitions are not some unique Catholic invention. We see the precedent for them in the pages of Scripture.

But what about Marian apparitions? Are they from Satan? Jesus gave us guidance on the matter when He said: "By their fruit you will know them" (Matthew 7:16). If the message is Christ centered and faithful to Church teaching the fruit is good. Anything else is unacceptable. There have been very few apparitions that have been approved. And in any case no one is required to believe in them. So what type of fruit do we get from the approved apparitions:

Fatima – Pray, avoid sin, do what Jesus tells you, I will aid you with my prayers.

Lourdes – confirmed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, exalted the virtues of Christian poverty and humility, and promoted personal conversion as it is the next life that is important, prayer, penance, humility as well as mercy for sinners and compassion for the sick.

Guadeloupe – God is the only God and Creator of everything, follow and live God's commandments, Mary takes us to Jesus, do not despair – Mary prays for us. As a result, nine out of ten million Aztecs who professed a polytheistic human sacrificing religion converted to Christianity.

Mary's ministry can be summed up by her words at the wedding at Cana: "Do whatever He [Jesus] tells you" (John 2:5). That is not a message that Satan would endorse. As Jesus once said: "If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end" (Mark 3:24-26).

The most curious objection to Mary concerns her title "The Mother of God." Some take this to mean that Mary is the mother of the Trinity. That in some way Almighty God is subordinate to her. Obviously, such an accusation is laughable to say the least. The title Mother of God has more to do with Jesus than with Mary. It is an assertion of His divinity. Mary as the "Theotokos" or God-bearer conceived our Savior by the power of the Holy Spirit. God was the originator and Mary was the bearer. As we read in Scripture Mary was the mother of Jesus ... Jesus is God. Therefore, Mary is the mother of Jesus who is God. In short Mary is the Mother of God. The Gospel asserts as much in Luke 1:43 where Elizabeth says to Mary: "How does this happen to me that **the mother of my Lord** should come to me." We call Jesus Lord because He is our God. The mother of my Lord is the mother of my God or, to shorten it, **the mother of God**.

Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, wrote in *A Prologue to the Magnificat*: "May the tender mother of God herself procure for me the Spirit of wisdom profitably and thoroughly to expound this song of hers." Also, in his last sermon at Wittenberg he said: "Is Christ only to be adored? Or is the holy Mother of God rather not to be honored? This is the woman who crushed the Serpent's head. Hear us. For your Son denies you nothing."

John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, wrote, "We cannot celebrate the blessings given us in Christ without commemorating at the same time how high an honor God has granted to Mary when he chose to make her the mother of his only Son." Ulrich Zwingli stated, "The more honor and love for Christ, the more also the esteem and honor for Mary."

Scott Hahn once noted: Just as a sculptor is honored when we admire his work, so too is God honored when we admire his work (Mary).