

In Defense of the Theotokos

To Deny That Mary is the 'God-Bearer'

Imperils Other Important Christian Beliefs

by Steven Collison

As one interested in Catholic apologetics, I make it a point to supplement my studies by reading literature and attending conferences sponsored by some of the larger anti-Catholic organizations. Although the Blessed Virgin is a favorite target for many of these groups, I find that they offer little substantive material on the subject of Mary as the Mother of God. Indeed, their lack of effort in trying to debunk Mary as the *Theotokos*, (Greek for "God-bearer") is enough to make one think that the Church's opponents are literally speechless on the matter. Yet from time to time, someone will still attempt to dispute the Catholic claim that Mary is in fact the Mother of God; and, sadly, from time to time, the less-instructed Catholic finds the arguments convincing.

One such attempt occurred last year when I attended a conference of Christians Evangelizing Catholics. The speaker who addressed the topic of *Theotokos* as the Church teaches it even went as far as to explain the hypostatic union of Jesus Christ. This surprised me for it is precisely because of the reality of the hypostatic union that we can call Mary "the Mother of God." Simply put, the hypostatic union is the Person of the Word (the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity) subsisting in two distinct natures: one truly human (received in time from His mother) and one truly divine (received eternally from the Father). Although the speaker drew an accurate picture of this union, he still drew the wrong conclusions and presented the same old standard charges as to why Mary cannot be the Mother of God. For someone to believe that Mary is the mother of Jesus, and that Jesus is both God and man united in one Person, while at the same time denying that Mary is the Mother of God is remarkable, to say the least. It is like believing that Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God, yet denying the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity. The conclusion is inescapable.

"*Theotokos*: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary" states that "the most important truth about Our Lady is that she is the Mother of God." It is because of this exalted vocation that she was privileged with such divine gifts as the Immaculate Conceptions and the Assumption. Conversely, if God the Son had not become man, then Mary would have been no different from any other woman. She is not so highly honored by Catholics because of anything in her own right but because of Whom she, and only she, gave to the world – our divine Savior. The importance of being able to explain this truth to non-Catholics cannot be stressed enough. But just as important, it is the first truth concerning Mary that should be presented. There are two reasons for this. The first is the many Protestants think that the Catholic system of devotion to Mary begins with a faulty exegesis of Genesis 3:15 and snowballs from there into the monstrous collection of idolatrous Marian beliefs we have today. To show that Marian devotion is legitimately based on her title as Mother of God may help them rethink their position.

Secondly, Catholic truths are so closely related to and based upon one another that to defend one doctrine without taking the time to explain doctrines upon which it is founded would probably be a waste of time. For example, it helps a great deal to explain to non-Catholics the truth of the Real Presence in the Eucharist before tackling the Sacrifice of the Mass. After all, how can one be expected to believe that the Sacrifice of Calvary is being re-presented upon our altars today if he does not believe that Christ is even present on those altars. So it is with Marian beliefs. It is because Mary was to be the Mother of God that she was immaculately conceived, so as to be a worthy vessel for the Son of God – the ark of the New Covenant, if you will.

If Catholics do not set forth *Theotokos* as the Church understands the term, our separated brethren cannot be blamed for insistently asking: "Why preserve Mary from sin if she is no different from my own mother?" Of course, we might answer: "Mary is different from your mother because her child is different from your mother's child." A non-Catholic might retort that she is not the Mother of Jesus the man or the mother of Jesus' body or of His human nature or something like that. This objection is simply untenable and lends no support to the Protestant position. If we are to explain our belief properly, we must labor – happily – to show that Mary is in fact the Mother of Almighty God; and because she is His mother, we can have the utmost confidence in her prayers for us. Just as concepts like "substance" and "accidents" are necessary to understand and explain the mystery of the Eucharist, so the concepts of "person" and "nature" are important when explaining the mysteries of Trinity and Motherhood of Mary. They are indispensable tools in ensuring that a Triune God and a Mother of God are believable and not irrational.

By the term "nature," we mean the permanent structure of a being, insofar as it is the source of all the activities of that being. In other words, nature answers the question "What is the thing or person?" and decides what that thing or person is capable of doing. Without a nature nothing can exist. Notice the word "permanent." Jesus is not God by the fact that He is born of Mary, but He is man for our salvation by the fact that He took His flesh from the flesh of the Virgin. We must always remember that Jesus is man and always will be. He did not just throw on a human nature as someone throws on a coat and then take it off again after His ascension into heaven. The term "person" defines that self-conscious, rational being that answers the question "Who am I?" It is that reality in a being that says "I". Although the nature is the source of a person's actions, it is the person who is responsible for those actions. For it is the person who possesses the nature and not the other way around. Whatever is done or experienced through a rational nature is done or experienced by the person whose nature it is.

Non-Catholics complain that Mary was not referred to as the Mother of God until 400 years after Christ. Actually, it was probably closer to 200 years. Whatever the precise date, one can hardly expect to call Mary "the Mother of God" until he has a clear understanding of exactly who and what Jesus is. It may well be obvious to us that Jesus Christ was and is one divine Person possessing two natures, and we do not now need any councils or *Theotokos* doctrine to know that. However, hindsight is 20/20. With a 2000-year-old tradition of monotheism behind the early Christians, the progression of understanding Christ as both God and man required the utmost care. The fact that Mary was seen as the God-bearer is a powerful testimony to the reality of the Incarnation. In the early Church, this fact was used to repudiate several heresies that called the incarnation into question. Nestorianism claimed that there were two persons in Christ. Monophysitism charged that Jesus had only an appearance of flesh and blood. Monotheletism denied the existence of Christ's human will and claimed that consequently He was not fully human. The adoptionist heresy taught that Jesus Christ was the Son of God only by adoption and not by nature.

It took the understanding that Mary is the *Theotokos* to arrive at a deeper knowledge of Jesus Christ and, hence, to facilitate the refutation of certain heterodox beliefs. These have always been the primary functions of Mary – to bring Jesus to us and then to bring us to Jesus. At this point, take a minute to imagine any other ontological combination of person and nature in Our Lord. It is easy to see that if Jesus were, say, two persons, then we could not know for sure that it was God Who died for our sins, and thus not know if we were redeemed or not. If there were no human nature in Christ, then He could not have made an adequate offering for sin on our behalf as a member of the fallen race of Adam. The redemption of mankind depends on the doctrine of *Theotokos*. This frees us from erroneous ideas of what Jesus' mission upon earth accomplished. It should be enough for "Bible Christians" to believe that Mary is the Mother of God simply by a reading of Luke 1:43, coupled with the knowledge we now have of Jesus Christ as the God-Man. Unfortunately, it seems it is not enough. Yet when Elizabeth calls Mary "the mother of my Lord," she uses a term that, among Hellenistic Jews, meant God. The word is used again in the same way in Verses 45 and 46.

Another objection to the unique maternity of Mary is stated thus: Since Mary had no direct role in the joining of these two natures of Christ, she cannot be the Mother of God. Aside from the unforeseen problem posed by the comment – that the Holy Spirit did have a direct role in the joining of the human and divine natures yet He is not the Father of Jesus – such a protestation will does not resolve the question of whom or what Mary was the mother. A definition of motherhood at this point would be in order. Philosophy tells us that sonship is the origin of a living thing from another living thing by communication of subsistence unto likeness of nature. Jesus, as man, fits this definition by receiving His human nature from Mary. Because He fits this definition, we can transpose it (without need for any syntactical gymnastics) to apply to Mary, Motherhood can thus be stated as: a living thing by communication of substance unto likeness of nature.

Can one rightly call her the Mother of God from the mere fact that she gave a human nature to the Person of the Word? Yes, because the relationship of mother to child is not one of nature-to-nature. It is a person-to-person, nor person-to-nature. It is a person-to-person relationship. Although it is the nature that is communicated, the mother is the mother of the person. No one ever refers to his mother as "the mother of my body" or "the mother of my nature." No, it is always "the mother of me" or "my mother." Keeping in mind the hypostatic union and the definition of motherhood, the point to be stressed is that there is exactly one person in the being of Jesus Christ the God-Man. So the person-to-person relationship between Mary and God (Jesus) is a relation of Mother and Son. Mary is the Mother of God now and forever since motherhood endures after birth as well as before.

Not only does belief in the divine maternity of Mary protect the integrity of the Incarnation and Redemption, but it reinforces the very truth of the Blessed Trinity itself. The Trinity is revealed to be three distinct Persons in one

divine nature. Because Mary is the mother of the Person of Jesus Christ, she can truly be called the Mother of God, while at the same time not be the mother of God the Father nor of God the Holy Spirit. Thus is shown the distinction of Persons within the Godhead. This is just another example of how Catholic doctrine is so intricately interwoven with other revealed truths. To deny even one may lead non-Catholic Christians to deny unwittingly truths to which almost all Protestant communities hold fast.

As it is with any other Catholic teaching, objections to a woman being the Mother of God usually involve an erroneous understanding of what the Church really teaches. A Protestant trying to visualize a Mother of God will probably see in his mind's eye a woman of immense proportions, before eternity (whatever that means), giving birth to divine triplets. This seems to them blasphemous and logically suicidal, as one opponent to the doctrine put it. The standard argument that reflects this kind of mind-set most clearly is the one that goes something like this: A temporal creature cannot give birth to the eternal Creator. If this in fact were the Catholic idea of the Mother of God, then it would indeed be blasphemous. IT is not the case, however. The difficulty lies in the direction from which the non-Catholic is arguing. It is not Mary who entered eternity; it is God who entered time. Again, it is not Mary who became creator; it is God Who became a creature. Mary is no more divine for giving birth to the Eternal Word than the Father is human because He is the Father of the Word Incarnate.

We see that the God-bearer has added strength to the truth of the Blessed Trinity. Now the Trinity can return the favor by refuting the objection that Mary is only the mother of Jesus' humanity, or human nature, and not the Mother of God, not the mother of the Person Jesus Christ. We that the Father has begotten the Son and is therefore the Father of the Second Person. If we follow Protestant reasoning regarding Mary as the mother of a human nature only, then we would have to believe that the Father is the Father of the Son's nature. This leads us to conclude that the Father is the Father of Himself since there is only one nature among the three Persons. This is logical suicide. *Theotokos* is not.

Scott Hahn, a former Presbyterian minister and convert to Catholicism, briefly but brilliantly explains the Church's justification for our devotion to Mary. The first point he sets down is that Jesus Christ fulfilled every letter of the Law perfectly. The first commandment of the Decalogue pertaining to man's obligations to his fellow man is to honor father and mother. The word "honor" in Hebrew means "to bestow glory." The second point is that we imitate Christ. Hahn concludes that the Catholic Church did not initiate giving glory to Mary; Jesus beat her to it. The beauty of it all is that it is all so simple. The status of the God-bearer remains irrefutable, if properly understood, and it is up to the instructed Catholic to see that it is properly understood – both by himself and the one to whom he is speaking. After that, maybe other Marian beliefs will not be such hard pills to swallow.

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