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THE PATRISTIC PRAISE OF MARY

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IN HIS BEAUTIFUL AND TIMELY ENCYCLICAL, “MOTHER OF THE REDEEMER” (*Redemptoris Mater*),¹ Pope John Paul II proclaimed the 1987-88 Marian Year, the second of its kind in the history of the Church (the first being that of Pope Pius XII in 1954). Pope John Paul’s reasons included preparation for the coming of the third millennium of Christianity in the year 2000; the honoring of Mary, who preceded Jesus in history; commemoration of the 1200th anniversary of the seventh and last worldwide ecumenical council accepted by both the Greek and the Latin churches, that of the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 A.D.; and, very importantly, prayer for Christian unity through Mary, Mother of the Church.

In pointing to Mary as the Mother of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, our Holy Father seeks to find in her the remedy for a divided Christendom. Non-Catholics today know little about the rich Christian tradition concerning Mary that existed prior to the Reformation, and indeed, prior to the Greek Schism of the 11th century. The purpose of the present article is to point out the common belief about Mary held by the early Church, as manifested in the writings of the so-called “Fathers of the Church,” learned and saintly writers of the first eight centuries of Christianity.² Let us therefore examine five of the Church’s teachings about Mary held by Christians some 1200-1800 years ago - Mary as the Mother of God (*Theotokos*), Mary’s perpetual virginity, her sinlessness and Immaculate Conception, her Assumption, and her role as Mother of the Church.

MARY, THE MOTHER OF GOD

The first and most fundamental teaching about Mary is based on her relationship with Jesus, that of being his mother. It is on this reality that her special dignity is founded, and from it flow all her prerogatives. Now Mary is not the Mother of God as such; she was rather the mother of God the Son incarnate. United in the one person of Jesus Christ are two natures, divine and human. Mary, being the mother of the one person of Christ, is in this sense the mother of God.

During the first few centuries of the growth of the Church, there arose three Christological heresies which bear on the issue of the divine maternity. Docetism (110 A.D.), while acknowledging the divinity of Christ, rejected the reality of his human nature. Arianism (320 A.D.), on the other hand, accepted Jesus’ humanity but denied that he was the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity. Both of these heresies repudiated the dual nature of Christ and the mystery of the Incarnation. If Docetism was correct, Mary could not be called the Mother of God, since she would not be the mother of God the Son incarnate. If Arianism were true, Jesus was not divine, and Mary could not be considered the mother of God. At the First Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.), the first ecumenical council convened by the Church, both of these positions were condemned, and the reality of Jesus as true God and true man infallibly defined. The consequent document is known as the Nicene Creed.

After Nicaea a third Christological heresy arose, called Nestorianism (428 A.D.), which proposed two persons in Christ, rather than two natures in one person. Mary would then be the mother of the human person of Christ only, and therefore not the mother of God. Nestorianism was condemned by the third ecumenical council, held in Ephesus (431 A.D.). In substance, the council infallibly declared that Jesus was “according to his divinity, born of the Father before all ages, and in these last days, according to his humanity, born of the Virgin Mary for us and for our salvation ... A union was made of the two natures ... In accord with this understanding of the unconfused union we confess that the Holy Virgin is the Mother of God (*Theotokos*, God-Bearer), through God the Word’s being incarnate and becoming man, and, from this conception, His joining to Himself the temple assumed from her.” The foregoing statement is taken from a letter of St. Cyril, bishop of Alexandria (+444 A.D.), who presided over the Council of Ephesus. It is known as the “Creed of Union” or the “Creed of Ephesus.”

Prior to Ephesus, however, the Church Fathers wrote of Mary’s relationship to Jesus, the Word Incarnate. St. Irenaeus (+202 A.D.), bishop of Lyons and pupil of Polycarp, St. John’s disciple, declared, “The Virgin Mary ... being obedient to His Word, received from the angel the glad tidings that she would bear God.” St. Ephraem of Syria (+373 A.D.) noted, “The handmaid work of His Wisdom became the Mother of God.” St. Alexander (+328 A.D.), bishop of Alexandria and a key figure at the Council of Nicaea, wrote that “Jesus Christ ... bore a body not in appearance but in truth, derived from the Mother of God.” St. Athanasius (+373 A.D.), secretary and successor to Alexander, reflected upon “the Word begotten of the Father on high” who “inexpressibly, inexplicably, incomprehensibly and eternally, is he that is born in time here below, of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God.”

St. Cyril (+386 A.D.), bishop of Jerusalem, referred to “the Virgin Mother of God,” and St. Gregory of Nazianz (+382 A.D.), bishop of Constantinople, strongly asserted, “If anyone does not agree that Holy Mary is the Mother of God, he is at odds with the Godhead.” St. Gregory of Nyssa (+371 A.D.) proclaimed the virginity of Mary, referring to her as “Mary, the Mother of God.” St. Epiphanius (+403 A.D.), bishop of Salamis, writes of the “Holy Savior who came down from heaven ... took on humanity along with His divinity ... incarnate among us, not in appearance but in truth ... from Mary, the Mother of God.” The monk Leporius (+426 A.D.), a disciple of the great Augustine, expressed his faith that “. . . the Only-begotten was incarnate in that secret mystery which He understood, for it is ours to believe, His to understand.” Finally, just prior to the Council of Ephesus, St. Cyril of Alexandria wrote, “I have been amazed that some are utterly in doubt as to whether or not the Holy Virgin is able to be called the Mother of God. For if Our Lord Jesus Christ is God, how should the Holy Virgin who bore him not be the Mother of God?” St. Cyril also wrote these words of praise: “Hail, O Mary, Mother of God! You did enclose in your sacred womb the One Who cannot be encompassed. Hail, O Mary, Mother of God! With the shepherds we sing the praise of God, and with the angels the song of thanksgiving - Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to men of good will! Hail, O Mary, Mother of God! Through you came to us the Conqueror and triumphant Vanquisher of hell.”

MARY, EVER VIRGIN

The virginal conception of Christ was upheld by the early Church. St. Ignatius (+ 107 A.D.), bishop of Antioch and reputed hearer of the apostle John, wrote, “The virginity of Mary, her giving birth, and also the death of the Lord ... three mysteries loudly proclaimed, but wrought in the silence of God.” And again, “According to the flesh, Our Lord Jesus Christ was born from the stock of David; but if we look at the will and the power of God, He is the Son of God, truly born of a vir-



gin.” St. Justin the Martyr (+ 165 A.D.) observed that the “power of God, coming upon the Virgin, overshadowed her, and caused her, while yet a Virgin, to conceive.” St. Irenaeus (+202 A.D.) referred to Jesus as “the Word Himself, born of Mary who was still a Virgin.” He adds, “The belief in the Virgin Birth has been handed over to the Church by the Apostles and by their disciples, the same as the other truths of the Faith.” St. Hippolytus (+215 A.D.), in questioning candidates for baptism, inquired, “Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Spirit, of the Virgin Mary?”

St. Ephraem (+373 A.D.) extols Mary as the Virgin who became a Mother “while preserving her virginity.” And St. Ambrose (+397 A.D.), bishop of Milan, proclaimed Christ who was “born of a virgin,” and adds, “Mary was a Virgin not in body only, but mind also ... so pure that she was chosen to be the Mother of the Lord. God made her whom He had chosen and chose her of whom He would be made.” St. Augustine (+430 A.D.) observed, “The nobility of the Child was in the virginity which brought him forth, and the nobility of the parent was in the Divinity of the Child.”

The Patristic writers also had no difficulty in asserting Mary’s perpetual virginity. For example, St. Athanasius (373 A.D.), bishop of Alexandria, who was, as a deacon, active at the First Council of Nicaea, stated that Jesus “took human flesh from the ever-virgin Mary.” Didymus the Blind (380 A.D.), mentor of the great Jerome, wrote of Mary, “Even after childbirth, she remained always and forever an immaculate virgin.” St. Epiphanius of Salamis (+403 A.D.) commented that “to Holy Mary, Virgin is invariably added, for that Holy Woman remains undefiled.” Against the heretic Helvidius, St. Jerome (+420 A.D.) spoke, “You say that Mary did not remain a virgin? As for myself, I claim that Joseph himself was a virgin, through Mary, so that a Virgin son might be born of virginal wedlock.”

St. Ambrose of Milan (+397 A.D.) cites the beautiful prophecy of Ezekiel - “This gate is to remain closed; it is not to be opened for anyone to enter by it. Since the Lord, the God of Israel has entered by it, it shall remain closed (Ez 44:2).” He then comments, “Who is this gate, if not Mary?” Leporius (426 A.D.), monk and disciple of St. Augustine, in a credal statement refers to Christ as the Son of God “made man of the Holy Spirit and the Ever-Virgin Mary.” St. Cyril of Alexandria (444 A.D.) remarked that the Word himself “kept his Mother a Virgin

even after her child-bearing, which was done for none of the other saints.” St. Peter Chrysologus (+450 A.D.), archbishop of Ravenna, penned the beautiful words, “A Virgin conceived, a Virgin bore, and a Virgin she remains.” St. John Damascene (+749 A.D.), the last of the Fathers, is quaint in his vigorous defense of Mary’s perpetual virginity - “Thus the Ever-Virgin remains after birth a Virgin still, never having consorted with man ... For how were it possible that she, who had borne God ... should ever receive the embrace of a man? Perish the thought!”

In subsequent centuries, Mary’s perpetual virginity was defended in various councils, e.g., the fifth ecumenical council held in Constantinople (553 A.D.), and dogmatically defined by Pope St. Martin I at the Lateran Council of Rome (649 A.D.), whose decree was later upheld by the sixth ecumenical council at Constantinople (681 A.D.). This belief also meets the criterion of infallibility in that it has been the constant teaching of the Church.



MARY’S SINLESSNESS

Early Christian belief always associated Mary with Jesus in the divine plan. The Patristic writers referred to Mary as the “new Eve,” who cooperated with Christ, the “new Adam.” In the writings of Justin the Martyr (+ 165 A.D.), Irenaeus (+ 202 A.D.), Ephraem of Syria (+403 A.D.), Cyril of Jerusalem (+348 A.D.), Jerome (+420 A.D.), Augustine (+430 A.D.), Epiphanius of Salamis (+403 A.D.), and John Chrysostom (407 A.D.), Mary is portrayed as bringing life (Christ) into the world, whereas Eve brought death, and Mary’s humility and obedience is contrasted with Eve’s pride and disobedience.

Mary’s sinlessness in general was undisputed by early Christian writers. St. Ambrose (+430 A.D.) wrote, “... Mary, a Virgin not only undefiled but a virgin whom grace has made inviolate, free of every stain.” Concerning Our Blessed Lady, St. Augustine declared, “I wish to have absolutely no question when treating of sin.” St. Ephraem, in a poem addressed to Christ, penned “Thou and thy mother are alone in this - you are wholly beautiful in every respect. There is in thee, Lord, no stain, nor any

spot in thy Mother.” In praise of Mary, he wrote, “My Lady most holy, all-pure, all-immaculate, all-stainless, all-undefiled, all-incorrupt, all-inviolable ... spotless robe of Him who clothes himself with light as with a garment ... flower unfading, purple woven by God, alone most immaculate!”

St. Proclus (+446 A.D.), Patriarch of Constantinople, wrote, “Mary is the heavenly orb of a new creation, in whom the Sun of justice, ever shining, has vanished from her soul all the night of sin.” St. John Damascene spoke of Mary as “preserved without stain.” Although agreeing that Mary was sinless in her behavior, the Church Fathers were divided on the question of her inheritance of original sin. Even the great Thomas Aquinas (+1274 A.D.) could not resolve the issue; it remained for John Duns Scotus (+1308 A.D.) to propose a “preservative redemption” rather than a “restorative redemption” for Mary. The Church took the decisive step on December 8, 1854, when Peter’s successor, the venerable Pope Pius IX, infallibly defined the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. It was by this title that, four years later, Mary identified herself to St. Bernadette at Lourdes. And, in 1954, the first Marian Year was occasioned by the 100th anniversary of the proclamation of this beautiful truth.

MARY’S ASSUMPTION

The belief in Mary’s resurrection, called the Assumption, is founded, as are all Marian doctrines, on her divine maternity. Liturgically, the feast of the Dormition, or “falling asleep,” of the Blessed Virgin, dates to the fourth century. In the fifth century, St. Augustine commented on the feast, “This venerable day has dawned, the day that surpasses all the festivals of the saints, this most exalted and solemn day on which the Blessed Virgin was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory. On this day the queenly Virgin was exalted to the very throne of God the Father, and elevated to such a height that the angelic spirits are in admiration.” St. Jerome observed, “We read how the angels have come to the death and burial of some of the saints, and how they have accompanied the souls of the elect to Heaven with hymns and praises. How much more should we believe that the heavenly army, with all its bands, came forth rejoicing in festal array, to meet the Mother of God, to surround her with effulgent light, and to lead her with praises and canticles to the throne prepared for her from the beginning of the world!”

St. Gregory (594 A.D.), bishop of Tours, declared that “the Lord ... commanded the body of Mary be taken in a cloud into paradise; where now, rejoined to the soul, Mary reposes with the chosen ones.” St. Germaine I (+732 A.D.), Patriarch of Constantinople, speaks thusly to Mary, “Thou art ... the dwelling place of God ... exempt from all dissolution into dust.” And St. John Damascene asserted, “He who had been pleased to become incarnate (of) her ... was pleased ... to honor her immaculate and undefiled body with incorruption ... prior to the common and universal resurrection.”

Finally, in our own time, on November 1, 1950, Peter’s successor, Pope Pius XII, infallibly defined the doctrine of Mary’s Assumption into heaven.

MARY AS MOTHER OF THE CHURCH

Since Christ is Head of his Mystical Body, the Church, it follows that Mary, mother of Christ, is also mother of that body. As we have seen, the early Church Fathers called Mary the new Eve, in that as Eve was our mother by physical generation, so Mary is our mother by spiritual regeneration, in virtue of her Divine Son’s redemption of humanity. In the second century, St. 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.” St. 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.” St. Augustine summarized, “The Mother of the Head, in bearing Him corporally became spiritually the Mother of all members of this Divine Head.”

With regard to Mary’s intercessory role on behalf of the members of the Body of Christ, St. Irenaeus remarked, “He who is devout to the Virgin Mother will certainly never be lost.” St. Augustine addresses Mary, “Through you do the miserable obtain mercy, the ungracious grace, and the weak strength.” St. Jerome wrote, “Mary not only comes to us when called, but even spontaneously advances to meet us.” St. Basil the Great (+379 A.D.), bishop of Caesarea, declared, “God has ordained that she should assist us in everything!” St. John Damascene prayed, “O Mother of God, if I place my confidence in you, I shall be saved. If I am under your protection, I have nothing to fear, for the fact of being your

client is the possession of a certainty of salvation, which God grants only to those whom He intends to save.” St. Ephraem beseeches Mary, “O Lady, cease not to watch over us; preserve and guard us under the wings of your compassion and mercy, for, after God, we have no hope but in you!” St. Fulgentius (+533 A.D.), bishop of Ruspe, stated, “Mary is the ladder of heaven; for by Mary God descended from Heaven into the world, that by her men might ascend from earth to Heaven.” Pope St. Leo the Great (+461 A.D.) observed, “Mary is so endued with feelings of compassion, that she not only deserves to be called merciful, but even mercy itself.”

EPILOGUE

It is evident, then, that Christian devotion to the Mother of our Savior is as old as the Church itself, flourishing during the fourteen centuries prior to the Protestant Reformation. Our contemporary non-Catholic brethren are deprived of their spiritual Mother, who loves them deeply and yearns to have them know of that love. We who have been gifted with this knowledge have an obligation in charity to make Mary known to them and to the world.

As we approach the third millennium of Christianity, let us pray also with our Holy Father that a divided Christendom may be brought into unity by the intercession of Mary, who desires so greatly the gathering of her children into the one fold of Christ, her Son.



NOTES

1Available from the Daughters of St. Paul, 50 St. Paul’s Avenue, Jamaica Plain, Boston, MA 02130.

2Patristic writings may be found in various works. The present article drew upon Peter Brookby’s *Virgin Wholly Marvelous* (Ravengate Press), and the three-volume work of William A. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers* (The Liturgical Press). Other excellent references include such multi-volumed series as *Ancient Christian Writers* (Paulist Press), *The Fathers of the Church* (Catholic University of America Press), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers and The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Eerdmans Publishing Co.).