

Protestants raise an objection to the Catholic devotion to Mary. To their mind it is excessive, if not idolatrous. We exalt her too much, we build churches in her honor, we erect shrines and statues of her in every single church, and we at times almost seem to worship her!

In the face of these objections, Catholics recall the scriptural words of Mary herself, that she spoke in her Magnificat: “*All generations will call me blessed. The Almighty has done great things for me*” (Lk 1:48-49). Any discussion about Jesus Christ, or belief in him, is *utterly* incomplete if the role and significance of Mary is not included.

The liturgical season of Christmas, which contemplates and celebrates the mystery of the Incarnation of the Second Person of Holy Trinity – God’s eternally begotten Son who became man and dwelt among us – must include a contemplation and celebration of the Blessed Virgin Mary. So, on the octave or “eighth day” of Christmas, we celebrate the Feast of the Divine Maternity, Mary Mother of God.

In order to reflect on what it means that God became man and took human flesh, we are led to the woman from whom God took His human flesh. After all, if the Word became “flesh” and dwelt among us (Jn 1:14), what flesh? How?

The Apostolic preaching, and holy Scripture, proclaim that Jesus was like us in all things *but sin* (Hb 4:15). He was totally pure and holy. The Gospel also proclaims emphatically that Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit (Mt 1:18, Lk 1:34-35). His flesh was entirely that of Mary, because he had no human father. Unlike any other human being, Jesus’ body is of the identical physical substance as his mother. In Mary, God has already prepared the physical material that the Eternal Word will unite to Himself in the Incarnation. *The purity of God’s Incarnate flesh already exists in Mary.*

It is inescapable: understanding the truth of the Incarnation leads to the realization that Mary is absolutely unique among all other human beings, and “blessed among women” is an understatement. Far from leading us away from Christ, or compromising the truth of who Jesus is, the Marian doctrines of the Church are necessary for fully understanding Christ. You don’t have salvation without the Incarnation. And you don’t have the Incarnation without Mary.

In the early 400s, a controversy arose in the Church over the common devotional practice of referring to Mary as the “*Theotokos*” or “Mother of God” (literally, “God-bearer”). The priest Nestorius said that addressing Mary as the

“Mother of God” was going too far, because Mary could not be the mother of Christ’s divinity, only his humanity, he said. Nestorius caused a lot of confusion, which was resolved at a Church council held in the city Ephesus in the year 431.

The bishops of the Church, in union with the pope, affirmed at Ephesus that it was not only possible, but necessary to call Mary “*Theotokos*,” the “Mother of God.” Because when the Word took his human nature from her flesh, Jesus Christ did not become two distinct persons, one human and another divine. Mary was the mother of only one single *person*, named Jesus, who is both human and divine.

Jesus, even though he possesses a human nature and is fully human, is nonetheless not a *human person*. Jesus is a Divine Person, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity. Mary is the human mother of a child who is God! Therefore, Mary is most truly and accurately called the *Theotokos*. Maternity is connected with the name, or the personhood of the child, and not just the nature or humanity of the child. Mary’s child has the “name which is above every name” (Phi 2:9), he has the divine name, the name of God. The person to whom Mary is mother, is Jesus, Son of God, eternal Word of the Father. Mary is the “Mother of God.”

Therefore the bishops condemned Nestorius and his heretical teaching which refused to properly honor Mary as the *Theotokos*. Denying this title of Mary in effect denies the Incarnation, or changes it into something it was not.

All Marian doctrines flow from this first truth about Mary, that she was the Mother of God. Our Catholic devotional instinct therefore echoes that of Elizabeth when her cousin Mary first entered her home, pregnant in the new joy of the Incarnation: “Who am I that the *Mother of my Lord* should come to me. Blessed are you among women!” (Lk 1:42-43). To this day, Catholics cannot cease to be amazed, as were Gabriel, Elizabeth, and Mary herself, at the great thing God had done in the Incarnation.

After the Lord’s Prayer, no prayer is as important for Catholics as the “Hail Mary,” because it constantly focuses us on this incredible mystery of the Incarnation, which comes through Mary, and echoes the wonder of those who came into contact with that great event. Gabriel and Elizabeth’s exclamations (Lk 1:28,42-43) become the refrain which since the Council of Ephesus have been perpetually on the lips of Catholics: “*Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus! Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and the hour of our death.*”