

CHURCH TEACHING:

What we celebrate soon is the Immaculate Conception. This does not refer to the conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary, but to Mary's conception in the womb of her mother. So what the Church is saying is that from the moment of her conception, Mary received the grace that we receive at Baptism. It is stating that her life was graced not just when Jesus was conceived, but from the moment her life began, in preparation for her part as the Mother of God, in his plan of salvation. It speaks not of the worthiness of Mary, but more of the gift of God. He will enable to do and be what we are called for.

Mary's life is a story of gift and response. Everything Mary had came from God. She responded by giving her whole life in his service, her whole self, body and soul. God will always accept what we offer, even if its only partial. Mary offered her complete self. The doctrine of the Assumption tells us that God took Mary "body and soul" to be with him in heaven. It is an expression not just of the holiness of Mary, but also of the new life that God has to offer to all those who give their lives to him.



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Up to now, what have you thought about the place of Mary in Christian belief? Do you think that Catholics have gone over the top as far as Mary is concerned? Is there one way of looking at Mary, or does she mean different things to different people? How can I develop real devotion to her?

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 at the hour of our death. Amen

MARY, MOTHER OF THE CHURCH 8



For centuries Mary, the mother of Jesus, has been a source of controversy both in and outside of the Church. In the eyes of some, she has been raised to the status of "goddess", in the eyes of others she has sunk to the depths of being no more than a "human incubator". Both are wide of the mark. She is a human being, one who was central to God's plan of salvation and who plays an huge part in our faith today.

MARY IN SCRIPTURE:

Scripture tells us little of the details of the life of Mary, mother of Jesus. However, on those rare occasions when she is mentioned, we can learn much: firstly, about the importance of her part in God's plan of salvation; secondly, something of her character and thirdly, of the esteem with which she was held by the early Church.

1. At the beginning of Luke's Gospel, we first hear of Mary described as a virgin betrothed to Joseph and the message of God to her is: "Hail, full of grace, The Lord is with you! Blessed are you among women!"

Before Mary has been asked to do anything, she is told that in God's eyes she is graced, blessed among women. Her response to the message is: "Let it be to me according to your Word". It was that sort of submission to the will of God that was to be so characteristic of Jesus, her son.

As we know, Mary's chosen path led to much personal anguish for her. Remember how Mary and Joseph lost Jesus for a whole day and then found him in the temple? In worrying, she reacted as any mother would but, in another way, her reaction was different. Luke says "His mother stored up all these things in her heart" (2:46-50). Most parents would have done a little more than that! But it shows that Mary's role in preparing her son for his mission was vital.

But that does not mean that "her job" was done once Jesus began his public ministry. She was there following him right up to the cross and in John's gospel the last words of Jesus concerned his mother. John's is such a theological gospel that, in Christian tradition, the words of Jesus "This is your mother" are not just addressed to John. He is seen as representing all Christians and so she is given as our mother also.

2. The Magnificat. Perhaps we reveal most about ourselves when we speak. In the Magnificat, Mary opens her heart and reveals her feelings about God and his relationship with his people.

*"My soul glorifies the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my saviour;
He looks on his servant in her lowliness.
Henceforth all ages will call me blessed.*

*The almighty works marvels for me,
Holy his name.*

*His mercy is from age to age
on those who fear Him.*

*He puts forth his arm in strength
and scatters the proud-hearted.*

*He pulls the mighty from their thrones
and raises the lowly,
he fills the starving with good things
and sends the rich away empty.*

*He protects Israel his servant,
remembering his mercy,
the mercy he promised to our fathers,
to Abraham and his sons forever."*

In this song of praise, Mary shows that there is a lot more about her than our pious images might at times suggest. She shows first of all her great humility. Everything she has is a gift from God, the fruit of his mercy. She also reveals her sense of justice. Mary is concerned for the lowly and the starving; the mighty and the rich have had their reward. It is not hard to find a similar vision in the teaching of Jesus. By becoming human, God opened himself up to the possibility of being influenced by mankind (Temptations). Undoubtedly, the greatest influence on anyone is their mother. This goes a long way toward explaining why she is so honoured in the Church today. Mary, the mother of Jesus, played a most important part in the victory achieved by her son.



3. ICONS: Very popular among religious art nowadays are icons. These paintings are most commonly associated with the Eastern (Greek Orthodox) Church. They are religious paintings done in a certain style and, believed to be inspired through prayer. What we can say with certainty is that they reveal the beliefs of the early Eastern Church. Some people's qualities can be better shown in a picture than in writing. In an icon of the Ascension (c.580 A.D.) Mary is placed in the midst of the twelve apostles. It shows Mary as the mother of her Sons's people. This supports our tradition that Mary was held in very high regard in the early Church.