

Meeting 11- Mary and the Saints

1/23/15

What is a Saint?

On the broadest level, a saint is anyone in Heaven with God. Those who are given the title “Saint”, are distinct from a saint. Those with the title of “Saint”, are people who the Church has solemnly proclaimed to have practiced heroic virtue and lived in fidelity to God’s grace. However, a Saint is a saint.

How does someone become a Saint?

They must meet several requirements and steps that the Catholic Church has in order for one to be given recognition of Sainthood. This includes that the person is a saint (i.e. in heaven). If members of a diocese believe that they have a case for one of their departed, they make a petition to a bishop with jurisdiction. He then decides whether to open an investigation of the person’s life. If he gives permission, the investigation is done at least 5 years after the person’s death. After sufficient information has been gathered, the congregation will recommend that the pope makes a proclamation of the Servant of God’s heroic virtue. If granted, the person gains the title “Venerable”. A statement is given by the Church claiming that it is “worthy of belief” that the person is in heaven. This is known as “Beatification”. This requirement is met in one of two ways: the person was a martyr or “confessor”. The pope must make a declaration of martyrdom for martyrs. Non-martyrs are “confessors”, because they “confessed” or bore witness to their faith by how they lived their lives. It must also be prove that a miracle has taken place through his or her intercession. In order to attain the title of “Saint”, at least two miracles must have been performed through the saint’s intercession after his or her death.

Why do Catholics seem to pray to Saints like they do to God?

We pray in the sense of mental communication; we do not pray in the sense of worship. Praying is not the same as worshipping. We pray for the Saints to intercede on our behalf to God. Asking for others to pray for us is often what many Christians do.

Paul himself strongly encouraged Christians to intercede for many different things. **”1** I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— **2** for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. **3** This is good, and pleases God our Savior, **4** who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” (Timothy 2:1-4).

Catholics are simply taking this to its logical conclusion as we do not believe that death severs the bond of Christian unity between us.

Isn’t doing that worshipping the Saints?

To worship a Saint like one does God is wrong. We honor them and ask them to pray/intercede for us, but we do not worship them, for the only one deserving of worship is God.

Why do Catholics care so much about Mary? Aren’t they giving her too much attention and drawing people away from God?

Mary has significant importance. The biggest and most obvious is that she gave birth to Christ and is his mother. She was the most intimately connected person with Christ.

Concerning whether or not we give Mary too much attention and drawing people away from God, Mary's eternal soul actually magnifies Jesus, so to speak. "My soul **magnifies** the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of his maidservant; for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed." (Luke 1:46-49) Mary wants everyone to know about her Son Jesus and she will do anything to help that relationship.

Don't Catholics basically worship Mary?

No. We honor her and ask for her intercession, for she was so intimately connected with Jesus Christ.

What are some dogmas about Mary?

The main Catholic dogmas about Mary are that she was a virgin throughout her life (Perpetual Virginity), conceived free from the effects of original sin (Immaculate Conception), and taken up into Heaven by God at the end of her life (Assumption).

How can Mary have always been a virgin? Didn't Jesus have brothers?

The Bible does refer to certain people as Jesus's brothers, but the word used is not used exclusively for blood brothers, but also for other close relatives and spiritual brothers. We know this is true for one of the people referred to as a "brother of the Lord": in Galatians 1:18-19, Paul says that while meeting Peter he met no other apostles except James, brother of the Lord. But we know the names of the fathers of both the Apostles James, and neither was Joseph. Thus, this apostle was not Jesus's brother, but a cousin or other close relative. Given this, it is certainly possible that those called Jesus's brothers were not sons of Mary.

If Mary was immaculately conceived, wouldn't that mean she wouldn't need a savior?

No. Mary was saved by God's grace the same as we are, but in a different way. Instead of being redeemed from sin as we are, she was kept safe from it, but this required active intervention on the part of God to preserve her from the effects of original sin. Medieval theologians have compared this to the two ways you can save someone from walking into a pit: you can pull them out of the pit after they fall in, or prevent them from falling in before they do so. As long as they would have fallen without your intervention, you have saved them either way.

How is the Assumption different from the Ascension?

There is a massive and fundamental difference between the Assumption and the Ascension, which is indicated in their names: Jesus ascended into Heaven, that is, He went there on His own power, while Mary was assumed into Heaven, that is, she was taken up by the power of God like Elijah or Enoch. The difference is equivalent to the difference between the Resurrection and the raising of Lazarus. It is important to remember this distinction because it is a reminder that Mary was only one of God's creatures, while Jesus was Himself God.

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What is the Immaculate Conception?

The Immaculate Conception is the belief, which is a dogma of the Catholic faith, that Mary was conceived preserved from the effects of original sin, due to the intervention of God, in order for her to be a more fitting vessel for Jesus. The term is often misapplied to refer to the Virgin Birth of Jesus (technically, Jesus was immaculately conceived, too, but that's kind of obvious).

Why do Catholics believe in it?

Catholics believe Mary was immaculately conceived as a fitting (but not necessary: see below) preparation for her role as the mother of Jesus. God gave her this gift to keep her purified, so that the body that carried Him would not be weakened by sin and concupiscence. It was also in keeping with her role as the new Eve, who would consent to rather than reject God's will, that she be free from original sin when she did so, as Eve was when she rejected God. Another indication comes from the comparisons between her and the Ark of the Covenant, since the Ark carried the Word of God and she carried the Word made Flesh, Jesus. There were very strict rules about how the Ark was to be kept sanctified and purified; similarly, Mary was kept sanctified from sin by her Immaculate Conception. While the Early Church Fathers were not universal in support of this doctrine as they are for her virginity, the majority nonetheless supported it, particularly in the Eastern Church.

There is no Scriptural proof of the Immaculate Conception, but there are indications of it in Scripture. One is Gabriel calling Mary "full of grace": we are cut off from grace by original sin, and normally restored to it by Baptism, but there was no Baptism in Mary's time, so she had to have received this grace in a different way. This does not prove the whole doctrine, since we believe she received more than we do at Baptism, but it gets a large part of the way there. Some Catholics argue that it goes further because the way it is phrased in the original language implies this is a permanent condition, while a similar use of the term grace by St. Paul to describe the salvation brought about by Jesus (which we receive in Baptism) does not, indicating that we fall from grace, but Mary did not. However, this argument may be stretching things.

In addition to this and the passages about the Ark of the Covenant, another scriptural argument comes from Genesis 3:15, where God promises to put enmity between the women and the serpent, and her offspring and his. Since we believe this to be fulfilled by Mary giving birth to Jesus, who was an enemy to all works of the Devil, it is argued that for her to be completely an enemy of the serpent, she must have never gone along with his temptations, and thus never sinned. Once again, this argument is not a solid proof, but it is evidence for the belief.

Was the Immaculate Conception necessary to bring about Jesus's birth?

No. It is occasionally implied that it was necessary for Mary to be conceived without original sin, so that she could bear Jesus, who was also without sin. But this is obviously wrong because the Immaculate Conception requires Mary's mother to conceive someone without original sin when she had it herself. Jesus could have been born of someone who had original sin; however, He decided it would be more fitting, given her unique role as the mother of Jesus, to give her this special gift.

How do you reconcile the Immaculate Conception with the statement of St. Paul that “all have sinned”?

St. Paul's statement was about the general rule of human behavior; he did not bother to give exceptions because they do not alter his point. Other exceptions can be found: the most obvious is Jesus, but He's obviously a very special case, but the other would be anyone who died before reaching the age of reason, since he is clearly speaking here about personal, not original, sin.

What is the Assumption?

The Assumption is the Catholic dogma that Mary, at the end of her life on Earth, was taken up, or “assumed”, into Heaven, body and soul, by God. Interestingly, this dogma does not state that Mary did not die; many, if not most, theologians, have believed that she did but that her body was then taken up into Heaven to be reunited to her soul. This is why the Eastern Church celebrates the dormition, or “falling asleep”, of Mary, and there is a site in Jerusalem that claims (although this is far from certain) to be the empty tomb of Mary.

What reasons are there to believe in it?

Catholics believe in the Assumption for several reasons. The doctrine is connected to the Immaculate Conception, in that many writers argue that since Mary was saved from original sin, she was also preserved from the corruption and destruction of the body that comes as the consequence of original sin. The comparison to Enoch and Elijah are also noted: if God has given this honor to any of His servants, does it not make sense that He would give it to the greatest of them? In addition, it is believed that God did this as a sign of hope for us in the bodily resurrection at the end of time: Jesus had already ascended, body and soul, into Heaven as the clearest sign of this, but He was God, so the presence of Mary in the perfected heavenly body that all of us will one day receive gives us hope that this is not only something that is true for God, but also for human beings who serve Him.

One interesting negative argument is made for the Assumption. The early Church was extremely devoted to preserving the remains and burial sites of its saints, and relics and tombs of nearly all the Apostles have been claimed in different places (although the veracity of some is disputable). However, it has never claimed any relics of Mary, and the only tomb of Mary claimed is in Jerusalem*, and empty: it is said that in the 5th century, the emperor asked the keepers of this tomb for relics of Mary's body, and received the response that it was not there, God having taken it up into Heaven. (Remember, the Church does not say that Mary did not die before the Assumption, and most theologians believe she did).

The doctrine did arise much later in Church History than most others, and the nature of this is too long and convoluted to write down here, but I will be able to talk about it if anyone brings it up.

*Technically, a town in Turkmenistan (which, for those not up on geography, is 4600 km away from Israel) claims Mary's tomb, but it also claims that she travelled there with Jesus after the crucifixion, since Jesus did not actually die on the cross, but instead moved there and lived out his life in this small town with His mother.

What does the Perpetual Virginity of Mary mean?

Exactly what it sounds like it means: this is the Catholic dogma that Mary was a virgin throughout her life. Catholics and Protestants share a belief in the Virgin Birth: both believe

that Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus, who had been miraculously conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit. The difference is that Catholics believe Mary remained a virgin for the rest of her life as well.

What reasons are there to believe it?

One reason is that belief in it was common to almost all Christian writers before the Reformation (and some of the Reformers), except a few heretics who were condemned for doubting it by other Christians. These writers commonly believed that she remained a virgin her whole life to emphasize that her body had played a unique in bringing forth God-made-man by keeping it from the usual process of sex and birth.

One piece of Biblical evidence given is Mary's question in Luke 1:34: "How shall this be, for I have no relations with a man?" At first glance, this seems like an obvious question for her to ask: how will I give birth if I haven't had sexual relations? But we know she was already engaged to be married at this time: if you told a woman preparing to be married that she was going to have a child, wouldn't she assume that you meant she would have one with her husband once they married? Many Catholic writers, therefore, believe Mary and Joseph were already planning to live chastely, that Mary had decided to be a virgin and was marrying Joseph so that he could look after and care for her, rather than for the more usual reasons, and this was why she asked this question.

Finally, most arguments against the virginity of Mary assume Mary had other children. But in John's Gospel, Jesus on the cross commits Mary to the care of St. John. If Jesus had brothers, they would be have been expected to look after Mary. That Jesus committed Mary to the care of John suggests that there wasn't anyone else to look after her. Some argue that Jesus did this because his brothers were not followers of His, or they abandoned Him when He was arrested. But Jesus, being Jesus, knew His followers would return to Him after the resurrection (and, in fact, one of the "brothers" is referred to by Paul as a Christian apostle later), so it's not clear why He would have had a problem with this.

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