

RCIA CLASS 6B –THE CATHOLIC CHURCH’S TEACHINGS REGARDING MARY

I. The Church affirms that Mary is the mother of Jesus Christ, who is God and man. And thus she is rightly called the mother of God.

A. Jesus is the divine person, the Son of God, who has from all eternity a divine nature and took a human nature in the Incarnation. Because the divine person and the human nature cannot be separated, Mary is the mother of this divine person, the Son of God, through His human nature. That is why Elizabeth describes Mary as “the mother of my Lord.” Luke 1:43. Although the term “Lord” could have more general meanings, that term as used by Luke and Elizabeth refers to God. For example, Elizabeth says immediately thereafter, “Blessed are you who believed what was revealed by the Lord.” And thus Mary is the Mother of God, that is, the Mother of the Son of God in His human nature.

B. The issue came to a head when Nestorius, the patriarch (a leading archbishop) of Constantinople from 428 – 431, denied that Mary is truly the Mother of God, saying that instead she is only the mother of the human Jesus. He believed that there were two persons, the divine Son of God who has a divine nature and a separate person, the human Jesus Christ, whom he believed to be morally united with the Son of God, but not the same person.

B. After a heated dispute, the ecumenical (universal) Council of Ephesus defined in 431 that Mary is truly the Mother of God because there is the same person, the Son of God, who shares the divine nature with the Father and the Holy Spirit, took on human nature through Mary. The divine and human saviors are not two persons but one. Pope Sixtus III then approved this Council’s conclusions in 432.

C. In addition to clarifying who Jesus is, knowing that Mary is the Mother of God gives implications for her universal and exalted role in salvation history, especially as the Queen Mother and as the Mother of the Church, the body of Christ. All motherhood participates in Mary’s perfect motherhood.

II. The Church also teaches that Mary was a virgin throughout her life on earth. She was married to Joseph but they maintained celibacy as well.

A. Mary was and is a virgin before, during and after the birth of Jesus. Although it was not a common practice, Mary probably took a vow of virginity at an early age. There were at the time some groups, often called Essenes, whose full members did take monastic like vows.

B. . Scripture clearly says Mary was a virgin until the birth of Jesus. See Matt. 1:25, Luke 2:7. It does not clarify whether such was the case later. The word “until” did not mean that the situation changed afterward. See, e.g., Gen. 28:15; Psalms 110:1; Matt 28:20 (“I will be with you always until the end of the age.”) However, it would seem that Mary had taken a vow of virginity because she asked the angel Gabriel how she could bear a son. See Luke 1:34. If she intended to have relations with Joseph after their marriage, the question would be easily answered.

C. The references to Jesus as the first born son of Mary does not imply that there were more sons. The “first born” was a title given regardless of whether there were other children. See Ex. 12:2; Lev. 18:15.

D. Likewise, the references to Jesus’ “brothers,” see e.g., Mark 3:31-35, 6:3, 1 Cor. 9:5, do not imply Mary had other children. The Greek word used here (adelphoi) mean close relatives generally. See Gen. 13:8, 14:14; 29:15.

- The Gospel according to Matthew describes the mother of two of Jesus’ “brothers,” James and Joseph, as “the other Mary.” See Matt 13:55, 28:1.

- Some Catholic theologians, although a minority, argue that Joseph was a widower and had children by his previous marriage. See, e.g., Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Book II, ch. 1.

E. Thus, the Church Fathers and councils have affirmed Mary as ever virgin.

1. St. Jerome, the patron saint of Scriptural scholars, wrote a treatise in or about 383 entitled On The Perpetual Virginité of Mary, which argued for this point.

2. The Second Council of Constantinople (554), an ecumenical (i.e. universal and binding) council of the Church referred to Mary twice as ever-virgin, although that was not the issue that the council was called to address.

3. The Lateran Synod of Rome (which was not an ecumenical council, but was a very prestigious gathering) said in 649 that Mary was ever virgin, a phrase that is in a Eucharistic Prayer used at Mass at least from the 4th century to the present.

4. In the last chapter of Lumen Gentium, The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the Vatican II Council confirmed this teaching, referring to Mary as “ever Virgin.” Lumen Gentium 52.

F. As both married and also as ever virgin, Mary is the model for both the married and the single. And thus, with St. Joseph, she unites both vocations together. The status of Mary as both Mother and Virgin is part of the basis for religious sisters in the Catholic (and also Orthodox) Churches, a vocation not as common elsewhere.

III. The Church teaches that Mary was conceived free of original sin (the Immaculate Conception) and remained free of sin her entire life.

A. The archangel Gabriel greeted Mary with a very unusual accolade, “Hail, full of grace.” The term “full of grace” seems almost to be a title for her. The implication is that nothing reduces the grace in her soul, as sin would. As the thirteenth century Franciscan theologian Blessed Duns Scotus explained, Jesus saved her by “preventative grace,” which kept sin from her, rather than redeeming her from sin already incurred. In an analogous way, it is a greater work for a doctor to prevent a sin than to cure it. Thus, Jesus is the Savior for Mary as for everyone else of the human race, but His salvation prevented her from ever being afflicted by sin.

B. This belief was common among Catholics from an earlier era, but became the subject of theological debates in the High Middle Ages. There was, for example, an extended debate between Franciscans (who tended to support belief in the Immaculate Conception) and Dominicans, who tended in the other direction. But almost all theologians in the Catholic Church agree that Mary was free of personal sin. See, e.g., St. Thomas Aquinas, The Three Greatest Prayers, III (A) (1). This affirmation of the Immaculate Conception became the subject of a universal feast (a high liturgical day) of the Church 1708. In 1854, after consulting the bishops of the Church, Pope Pius IX defined belief in the Immaculate Conception as infallible dogma in Ineffabilis Deus.

C. Mary is the new Eve. Like the first Eve, she was conceived without original sin; however, unlike the first Eve, she resisted temptations and remained sinless. She draws us to this perfect freedom from sin by her example and our devotion to her.

IV. The Church teaches that, at the end of her earthly life, Mary was assumed body and soul into heaven.

A. Forty days after the Resurrection. Jesus ascended of His own power into heaven. But He wanted His mother Mary to be there in fullness of humanity as Mother and Queen of the Church.

B. Part of the idea is that Mary, as the new Eve, would fittingly be with Jesus, the new Adam, both body and soul in heaven. Or to put it another way, Jesus is the King of the Church, and also wanted the Queen and Mother to be in heaven, body and soul with Him.

C. Psalms 45 and 132 refer to the Queen and the Ark of the Covenant being brought to the King and to God. In addition to their historical meaning, these images are prefigurations of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Thus, Revelation 13 refers to the opening of the new and final Ark of the Covenant in heaven and the woman clothed with the sun in the same breath. Both are images of Mary.

D. After requests from 113 cardinals, 1500 bishops, 82,000 priest and religious, and about 8 million laity over the course of a century, Pope Pius XII defined this dogma in 1950 in the encyclical Munificentissimus Deus.

E. This dogma both further clarifies Mary's role as reigning as Queen and Mother in Heaven, gives a more profound sense of true feminism, and emphasizes the true importance of the human body and human accomplishments, which are as St. Paul says like a seed to the tree of everlasting life. See 1 Cor. 15:42-44.

V. And so we venerate and call upon the Blessed Virgin Mary above all the angels and saints, as the Mother of Jesus and thus the Mother of God and the Mother of the Church.

A. Jesus performed His first miracle at her request; and, being a good son, would want His people to give her honor. See John 2:1-11.

B. The Book of Revelation presents "the woman clothed with the sun" who bears the Son and who is the mother of all the faithful. See Rev. 12:1-8. We identify this woman with both Mary and the Church, of whom she is the Mother. "By her motherly love she

cares for her Son's brothers and sisters who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and difficulties. . . . She shines forth on earth, until the day of the Lord shall come, a sign of certain hope and comfort to the people of God." Lumen Gentium 62, 69.