

Questions About Mary

Questions addressed to a Catholic Priest. From “Radio Replies”.

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(Father Rumble is himself a convert to the Catholic faith and is ideally placed to answer questions from non-Catholics about the Catholic Faith,)

Q. Let us turn to those dogmas concerning your goddess Mary.

It would be mortal sin for any Catholic to regard Mary as a goddess. If a Catholic expressed such a belief to a Priest in confession, he would be refused absolution unless he promised to renounce such an absurd idea. If you wish to attack Catholic doctrine, at least find out what Catholics do believe before you begin.

Q. If you call her Queen of Heaven, do you not do her an injustice in refusing to her the title of goddess?

It would be the greatest possible injustice to regard her as a goddess. It is just however, to honor her even as God has honored her, which we Catholics do. Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords, and His mother certainly possesses queenly dignity, holding the highest place in Heaven next to her Divine Son. But that does not, and cannot change her finite and created human nature. To regard her as a goddess would be absurd.

Q. Yet you insist that she is the Mother of God!

Jesus Christ is true God and true man, and as He was born of Mary, she is truly the Mother of God. The Second Person of the Blessed Trinity was born of her according to the humanity He derived from her. She is not a goddess, for God did not take His Divine Being from her. But she is the Mother of God since the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity was truly born of her in His human nature.

Q. How could Mary be the mother of the One who created her?

Mary owed her being, of course, to God, but this under the aspect of His eternal Nature. Subsequent to her creation, that human nature was born of her which the Son of God had assumed to Himself. She was, therefore, the mother of Christ. But Christ was one Divine Person existing in two natures, one eternal and divine; the other temporal and human. Mary necessarily gave birth to a being with one Personality and that Divine, and she is rightly called the Mother of God.

Q. Does not the Catholic Church insist also upon the biologically impossible dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary herself?

The dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary has nothing to do with biology. It does not mean that she was conceived miraculously in the physical sense. She was normally conceived and born of her parents, Joachim and Ann. But in her very conception, her soul was preserved immaculate in the sense that she inherited no stain of original sin, derived from our first parents.

Q. According to Catholic doctrine, the Sacrament of Baptism destroys original sin. Would you say that Mary did not need Baptism?

Mary did not need Baptism in so far as that Sacrament was instituted for the destruction of original sin. She received that Sacrament in order to participate in its other effects, and chiefly in order to receive the Christian character, which that Sacrament impresses upon the soul.

Q. If Mary was sinless, she could not have needed redemption! Yet is not Christ the Redeemer of every child of Adam?

In so far as the sin of Adam involved the whole human race in condemnation, Mary needed redeeming. But there are two ways of redeeming. God could allow one to be born in sin and then purify the soul by subsequent application of the merits of Christ, or He could, by an anticipation of the merits of Christ, exempt a soul from any actual contraction of original sin. Thus, He exempted Mary from any actual inheritance of the sin, and she owes her exemption to the anticipated merits of Christ. In other words, she was redeemed by Christ by prevention rather than by subsequent purification.

Q. Is there any evidence in Scripture that Mary was indeed never actually subject to original sin?

Yes. In Genesis 3:15, God said to Satan, "I will put enmities between you and the woman... you shall lie in wait for her heel." The radical enmity between Satan and that second Eve, the Mother of Christ, forbids her having been under the dominion of Satan, as she would have been, had she ever contracted original sin in actual fact. In Luke 1:28, we read how the Angel was sent by God to salute Mary with the words, "Hail, full of grace." Grace excludes sin, and had there been any sin at all in Mary she could not have been declared to be filled with grace. The Protestant version translates the phrase as "thou that hast been highly favored." But the Greek certainly implies "completely filled with holiness." However, complaints that our doctrine exempts Mary from the contracting of original sin are becoming more and more rare in a world which is tending to deny original sin altogether, and which wishes to exempt everybody from it.

Q. Saint Paul says that 'One died for all, and therefore all were dead'. 2 Corinth 5:14.

Such texts must be interpreted in the light of other passages where God reveals that Mary was never under the dominion of Satan. Mary is included in these words of Saint Paul juridically in so far as she was born of Adam, but she was not allowed to be born in sin to be afterwards redeemed. She was redeemed by prevention.

Q. Saint John knew the Mother of Christ better than the others, yet he does not mention her Immaculate Conception!

In Revelation 12, he shows clearly his knowledge of the deadly opposition between Mary and Satan. His Gospel he wrote to supplement the Synoptic accounts, and sufficient details had been given concerning Mary herself by Saint Luke. Omission to mention a fact in a given book is not proof that the writer did not know of it, and above all, if it does not fall within the scope of his work.

Q. Did the early Church know anything of this doctrine?

Saint Augustine, in the 4th century, wrote, "When it is a matter of sin we must except the holy Virgin Mary, concerning whom I will have no question raised, owing to the honor due to Our Lord." Saint Ephrem, also in the 4th century, taught very clearly the Immaculate Conception of Mary, likening her to Eve before the fall. The Oriental churches celebrated the feast of the Immaculate Conception as early as the 7th century. When Pope Pius IX defined the Catholic doctrine in 1854 he gave, not a new truth to be added to Christian teaching, but merely defined that this doctrine was part of Christian teaching from the very beginning, and that it is to be believed by all as part of Christian revelation.

Q. Your infallible Church allowed Saint Bernard to remain in ignorance of this doctrine.

Since the Church had not then given any infallible definition on the subject, Saint Bernard naturally could not be guided by it. Saint Bernard believed that Mary was born free from sin, but he was puzzled as to the moment of her sanctification. He thought the probable explanation to be that she was conceived in sin, but purified, as was Saint John the Baptist, prior to her actual birth. But he did not regard this opinion as part of his Faith. Meantime his error was immaterial prior to the final authentic decision of the infallible Church. Saint Bernard believed all that God had taught and all that the Catholic Church had clearly set forth in her definitions prior to his time.

Q. Did not Saint Thomas Aquinas deny the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception?

His opinion was probably much the same as that of Saint Bernard. Before the definite decision of the Church was given, theologians were free to discuss the matter. But the Church has since defined that the soul of Mary was never subject for a single moment to the stain of original sin. Both Saint Bernard and Saint Thomas would have been very glad to have had the assistance of such a definition.

Q. Why did the Church withhold that honor from Mary for so long a time?

Since Mary always possessed that honor, the Church did not withhold it from her. The definition that Mary did possess such an honor was given by the Church when necessity demanded it. There was no real dispute about this matter in the early Church. In the Middle Ages, theologians attempted a deeper analysis of the privileges of Mary and, with no infallible decision of the Church to help them, some theologians arrived at defective conclusions chiefly because of the defective psychology of the times. Some theologians held that Mary was preserved from original sin from the very moment of her conception; others said from the moment of her animation; yet others that she was purified at a moment subsequent both to her conception and to her animation. All admitted that she was sanctified prior to her actual birth. Now that the Church has spoken, there is no doubt on the subject.

Q. Did not Franciscans and Dominicans attack each other bitterly over the Immaculate Conception?

They indulged in much controversy, but it was a free matter for discussion until the Church had given her definite ruling. The Catholic Church demands unity in doctrines, which have been definitely decided, liberty in matters still undecided, and charity always. I admit that her ideals of charity have not always been maintained by her wayward children in theological controversies, but that is no fault of the Church.

Q. Did not Philip III and Philip IV ask the Popes Paul V, Gregory V, and Alexander VII to define the Immaculate Conception in order to stop the wrangling, the Popes replying that the doctrine was not definable as not being in Scripture?

The Popes have never given such a decision. Paul V in 1617 forbade anyone to teach publicly that Mary was not immaculate. Gregory V in 1622 ordered the discussion to stop until the Church should have given an official decision. Alexander VII said that the Immaculate Conception of Mary was the common doctrine of the Church and that no one must deny it. None of these Popes gave a dogmatic definition, but rather a disciplinary ruling. Pope Pius IX defined the doctrine finally in 1854.

Q. Why call Mary a virgin, seeing that she was a mother. The linking of the two terms is an insult to reason.

The assertion that an omnipotent God is limited by the natural laws, which He Himself established, is an insult to reason. Jesus, the child of Mary, was conceived miraculously without the intervention of any human father, and was born miraculously, Mary's virginity being preserved throughout. I do not claim that any natural laws were responsible for this event. I claim that God was responsible, and the only way you can show that the doctrine is not reasonable is by proving that there is no God, or that He could not do what Catholic doctrine asserts.

Q. Where does it say in Scripture that Mary was ever a virgin?

Isaiah the prophet (Isaiah 7:14) certainly predicted a supernatural and extraordinary birth of the Messiah when he wrote, "The Lord Himself shall give you a sign. Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son; and his name shall be called Emmanuel." Saint Luke says, "The angel Gabriel was sent from God... to a virgin... and the virgin's name was Mary." When Mary was offered the dignity of becoming the mother of the Messiah, a privilege to which any Jewish maiden would ordinarily look forward with eager desire, she urged against the prospect the fact that she had no intention of motherhood. "How shall this be done, because I know not man." She does not refer to the past, but by using the present tense indicates her present and persevering intention. The angel assured her that her child would be due to the miraculous operation of the Holy Spirit, and that she would not be asked to forfeit the virginity she prized so highly, and then only did she consent. Luke 1:26-38. When Jesus was born, Mary had none of the suffering usually associated with childbirth. The child was born miraculously, Mary herself in no way incapacitated. She herself attended to her own needs and those of the child. "She brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him up in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger." Luke 2:7.

Q. Did not Mary, to cloak her own sin, persuade Saint Joseph that her child was of the Holy Ghost?

No. That is absolutely false. Mary, saluted by an angel as full of grace, was the purest and holiest woman who ever lived on this earth. And, as a matter of fact, with sublime confidence in God, Mary refrained from explaining the event to Saint Joseph, leaving all to God. As Saint Matthew tells us, "Behold the angel of the Lord appeared to him in his sleep, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, fear not to take unto you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.'" Matthew 1:20. What you suggest has been said by certain people merely because the Catholic Church honors Mary. Their hatred of the Catholic Church is so great that they dislike all she loves, and are willing to overlook any injury to Christ in fostering their hatred. Yet how can they hope to please Christ by dishonoring His mother? Every true child bitterly resents disrespect to his mother, and Christ was the best son who ever lived. The more we honor Mary the more we honor Christ, for the honor we

show her is because of Christ, If He were not the central figure, Mary would have been forgotten long ago.

Q. If Jesus was born of a virgin, why does He say nothing about it?

We do not know that He said nothing about it. The evangelists do not record any special utterances of Christ on this subject, but they do not pretend to record all that He ever said. Saint Luke tells us that when He met the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, "beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded to them in all the Scriptures, the things that were concerning him." Luke 24:27. There is every probability that He explained His advent into this world according to the prophecy of Isaiah. Meantime the Gospels do record the fact that Mary was a virgin, and their words are as reliable in this as when they record the utterances of Christ.

Q. To prove Davidic descent both Matthew and Luke give the genealogy of Joseph, useless were not Joseph the father of Christ.

The genealogy of Joseph was that of Mary also. They were kins-people of the same Davidic stock. The Jews as a rule counted their generations only in the male line, and such a generation alone would appeal to the Jews for whom Matthew above all wrote. The same Saint Matthew records that the angel told Joseph that the child was conceived miraculously by the Holy Ghost and not through the intervention of man. Saint Luke in turn left no doubt as to his mind on the subject when he carefully wrote that "Jesus himself was beginning about the age of thirty years; being (as it was supposed) the son of Joseph." Luke 3:23.

Q. Saint Matthew says that Joseph knew her not till she brought forth her first-born son. Matthew 1:25.

Nor did he. And the expression "till" in Hebrew usage has no necessary reference to the future. Thus in Genesis 8:7, we read that "the raven went forth from the ark and did not return till the waters dried up." That expression does not suggest that it returned then. It did not return at all, having found resting places. Nor does the expression first-born child imply that there were other children afterwards. Thus, Exodus says, "Every first-born shall be sanctified unto God." Parents had not to wait to see if other children were born before they could call the first, their first-born!

Q. Matthew 13:55-56, says, "His brethren James and Joseph, and Simon and Jude, and His sisters, are they not all with us?"

The Jewish expression "brothers and sisters of the Lord" in Scripture merely refers to relationship in the same tribe or stock. Cousins often came under that title. In all nations, the word brother has a wide significance, as when one Mason will call another a brother-mason without suggesting that he was born of the same mother. The same Saint Matthew speaks explicitly of "Mary, the mother of James and Joseph" in 27:56, obviously alluding to a Mary who was not the mother of Jesus but who was married to Cleophas, the brother of Joseph.

Q. There would not be two girls in the one family called Mary.

There certainly could be. And Saint John, 19:25, writes that there stood by the cross of Jesus "His mother, and his mother's sister, Mary of Cleophas." But even here, Mary of Cleophas need not have been a sister in the first degree of blood relationship, but rather of the same lineage in more remote degrees of either consanguinity or affinity.

Q. Why are Protestants, who believe in Scripture, so convinced that Mary had other children?

They are not inspired by love for Christ, or for the mother of Christ, or for Scripture in their doctrine. Their main desire is to maintain a doctrine differing from that of the Catholic Church. But it is a position, which is rapidly going out of fashion. Learned Protestant scholars today deny as emphatically as any Catholic that Mary had other children. When Our Lord, dying on the cross, commended His mother to the care of Saint John, He did so, (apart from spiritual considerations) precisely because He was her only child, and He knew that Mary had no other children to care for her. The idea that Mary had other children is disrespectful to the Holy Spirit who claimed and sanctified her as His sanctuary. It insults Christ, who was the only begotten of His mother even as He was the only-begotten of His Heavenly Father. It insults Mary, who would have been guilty of great ingratitude to God, if she threw away the gift of virginity, which God had so carefully preserved for her in the conception of Christ. It insults Saint Joseph. God had told him by an angel to take Mary to wife, and that the child to be born of her had no earthly father but was the very Son of God. God merely gave Saint Joseph the privilege of protecting her good name amongst the undiscerning Jews, and He chose a God-fearing man who would respect her. Knowing that her child was God Himself in human form, Joseph would at once regard her as on a plane far superior to that of any ordinary human being, and to him, as to us, the mere thought of her becoming a mother to merely earthly children would have seemed a sacrilege.

Q. You urge these privileges granted to Mary as the foundation of your devotion to her, yet Christ said, "Rather blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it."

Would you presume to say that Mary, whom the angel addressed as full of grace, did not hear the Word of God and keep it? You have missed the sense of the passage to which you allude. In Luke 11:27, a woman praised the one who had the honor to be the mother of Christ. Christ did not for a moment deny it, as you would like to believe. The sense of His words is simply, "Yes, she is blessed. But better to hear God's word and keep it, and thus attain holiness, than to be My mother. You cannot all imitate Mary by being My mother; but you can do so by hearing God's word and keeping it." The thought that those who hear God's word and keep it are rather blessed than Mary because she did not is simply absurd. "Henceforth," declared Mary prophetically, "all generations shall call me blessed." Luke 1:48. And Elizabeth saluted her with the words, "Blessed are you among women." Luke 1:42.

Q. How do you prove Mary's bodily assumption into Heaven?

No Christian could dispute the fact that Mary's soul is in Heaven. Christ certainly did not suffer the soul of His own mother to be lost. The doctrine of her bodily assumption after her death is not contained in Scripture, but is guaranteed by tradition and by the teaching of the Catholic Church. That Scripture omits to record the fact is no argument against it. Omission is not denial. Meantime early traditions positively record the fact, and negatively we note that, whilst the mortal remains of a Saint Peter and of a Saint Paul are jealously possessed and honored in Rome, no city or Christian center has ever claimed to possess the mortal remains of Our Lady. Certainly, relics of Our Lady would be regarded as having greater value than those of any Saint or Apostle, so nearly was she related to Christ. And it was most fitting that the body of Mary, who had been preserved even from the taint of original sin, should not have been allowed to corrupt. After all, it was just as easy for God to take her glorified body to Heaven at once as it will be to take the glorified bodies of all the saved at the last day. However, the definite sanction of this doctrine by the Catholic Church is sufficient assurance of the fact.
