

SOLEMNITY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY, MOTHER OF GOD ~ JANUARY 1

And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ~ Luke 1:43

THE FIRST AND MOST ESSENTIAL TRUTH about Mary is that she is the Mother of God. Mary is the Mother of God because she is the mother of Jesus who is the Son of God. Sacred Scripture reveals this truth about Mary in a couple of passages. First, when the angel Gabriel greeted Mary and declared to her: “Behold... [t]he Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God” (Lk 1:31, 35). In another passage, Mary’s cousin Elizabeth greets her as “the mother of my Lord” (Lk 1:43). Though neither of these passages explicitly refer to Mary as the Mother of God, putting them together it is clear that, if Mary is the mother of the Lord and the Lord is God, then Mary is the Mother of God.

A mother gives her child the nature that she herself has. Mary gave her human nature to her Son, Jesus. She did not give Jesus his divine nature or his divine person. This was not possible because Mary is not divine. She is a creature, and Jesus is the second person of the Holy Trinity. His divine nature and divine person are aspects of his divinity that always existed. Scripture says, “when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman” (Gal 4:4). Mary was that woman. She only gave him his human nature, but a woman does not give birth to a nature; she gives birth to a person and in Mary’s case that person was divine. When the second person of the Trinity became man, he “emptied himself... being born in the likeness of men” (Phil 2:7). Mary is the Mother of God because the eternal Son of God emptied himself of all his glory and freely subjected himself to the entire spectrum of human existence, from the moment of conception in the womb of Mary to his terrible death on the cross. St. Athanasius had a saying: “What was not assumed cannot be redeemed.”



The Annunciation of the Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary, 12th century illuminated manuscript of a German psalter

If Jesus had not fully assumed every aspect of our humanity, then he could not have redeemed us. By proclaiming Mary as truly “Mother of God,” we are safeguarding the truth not only about the Incarnation but also about our redemption and bodily resurrection.

Early in the Church’s history, there was a controversy over this truth. Some people denied that Mary was the Mother of God. They believed that Jesus Christ was divided into two separate persons, the son of Mary and the eternal Son of the Father. They were willing to call Mary the mother of Christ, because to them Christ was a human person. Others saw the error of this thinking and fought to defend the truth that Christ was a divine person with two natures, one human and one divine.

A council of the Church was called to settle the dispute. In 431 AD at Ephesus, the Church declared that Mary could indeed be called Mother of God, because she gave birth to Jesus, the eternal Son of God. This definition made it clear that Jesus is one person, truly God and truly man. The Church declared that Mary was Theotokos, a Greek word that means “God-bearer” (see CCC 495).

Every year on January 1 we celebrate the gift of Mary’s divine motherhood. We remember her humble acceptance of this great gift when the Angel Gabriel came to her and remember her cooperation with the Holy Spirit when he came and overshadowed her. Inspired by her example, we pray: “Father, ... [m]ay her prayer, the gift of a mother’s love, be your people’s joy through all ages. May her response, born of a humble heart, draw your Spirit to rest on your people” (*The Roman Missal*, Opening Prayer).

(CCC 466, 495)

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