

## "HOLY MARY, MOTHER OF GOD"

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*And Mary said: Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word. (Lk. 1:38).*



WHEN the Virgin Mary pronounced these words, lo! the ineffable mystery of the Incarnation was consummated. The Son of Justice, eternally generated in the bosom of His Father, by the miraculous operation of the Holy Ghost, became man. This was the point, the moment in the fullness of time when a virgin conceived a God in her womb. This was the prelude to the temporal birth of the Word from the chaste and immaculate one, the fairest of the daughters of Israel. Mary, the "virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David," became the Mother of God. Holy Mother Church joyfully sings to her in her own Office the lines:

"O glorious Lady! throned on high  
Above the star-illuminated sky;  
Thereto ordained, thy bosom lent  
To thy Creator nourishment."

Every one of the faithful exults in this great dignity of the Queen of Heaven and Earth. The Abbé Orsini has dramatically described how, centuries ago, the faithful of the city of Ephesus thronged before the Council hall where the Church Fathers were deliberating the Nestorian question. It was in the year 431, a date famous in the history of the Church. Within the building about two-hundred and fifty bishops were assembled under the leadership of Cyril, the venerable Patriarch of Alexandria. Nestorius had denied the oneness of Person in Christ, asserting that there were two persons, one divine, one human. Consequently, he denied Mary's divine motherhood, holding that she was but the mother of the human person of Christ. The time was close at hand for an announcement of the Fathers' decision. The people awaited the appearance of Cyril. What would the answer be? Of course it could only be that which they already believed and for which they would gladly die. But for the greater honor of the Holy Virgin and for the peace of the Church they wanted the answer once and for all. At length Cyril stood before the great doors of the Council hall. The noise of the

crowd abated, the vast multitude was hushed. Cyril, filled with emotion, but in a loud, clear voice uttered the words: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners." The Council had condemned the heresy of Nestorius. Mary truly was the Mother of God.

For us, who are Catholics, it is natural to praise Mary as God's mother. But why do so many outside the Church object to join in the affection due to our Lady as Mother of God? It is because they do not properly comprehend and realize the import of that glorious title.

What is the meaning of the title? To answer this question we must first understand the concept of motherhood, and what it implies. For motherhood three conditions are required:

1. *The origin of a living being from a living being:* thus, Christ has His human nature and human life from His human mother.
2. *From a conjoined principle:* i.e., a consubstantial principle; or from the very substance of the one generating. Mary gave the matter from which the body of Christ was formed, just as other mothers furnish the substance of their bodies for their offspring and dispose it for conception. Of Mary St. Thomas says: "She furnished the matter and coöperated actively before conception, by preparing the matter that it might be fit for conception." *Summa Theol.* IIIa, Q. 32, a. 4.
3. *According to likeness of nature:* so that the act of generation by its nature tends to impress the nature of the one generating upon the one generated. Mother and her Son share in the same nature because of the act of generation whose end is to form one like to the generator in nature. In this, the function of Mary is the very same as that which other mothers have, in whom the whole process of itself tends to communicate a likeness of nature.

A nature does not exist of itself; that is, it has not its own subsistence, since it is only that *by which* a thing is such as it is. A "supposit," in rational beings called a "person," is that which properly *is* and properly acts. The principle of subsistence completes the *nature* as an extrinsic form and renders it altogether incommunicable to another, establishing the *supposit*. The supposit is the whole subject, the nature part of the subject. The nature subsists in the supposit. Now in Christ, human nature, though perfect and complete as nature, has not its own subsistence because nature is always a principle *by which*, a part; not a principle *which*, the whole. Where then

is the subsistence of Christ's human nature? In the divine supposit, in the Person of the Word, for the Hypostatic union is the union of the divine and human natures in the Person of the Word.

Christ receiving human nature from Mary, and Mary being His true mother according to the flesh, she fulfilling the three conditions for maternity (and over and above that, conceiving miraculously, i.e., without the seed of man), how can Mary be said to be God's mother? Mary is called the Mother of God because she brought forth a Divine Person. This can be demonstrated in the following way, based on the argument proposed by St. Thomas in the Thirty-fifth Question, article four of the Third Part of the *Summa Theologica*:

It is evident that she who conceived and gave birth to God, should be called the Mother of God, for conception and parturition belong to motherhood. Now the Blessed Virgin Mary conceived and brought forth God. This needs proof. For, to be conceived and to be born is attributed to a person according to that nature in which he is conceived and born. A person subsists in a nature and a person is the subject of conception and of birth, while nature is the term. Only a person is a subject which is born, because being properly belongs to a *subsistent* thing, and hence what subsists of itself (a person) is said properly to be made and to be born. Nature is the term of birth. Nature is the form, the principle *by which*, the part. The term of any generation is a form, and nature is signified after the manner of a form. Nature is said to be inasmuch as it subsists in the person itself.

Now to be conceived and to be born of the Blessed Virgin belonged to the Son of God according to his human nature. The formal term of this generation was the human nature of Christ communicated from Mary; the subject, the Person of the Word, properly said to be. Mary could not bestow divine nature upon Christ. That would run into the false notion of Nestorius concerning Mary's motherhood. He contended Mary could not have been the mother of God because this would necessarily imply a contradiction, namely, that God, like pagan gods from human mothers, begot a divine son from a human mother, or that a human mother endowed her son with a divine nature; an inference flowing from his erroneous conception of the Hypostatic Union and of the nature of generation. But because of the Hypostatic Union where the divine and human natures were united substantially in the Person of the Son of God, at the very moment when Mary gave her consent to the angel, she conceived her divine Son. The foundation for the relation of motherhood is the act of conception. Holy Mother Church



has defined that the conception of Jesus and assumption of human nature by the Person of the Word took place in the same instant. Hence, supposing that Mary had conceived a mere man, even though before his birth his human personality was taken away, and in the very instant of removal the human nature was assumed by the Person of the Word, Mary would not deserve the title "Mother of God"; having conceived a man, she would have been the mother merely of a man.

Briefly, therefore, the argument resolves to this:

A mother brings forth a person, a son.

She brings forth a nature in that son like to her own.

For Mary to be God's mother it was necessary, therefore, only to bring forth a Divine Person subsisting in human nature, not to generate a Divine Nature.

This she did in the Incarnation, because of the Hypostatic Union.

Let us recur again to another of Mary's hymns and remind her of her great title by singing:

"Blest be the herald angel's tongue,  
O'er thee God's shadowing Spirit hung,  
And filled thy womb whence issued forth  
The long-desired of all the earth."

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