

The two primary sources for Catholic doctrine are the Scriptures and Sacred Tradition. Sacred tradition is found in the teachings and practices of the early Church, beginning in the apostolic age and explained and defended by the Church Fathers and Church Councils. Together scripture and sacred tradition form Divine Revelation, and there is never a conflict between them when they are correctly understood. It is the teaching authority of the Church (the Magisterium) which consistently interprets and applies God's revelation with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Like all Catholic doctrines, Marian doctrine is derived from both the scriptures and sacred tradition. Sacred tradition helps the Church interpret what is sometimes only implicit in the scriptures. It gives us the “rest of the story,” as Paul Harvey would say. Saint Paul attests to the primary importance of this tradition: “Therefore, brothers, stand firm and hold fast to the *traditions* that you were taught, either by an oral statement or a letter of ours” (2 Thessalonians 2:15). These are not the traditions of man; they represent the faith handed on to the Church, “the pillar and foundation of truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). We also know from the testimony of the apostle John that the gospels do not, and cannot, contain every word and deed of Jesus. John’s was the last of the four gospels, published around 90 C.E. John ends his story of Jesus with a disclaimer: “There are many other things that Jesus [said and] did, but if all of these were to be described individually, I do not think the whole world would contain the books that would have been written” (John 21:25). So what did the very early Church, the generation to which the apostles handed on the true faith, believe about Mary? The earliest Church leaders and their communities are the ones most directly connected to the teachings of the apostles and therefore the teachings of Jesus himself. We will look at the New Testament scriptures, the writings of the

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Church Fathers and the practice of the early Christian communities in the first through fourth centuries to find the answer.

The Gospel of Luke gives us an insight into the role of Mary in the Infancy Narrative. In chapter one beginning in verse twenty eight, we read about the Annunciation. "In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary" (Luke 1:26,27 NAB). Gabriel addresses her with honor: "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you" (1:28). The angel then proceeds to tell Mary that she is going to become pregnant and bear a son, and that he would be "the Son of the Most High" (1:32). Mary is confused, especially since she has not had, and does not intend to have, sexual relations with a man. Gabriel explains, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Most High will overshadow you, and therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Mary responded freely with her heart completely open to the will of God: "Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word" (1:38).

Luke, the author of this gospel and the Book of Acts, was not one of the Twelve apostles. Many scholars believe that he may have been a disciple of Paul who was mentioned in some of Pauline epistles. The prologue of his gospel makes it clear that he was not a member of the first generation of Christian disciples but was dependent on the traditions that he received from others who were eye witnesses (New American Bible commentary). Mary must have told the apostles and others the story about how she was surprised by the angel and how he announced to her the Good News of the Incarnation. It became a part of the oral tradition and remained so until Luke wrote it down. The oral tradition of the early Christian communities,

which stemmed from the teaching and preaching of the Apostles (in Greek - the kerygma), eventually became the Gospel of Luke.

Luke continues the infancy narrative by relating the story about how Mary visited her cousin, Elizabeth, who the angel had mentioned. Mary was informed that Elizabeth was also pregnant. She too greeted Mary with honor, "Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Luke 1:42). The entire Infancy Narrative takes place in less than five pages. For the "rest of the story" we will have to turn to Sacred Tradition. Just what was the tradition about the role of Mary handed on by the apostles and circulated among the earliest Christian communities? Did they continue to venerate Mary as the Angel Gabriel and Elizabeth did?

Some of the earliest indicators that Mary was honored by the Christian communities of the first century and beyond are depictions of her in the Roman catacombs. These were underground sanctuaries built and used by early Christian communities as a gathering place. It is there that they gathered to escape the Roman persecution, to pray together, support one another, Break Bread (celebrate the Eucharist), teach, learn and bury their dead. The beliefs and devotions (called simply the "Way") of the early Christian communities have always been depicted in art. Art was a way to retell the story and enkindle devotion within the mostly illiterate culture of the time. "As early as the end of the first century to the first half of the Second century, Mary is depicted in frescos in the Roman catacombs both with and without her divine Son. Mary is depicted as a model of virginity with her Son at the Annunciation, at the adoration of the Magi, and as the orans, the praying one, the woman of prayer" (Miravalle 4,5)

In one of the catacombs of Saint Agnes researchers have found a fresco that depicts Mary situated between saints Peter and Paul with her arms outstretched to both. This is very

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significant because it reflects the earliest symbol of Mary as "Mother of the Church." Whenever Peter and Paul are shown together in this art form, it symbolizes the one true Church of Christ, a church of authority and evangelization. Mary's prominent position between them reveals the understanding of the apostolic Church of Mary, the Savior's Mother, as maternally central (Miravalle). The image of Mary on the tombs in the catacombs shows that these early Christians prayed for their dead and asked for Mary's intercession with her Son for special protection and motherly assistance. "As early as the first century, Mary's role as Spiritual Mother was recognized and her protective intercession was invoked" (Miravalle 3). The first Christians never worshiped Mary, but they certainly prayed to her for intercession for both the living and the dead.

Saint Justin Martyr is one of the earliest Christian apologists. He is the first of many of the Church Fathers to use the Eve-Mary parallel to illustrate Mary's role in the plan of salvation. Through a virgin's disobedience death was born (Eve). Through a virgin's obedience the Son of God was born and through him eternal life (Mary).

"The Son of God became a man through a Virgin so that the disobedience caused by the serpent might be destroyed in the same way it had begun. Eve, who was a virgin, gave birth to disobedience and death after listening to the serpent's words. But the Virgin Mary conceived faith and joy...by her response to the Angel, 'Let it be done to me according to your word'"(Luke 1:38) (Saint Justin cited by Gambero 47).

Many other Church Fathers echoed the same Eve-Mary insight of the early Christian communities about Mary's instrumental role in God's plan for our redemption. This concept in no way diminishes the role of Christ as the substantial cause of our redemption. "Just as the harmful action of Eve was subordinate to Adam, on whom fell the primary responsibility for sin,

in the same way the action of Mary, in the order of human salvation, remains absolutely subordinate to the necessary and essential action of Christ, the only Redeemer" (Gambero 48).

Saint Irenaeus can rightly be called the first Christian theologian. He knew Polycarp who was a disciple of John the Evangelist. The writings of Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, give us an insight into the Marian beliefs of the second century. He fought against the Gnostic heresy, expanded the Eve-Mary parallel and Mary's role in the economy of salvation, alongside but always subordinate to her Son. Irenaeus sums up this teaching, "Adam had to be recapitulated in Christ, so that death might be swallowed up in immortality, and Eve (had to be recapitulated) in Mary, so that the Virgin, having become another virgin's advocate, might destroy and abolish one virgin's disobedience by the obedience of another virgin" (Saint Justin as cited by Gambero 55). This Marian insight reflects the early Christian belief in the soteriological (pertaining to salvation) character of Mary's obedience to the will of God within the divine plan of salvation. "Irenaeus affirms, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the active and efficacious presence of the Blessed Virgin in the history of salvation and does so with remarkable determination" (Gambero 56).

At the end of the second century and the beginning of the third, Clement of Alexandria witnessed to the Church's understanding of Mary as the Mother of the Church. "There is one Father of all; there is one Word of all, and the Holy Spirit is one and the same everywhere. There is also one Virgin Mother, whom I love to call the Church" (Clement as cited by Gambero 71). The mystery of the Virgin Mary, mother of our Lord, began at this point to become the archetypal model for the mystery of the Church, with Christians as her spiritual children (Gambero).

By the middle of the third century we see the writings of Origen, who is sometimes called

the Father of Eastern Theology. He replaced Clement as director of the catechetical school of Alexandria. Origen insists that, "Mary was indeed the Mother of God. She was the real and proper Mother of the Son whom the gospel testifies was born of her" (Gambero 73). The title of Mary as the *Theotokos*, God Bearer, originated in Egypt which was Origen's homeland. The perpetual virginity of Mary was also affirmed by Origen as a part of the original deposit of faith. "There is no child of Mary except Jesus, according to the opinion of those who think correctly about her" (Origen as cited by Gambero 75). The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains:

“Against this doctrine (Mary’s perpetual virginity) the objection is sometime raised that the bible mentions brothers and sisters of Jesus. The Church has always understood these passages as not referring to other children of the Virgin Mary. In fact, James and Joseph, the ‘brothers of Jesus,’ are the sons of another Mary, a disciple of Christ who Matthew calls ‘the other Mary.’ They are close relatives of Jesus, according to the Old Testament expression” (CCC 500).

Besides ‘ever-virgin,’ the early Church revered Mary as ‘all holy.’ The title of "All Holy" pertaining to Mary is attributed to the Church in Alexandria and is affirmed in the art and liturgy of the East (Gambero).

By the mid-third century much of the early Cristian belief about Mary can be clearly discerned as testified to by these dedicated, consistent and sometimes prolific early Church Fathers. So far we have seen that Mary was honored and revered by the very early Church, that she is understood to have had a role in the economy of salvation, that she was called the spiritual Mother of the Church, that she was believed to be a powerful means of intercession with her Son

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for her spiritual children, that Mary was rightly called the Mother of God, and that she remained a virgin after the birth of Jesus.

The beginning of the fourth century brought a struggle against the Arian heresy which taught a Christological error - that Jesus was somehow less than God, subordinate to God the Father. If Jesus was not fully God, then Mary wasn't fully the Mother of God. Athanasius was the bishop of Alexandria and was present at the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E. He affirmed Jesus's true divine nature, Mary as the *Theotokos*, and her perpetual virginity. "Let those, therefore, who deny that the Son is by nature from the Father and proper to His essence, deny also that He took true human flesh from the Ever-Virgin Mary. In neither case would it have been profitable for us men: if the Word were not by nature the true Son of God, or if the flesh He assumed were not true flesh" (Saint Athanasius as cited by Jurgens 330). By this time Mary's virginity had also become a paradigm of holiness that would be proposed for imitation by the faithful.

In the early fourth century Ephrem the Syrian, a brilliant teacher and the greatest poet of the patristic age, described Mary as the most marvelous creature who exists after Jesus and the source of the highest inspiration. He insisted on Mary's spiritual beauty and holiness as well as her freedom from any stain of sin (Gambero 110). This was around the year 325, many centuries before the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was declared by Pope Pius IX on December 8, 1854: "The Most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of Almighty God and by the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune of all stain of original sin" (Pius IX. *Ineffabilis Deus*. 1854.). For Ephrem, Mary is also figure or symbol of the Church: "The Church gave us the Living Bread, in place of the unleavened bread that Egypt had given. Mary gave us the refreshing

bread. In place of the fatiguing bread that Eve had procured for us” (Ephrem as cited by Gambero 115). He is also the first author to call Mary the spouse of Christ. He depicts her as praying, “I am mother because of your conception, and bride am I because of your charity” (Ephrem as cited by Gambero 117).

Cyril was consecrated as bishop of Jerusalem in the year 348. He affirmed the theology of the hypostatic union – that in the divine person of Christ, humanity and divinity are inseparable. “This is why the Virgin, even though she gave Jesus his human nature only, is rightly proclaimed to be the Mother of God” (Gambero 137). “Christ is the savior of man only if presented alongside his mother from whom he received the body that made him Emanuel, God with us” (Gambero 139).

Basil was consecrated bishop of Caesarea in 370. Besides founding many monasteries, he established hospitals, shelters, hospices and relief operations, he taught that “God had to collaborate with a woman; the Incarnate Word had to descend from human ancestors” (Gambero 145). Basil’s Marian thought was shaped by his Christology. “Mary was called to collaborate with God the Father by offering her own body” (Gambero 145). She abstained from sexual relations, and is a perfect model of total openness to the action of the Holy Spirit. He also claimed that the teaching about Mary’s perpetual virginity was the consensus of the faithful of his day.

Gregory of Nyssa was a contemporary of Saint Basil. He was one of the greatest theologians and orators of antiquity. Gregory was the first author to purpose the title of *Theotokos*, God-bearer, for Mary. He believed, as did others, that this Marian title is the most consistent with the orthodox faith in Jesus’s divine-human unity. Gregory was also a powerful witness to the power of Mary’s intercession, and he taught about her undiminished virginity. He



also professed that Mary was spiritually purified in advance. In other words, the merit of her Son's sacrifice was applied to her at conception as to provide for him an unblemished vehicle. Gregory called Mary a Temple of the Incarnate Word, and he envisioned her as the Bride of Christ, who is the husband of all consecrated virgins (Gambero).

Saint Ambrose was called to the episcopacy of Milan in 374. He is one of the most important Marian doctors of the Church in the West. He taught that Mary had no defects or imperfections, and that she is the ideal of virginity. Ambrose promoted the imitation of Mary and echoed the Eve-Mary parallel of previous generations. He fought against the Arian heresy claiming that Jesus was indeed fully divine and, at the same time fully human. Mary contributed to human redemption by giving human nature to the Son of God so that he would be capable of suffering and dying. She was the first to receive salvation via her immaculate conception. She was *full of grace* and therefore excluded from the stain of sin. Ambrose saw Mary as the Mother of the Church – which brings salvation to the People of God (Gambero).

Saint Augustine of Hippo, who was converted by Ambrose after much prayer for many years via his mother, Saint Monica, was ordained priest and then bishop in 397. He was the Father of the Church most cited at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Augustine wrote and taught about Mary's predestination, how she was created and chosen by God to bear his Son, not by her merits, but by grace. Through her obedience Christ was conceived in faith, though he had existed before her. Augustine believed that Mary took a vow of virginity and had a mission within the divine economy of salvation. She is a model of the Church because she gave birth to Christ as the Church gives birth to the members of Christ. Augustine wrote that, "The Church ...by receiving the word of God in faith becomes a mother and by preaching and baptism, she brings forth sons, who are conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of God to a new and eternal

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life” (Augustine). He also taught that Mary’s conception was indeed immaculate by God’s grace and the pre-application of the saving death of her divine Son, and she remained free from sin, doing the will of the Father through charity (Gambero).

Finally, at the Church Council of Ephesus in 431, the heresy of Nestorianism was condemned because it denied the truth that Jesus, the Son of God the Father and the Second person of the Blessed Trinity, was truly God and truly man – two natures in one Person (not in two separate persons). Denying this Christology also denied that Mary was the Mother of God. The Council fathers made the teaching of the Church clear. “The One who she conceived by the Holy Spirit, who truly became her Son according to the flesh, was none other than the Father’s eternal Son, the second person of the Blessed Trinity. Hence the Church confesses that Mary is truly the Mother of God” (CCC 495).

As we can see, Mary’s role in the economy of salvation, her conception without sin, her perpetual virginity and the power of her intercession were firm Christian beliefs widely held, substantially developed in the first three centuries and testified to by the constant witness of the early Church Fathers. As the infant Church handed on the faith of the apostles and continued to reflect on the scriptures and the oral teachings (kerygma) guided by the Holy Spirit as Jesus had promised, Marian doctrine developed. The early Church witnesses, mentioned above, attested to the firm beliefs about Mary which were consistently held by Christians since the earliest times. The Second Vatican Council summed up the development of Marian doctrine in the early Church:

“From the earliest times the Blessed Virgin is honored under the title Mother of God, in whose protection the faithful take refuge together in prayer in all their perils and needs. Accordingly, following the Council of Ephesus, there was a remarkable growth in the

cult of the People of God toward Mary in veneration and love, in invocation and imitation, according to her own prophetic words, ‘All generations will call me blessed, because He that is mighty has done great things for me’” (Lumen Gentium 66). .

From the first moment of her existence Mary was destined to become the Mother of God. Mary never distracts our attention from Jesus, instead she draws our attention to him, and focuses our hearts on the infinite self-giving love of God to which we should all aspire. Since the moment of her Immaculate Conception in her mother’s womb, Our Lady has led us to Jesus. From the cross, Jesus commands, “Behold your mother.” He spoke not only to the apostle John but to us and to Christians of every age. As the Savior’s dying gift to us, he leads us back to Mary. For we need the maternal closeness of our Blessed Mother to sustain us when we are overcome by some of the terrifying trails of life. Through Mary’s compassionate presence at the cross, that event becomes for us more deeply human, and it gives us the courage to face life’s sufferings certain in the sure and loving embrace of divine providence. Whenever Mary loves us, she gives us Jesus and, by obeying the Lord in our devout beholding of the Mother of God, we give Mary the chance to speak her “yes” to the second “Annunciation,” the one uttered from the cross when Jesus said, – “Woman, Behold your son.”

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