

Mary, the Immaculate and Ever-Virgin Mother of God

We've been speaking of the *Doctrinal Commentary* published by the Holy See in 1998, which gives a helpful overview of doctrines that Catholics must believe. The first category of teachings it considers is of doctrines that must be absolutely believed with divine faith, because they're infallibly taught by the Church as having been divinely revealed. In March, we looked at the dogmas of Christ as consubstantial with the Father, both fully God and fully man.

Australians tend to be pragmatic in outlook, so we can imagine some people asking, 'Well, what practical difference does it make whether Christ was one person with two natures, or two persons with one nature?' And the same goes for quite a few Church teachings: 'What difference do they make?' Well, in the long term our beliefs do make a huge *practical* difference, because they shape our prayers, our actions, and the prayers and actions of the whole Church, in ways we couldn't predict.

But above all, we believe that truth has a precious value *in itself*: very especially the truth about God; and most especially the truth that God has thought important enough to reveal to the human race. If God thinks it important enough to tell us, we're not on very firm ground if we say to ourselves, 'Well, does it really matter one way or the other?' Divine truth is priceless. And we have a word for those who don't care about the difference between what's true and what's not true. We call them, 'liars'.

So – truth makes a difference. And unless there is an excuse due to ignorance, to deliberately deny or doubt any *divinely revealed* truth implies a rejection of the truthfulness of God. So Catholics have always rightly had a horror of the sin of heresy. And God gives us all these truths expressed in Catholic dogmas not just to hold as empty words, but as things of deepest meaning, to be treasured and pondered in our hearts.

After the Christological dogmas, the next infallible teachings of faith referred to by the Holy See's *Doctrinal Commentary* are what it calls the Marian dogmas; and here its footnote refers to the *ex cathedra* papal definitions of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption.

Long before these two Marian dogmas were defined in modern times, two other foundational doctrines concerning Mary already belonged to infallible Catholic teaching. The first of these, proclaimed by the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431, is that Mary is truly Mother of God (in the Council's original Greek, *Theotókos* – literally 'God-bearer'). This was especially to safeguard the truth that Jesus her Son and the divine Word are the one same person, not two.

Mary, the Council said, is 'Mother of God, not that the nature of the Word or his divinity received the beginning of its existence from the holy Virgin, but that, since the holy body, animated by a rational soul, which the Word of God united to himself according to the hypostasis, was born from her, the Word is said to be born according to the flesh.' (DS 251, quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 466)

The second ancient infallible teaching on Mary is of her perpetual virginity. Though never the direct object of a dogmatic definition, this is included in many statements of faith that name her 'Virgin' or 'ever-Virgin'. The teaching is understood by theologians as being infallibly taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium, constantly set forth as definitive by popes and by bishops around the world.

The *Catechism* (n. 499) refers back to various statements of the Magisterium, and quotes St Augustine as an expression of the constant Tradition: Mary ‘remained a virgin in conceiving her Son, a virgin in giving birth to him, a virgin in carrying him, a virgin in nursing him at her breast, always a virgin.’ (n. 510) Vatican II, in its own reaffirmation of the teaching (*Lumen Gentium* 52, 57), referred to the Lateran Synod under Pope Martin I in 649, which condemned anyone who did not confess ‘that holy Mary, ever virgin and immaculate, is Mother of God, since in this latter age she conceived really and truly, without human seed from the Holy Spirit, God the Word himself, who before the ages was born of God the Father, and gave birth to him without corruption, her virginity remaining equally inviolate after his birth.’ (DS 503)

Then we come to the first of the dogmatic definitions of more recent centuries concerning Mary. Blessed Pope Pius IX, in the Bull *Ineffabilis Deus* of 8th December 1854 (DS 2803), solemnly and infallibly proclaimed the Immaculate Conception to be a divinely revealed dogma:

‘To the honour of the holy and undivided Trinity, to the glory and distinction of the Virgin Mother of God, for the exaltation of the Catholic Faith and the increase of the Christian religion, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul and Our own:

‘We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.

‘Hence, if anyone shall dare – which God forbid! – to think otherwise than as has been defined by Us, let him know and understand that he is condemned by his own judgment; that he has suffered shipwreck in the faith; that he has separated from the unity of the Church.’

Pope Pius XII, in his Encyclical *Fulgens Corona* (1953) proclaiming a Marian Year for the centenary of the definition, affirmed the uniqueness of the Immaculate Conception: ‘It is clearly apparent that there is only one among all holy men and women about whom it can be said that the question of sin does not even arise, and also that she obtained this singular privilege, never granted to anyone else, because she was raised to the dignity of Mother of God.’ (10)

And he noted in the same Encyclical the link to the definition of the events at Lourdes in 1858. (3) ‘It seems’ the Pope wrote ‘that the Blessed Virgin Mary herself wished to confirm by some special sign the definition, which the Vicar of her Divine Son on earth had pronounced amidst the applause of the whole Church. For indeed four years had not yet elapsed when, in a French town at the foot of the Pyrenees, the Virgin Mother, youthful and benign in appearance, clothed in a shining white garment, covered with a white mantle and girded with a hanging blue cord, showed herself to a simple and innocent girl at the grotto of Massabielle. And to this same girl, earnestly inquiring the name of her with whose vision she was favoured, with eyes raised to heaven and sweetly smiling, she replied: “I am the Immaculate Conception.”’