

*The Knights of Columbus presents
The Luke E. Hart Series
Basic Elements of the Catholic Faith*

MARY

PART TWO • SECTION TEN OF
CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY

*What does a Catholic believe?
How does a Catholic worship?
How does a Catholic live?*

Based on the
Catechism of the Catholic Church

by
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A WORD ABOUT THIS SERIES

This booklet is one of a series of 30 that offer a colloquial expression of major elements of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Pope John Paul II, under whose authority the *Catechism* was first released in 1992, urged such versions so that each people and each culture can appropriate its content as its own.

The booklets are not a substitute for the *Catechism*, but are offered only to make its contents more accessible. The series is at times poetic, colloquial, playful, and imaginative; at all times it strives to be faithful to the Faith. Following are the titles in our series.

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SECTION 10: MARY

1. The high place of Mary in Catholicism

It is fitting to conclude Part II by considering Mary because everything in the Catholic religion exists for the single purpose that was most clearly and perfectly fulfilled in her: to conform us to the image of her Son, to make humanity Christlike. Mary shows us the summit of God's success in his "saint-making business," and also the summit of *humanity's* success, how high humanity can rise under God's grace.

She thus shows us ourselves; for what he did for Mary, he wants to do for us. He announced his plan for us: "You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). If we cannot fulfill this divine demand in this life, as Mary did, he will not rest until we have fulfilled it in Heaven. He will not lower his ideal for us, only postpone its fulfillment. We are all "called to be saints" (Rom 1:7).

Saints are made by love (*agape*, charity; see Part II, Section 4, paragraph 13). That is why Mary is the greatest saint: she was full of the most perfect love: both God's love to Mary and Mary's love to God:

— of God’s love to Mary because in Mary God exalted a creature as much as any creature could be exalted. He gave “to the maximum.” That she be prepared to be the Mother of God, he gave her maximum grace. Mary was literally “full of grace.” She was “wholly borne by God’s grace” (C 490) like a perfect surfer on a perfect wave;

— of Mary’s love to God because she also gave “to the maximum;” she obeyed “the first and greatest commandment,” to love God with her whole heart and mind and soul and strength, with perfect charity, simply and purely. As God withheld nothing from her, she withheld nothing from him.

We will show how Mary fits into each of the three main parts of the Catholic faith. 1) First, we will explain the Church’s main Marian *doctrines* as expressed in her main titles: the “New Eve,” the “Virgin Mother,” the “Mother of God,” her “Immaculate Conception,” her Assumption into Heaven, and her role as “Mediatrice of All Graces” (paragraphs 3-8). 2) Next, we will look at Marian *prayer*: both prayers *by* her and prayers *to* her, and the spiritual importance of Mary today in relation to the Church of our day, especially with regard to Marian prophetic apparitions and with regard to ecumenical unity (paragraphs 9-15). 3) Finally, we will summarize Marian *morality*: her faith, her submission, and its fruit, her fearless joy (paragraph 16).

2. The primary objection to Catholic teaching about Mary

Most devout Protestants find the Church’s teachings about and devotions to Mary the single most objectionable

thing about the Catholic religion. On the other hand, most devout Catholics find them the crowning glory of their religion, as Mary is the crowning glory of the human race, “our tainted nature’s solitary boast.” For the most beautiful thing in the universe is a saint; and Mary is the most perfect saint; therefore Mary is the most beautiful thing in the universe. Why would Protestants object to this?

Because they worry that the Catholic Church, in raising Mary so high, obscures the uniqueness and all-sufficiency of Christ. Catholics find this objection strange, for Mary can no more rival Christ than the reflection of a face in a mirror can rival that face. How could Mary obscure Christ? All her beauty is his. She is only his obedient, humble handmaid: that is precisely why she is so highly revered. Mary’s greatness, and Catholics’ devotion to her, is totally dependent on her total dependence on him, beginning at the Annunciation, when her submission to the Word of God made his incarnation and our salvation possible. And her whole effort now, in interceding with him for us in Heaven, and also whenever she appears to anyone on earth, is to point beyond herself to Christ.

In the fundamental formula for Mary – “Mother of God” – is contained the fundamental formula for Christ: true God and true man, i.e. God truly born from this human mother.

Mary is “full of grace,” as the angel announced and as the “Hail Mary” confesses, for this reason: she was filled with grace because she was filled with *Christ*. “To become the mother of the Savior, Mary ‘was enriched by God with gifts appropriate to such a role’¹³²” (C 490), beginning with

her Immaculate Conception. She was the perfect door for the perfect God to enter this imperfect world.

It is no accident that Catholic art, like Scripture, almost always portrays Mary in relation to Christ rather than alone. She is about to conceive Christ (at the Annunciation), or has just given birth to him (at the Nativity), or surrounds his infancy (as the Madonna), or stands at his Cross (at the Crucifixion), or receives his dead body (in the Pieta). Her Assumption is to him; when she is crowned Queen of Heaven, it is by him; and when she appears on earth (as at Fatima or Guadalupe), it is to do his work, to call us to him.

Mary's light is like that of the moon, totally reflected from the sun, the Son of God. This is true in all three dimensions of the Catholic religion: theology, liturgy, and morality. 1) All the Marian dogmas are Christocentric; "[w]hat the Catholic faith believes about Mary is based on what it believes about Christ, and what it teaches about Mary illuminates in turn its faith in Christ" (C 487). 2) "Mary's role in the Church is inseparable from her union with Christ and flows directly from it" (C 964). And 3) Mary is also the perfect moral ideal precisely because of her perfect submission to Christ.

3. Mary as the "New Eve"

This is the earliest of her titles, going back to the first Church Fathers, who see both her and her Son foretold in Genesis 3:15. After Adam and Eve have fallen, God says to the serpent:

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

“At the very beginning there was Eve; despite her disobedience, she receives the promise of a posterity that will be victorious over the evil one ...¹²⁸” (C 489). “This passage in Genesis [3:15] is called the *Protoevangelium* (‘first gospel’): the first announcement of the Messiah and Redeemer, of a battle between the serpent and the Woman [M]any Fathers and Doctors of the Church have seen the woman announced in the *Protoevangelium* as Mary, the Mother of Christ, the ‘new Eve’” (C 410-11). For Mary reverses Eve’s disobedience with her obedience, in cooperation with Christ the New Adam (1 Cor 15:21-22, 45), who reverses Adam’s disobedience by his obedience “unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8).

Where Eve said No, Mary said Yes. Where Eve’s faith failed, Mary’s stood firm. “At the announcement that she would give birth to ‘the Son of the Most High’ without knowing man, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary responded with the obedience of faith . . . : ‘Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be [done] to me according to your word’¹³⁹ (Lk 1:28-38)

“As St. Irenaeus says, ‘Being obedient she became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race.’¹⁴¹ Hence not a few of the early Fathers gladly assert . . . : ‘The knot of Eve’s disobedience was untied by Mary’s obedience: what the virgin Eve bound through her disbelief, Mary loosened by her faith.’¹⁴² Comparing her with Eve, they call Mary the ‘Mother of

the living' and frequently claim: 'Death through Eve, life through Mary'¹⁴³" (C 494).

4. *Mary as Virgin Mother*

The point of the Virgin Birth is not something negative but something positive: Christ's divinity and humanity and her being a mother. "The Fathers see in the virginal conception the sign that it truly was the Son of God who came in a humanity like our own" (C 496). "The gospel accounts understand the virginal conception of Jesus as a divine work ... 'conceived ... of the Holy Spirit'¹⁴⁹" (C 497), spiritually and supernaturally, instead of by Joseph, physically and naturally. Christ had no human father because he has a divine Father, and he has his divine nature from his Father in eternity. He received his human nature from his mother Mary in time, and from her alone.

The Church has always taught that Mary is *Aeiparthenos*, "ever-virgin" – before, during, and after Christ's birth. "Against this doctrine the objection is sometimes raised that the Bible mentions brothers and sisters of Jesus.¹⁵⁷ ... In fact James and Joseph, 'brothers of Jesus' [Mk 3:31-35; 6:3], are the sons of another Mary, a disciple of Christ whom St. Matthew significantly calls 'the other Mary'¹⁵⁸ [Mt 13:55; 28:1; 27:56]. They are close relations of Jesus, according to an Old Testament expression¹⁵⁹" (C 500). The Hebrew expression can mean "cousins" as well as "brothers."

The *Catechism* mentions four "reasons why God in his saving plan wanted his Son to be born of a virgin" (C 502).

- 1) “Mary’s virginity manifests God’s absolute initiative in the Incarnation. Jesus has only God as Father” (C 503).
- 2) “Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit in the Virgin Mary’s womb because he is the New Adam, who inaugurates the new creation: ‘The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven’¹⁶²” (1 Cor 15:45, 47; C 504). “By his virginal conception, Jesus, the New Adam, ushers in *the new birth* . . . ‘not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God’¹⁶⁶” (Jn 1:13; C 505).
- 3) “Mary is a virgin because her virginity is *the sign of her faith* . . . ‘Mary is more blessed because she embraces faith in Christ than because she conceives the flesh of Christ’¹⁶⁹” (St. Augustine; C 506).
- 4) Mary is not just virgin, but “*virgin mother;*” and not just the mother of Jesus, but also “her spiritual motherhood extends to all men whom he came to save” (C 501). “At once virgin and mother, Mary is the symbol and the most perfect realization of the Church: ‘the Church indeed . . . by receiving the word of God in faith becomes herself a mother. By preaching and Baptism she [the Church] brings forth sons, who are conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of God, to a new and immortal life. She herself [the Church] is a virgin, who keeps in its entirety and purity the faith she pledged to her spouse’¹⁷⁰” (C 507).

5. *Mary as “Mother of God”*

As the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus declared in 431 A.D., “Mary is truly ‘Mother of God’ [*Theotokos*] since she is the mother of the eternal Son of God made man, who is God himself” (C 509). “In fact, the One whom she conceived as man 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 Holy Trinity. Hence the Church confesses that Mary is truly ‘Mother of God’ (*Theo-tokos*)¹⁴⁵” (C 495).

Mary’s title “Mother of God” is inseparable from Christ’s two essential titles: “Son of God” and “Son of Man;” to deny Mary her title is to deny Christ his. To deny that Mary is the Mother of God is either to deny Christ’s divinity (that is, to deny that Mary’s son is God) or to deny his Incarnation (that is, to deny that God really became Mary’s son). And these two doctrines, Christ’s divinity and his Incarnation, are the two earliest and most central of all Christian dogmas. They were formulated in the two earliest and shortest Christian creeds in the New Testament: “Jesus is Lord” (*Kyrios*, Lord God) (1 Cor 12:3; Phil 2:11) and “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (1 Jn 4:2-3). If we believe that Jesus is God and that Mary is Jesus’ mother “in the flesh,” then we must believe that Mary is the Mother of God “in the flesh.” Mary is understood correctly only in relation to Jesus.

Since Mary is the Mother of Christ, Mary is also the Mother of the Church, for the Church and Christ are inseparable. They are one Body. Thus Mary is “the mother of the ‘whole Christ’¹⁰⁸ [Head and Body]. As such, she was present

with the Twelve . . . at the dawn of the ‘end time’ which the Spirit was to inaugurate on the morning of Pentecost with the manifestation of the Church” (Acts 1:14; C 726).

Mary is therefore *our* mother, if we are members of the Church, for “we *are* the Church.” Christ gave her to us and us to her from the Cross: “When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved [John, representing all disciples] standing near, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold your son!’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother!’ And from that hour the disciple took her to his own” (Jn 19:26-27). And the Church did what John did: heard Christ’s command and obeyed it, beheld Mary and took her into our homes and hearts.

6. Mary’s Immaculate Conception

Non-Catholics (and some Catholics) often confuse the Immaculate Conception with the Virgin Birth. But the Virgin Birth refers to *Christ’s* being conceived in his mother Mary’s womb without sexual intercourse from a human father, while the Immaculate Conception refers to *Mary’s* being conceived in *her* mother Anna’s womb without *Original Sin*. It is the world, not the Church, that confuses sex with sin here!

“Through the centuries the Church has become ever more aware that Mary, ‘full of grace’ through God,¹³⁴ was redeemed from the moment of her conception. That is what the dogma of the Immaculate Conception confesses ‘The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus

Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin^{'135}" (Pope Pius IX; C 491).

The dogma was not officially *defined* until 1854, for it took time for the Church to properly understand and define it after the question had been matured and examined over time. But its substance had been known and believed from the beginning since it was present from the beginning in the original "deposit of faith" like all dogmas, including the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the canon of the New Testament, all of which took centuries before they were defined infallibly. The truth did not change with time; the Church's awareness and understanding of it did.

By God's grace Mary was not only immaculately conceived without "original sin" (which affects every human nature, except hers), but also preserved from all "actual sin" (committed sins) during her life. This total sinlessness of Mary, far from detracting in any way from Christ, was 1) wholly *for* Christ's sake and 2) wholly *from* Christ's power.

- 1) Mary's glory was wholly *for* Christ, for his Incarnation: "To become the mother of the Savior, Mary 'was enriched by God with gifts appropriate to such a role.'¹³² The angel Gabriel at the moment of the annunciation salutes her as 'full of grace'^{'133}" (Lk 1:28; C 490). Because "of her vocation [to be Mother of God], it was necessary that she be wholly borne by God's grace" (C 490). "[B]ecause his Spirit had prepared her, the Father found the *dwelling place* where his Son and his Spirit could dwell among men" (C 721). "It was fitting that the

mother of him in whom ‘the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily’¹⁰² [Col 2:9] should herself be ‘full of grace’” (C 722). It was for Christ’s saving action that Mary was kept holy.

The simplest answer to the Protestant objection to the doctrine of Mary’s sinlessness is this: Suppose God had not made Mary full of grace and immaculate; would Christ have had more glory if Mary had thus had less? The objection has three hidden errors: Mary and Jesus are never rivals; glory is not a divisible quantity like money; and God is not a miser with his grace.

- 2) Mary’s glory is wholly *from* Christ too, as the moon’s glory is wholly from the sun. “The ‘splendor of an entirely unique holiness’ by which Mary is ‘enriched from the first instant of her conception’ comes wholly from Christ; she is ‘redeemed . . . by reason of the merits of her Son’¹³⁶” (C 492).

Mary needed Christ for her salvation from original sin. Christ’s redemptive act for her was like preventive medicine in contrast to his saving act for us which is more like curative medicine. It is like one person being saved from a disease by an inoculation to prevent it, and another person being saved from the same disease by an operation to cure it – by the same doctor.

7. *Mary's Assumption into heaven*

Mary, “when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory . . .” (C 966). This dogma too is Christocentric. Like the Immaculate Conception, it is *both from Christ and for Christ*. It is *from* Christ because “[t]he Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is a singular participation in her Son’s Resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians” (C 966). And it is *for* Christ because God did this for her “so that she might be the more fully conformed to her Son, . . . the conqueror of sin and death⁵⁰⁸” (C 966). Death is the consequence of sin, and it was fitting that sinless Mary be spared sin’s consequence.

There are grave sites, or reported grave sites, and relics, or reported relics, of the bodies of all the other important early saints and apostles, but there is none at all for Mary.

What of Mary after her Assumption? The last Glorious Mystery of the Rosary is the Coronation of Mary as “Queen of Heaven” – the fulfillment of her humility, as prophesied in her *Magnificat*: “All generations shall call me blessed.... He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree” (Lk 1:48, 52). Like everything about her, it points to Christ; for the reason we call her blessed is his grace: “For he who is mighty has done great things for me, And holy is his name” (Lk 1:49). And it verifies what Christ said, that “the last shall be first and the first last” (Mt 20:16).

8. *The titles “Advocate” and “Mediatrix”*

What is Mary doing now? Praying for us, interceding with her Son, with more wisdom and power than any other creature. We are invited to invoke her intercession. Thus, she is our “Advocate.”

There is no kind of grace she cannot ask God for, and mediate; and in so doing she is the “Mediatrix of all graces.”

Finally, she cooperates still, as she did on earth, with God’s will and work of redemption, by her faith and submission. “To cooperate” means “to work with.” Mary cooperates with God by her faith and submission. She says her *fiat*, her “let it be done” still, in praying to her Son to come to us with his saving grace. “For this reason she is a mother to us in the order of grace⁵¹¹” (C 968).

The Church has not dogmatically defined these titles, but properly understood, they are in line with everything else the Church believes about Mary. The reluctance most Protestants (and even some Catholics) feel toward these titles is usually based on the fear they will be misunderstood and contribute to the traditional misunderstanding that Catholics confuse Mary with Christ, exalt her too much, and compromise Christ’s uniqueness. But as we have seen before, and is true again with these titles, every facet of Mary’s greatness, from her Immaculate Conception to her present role as advocate and intercessor in Heaven, consists precisely in her transparency to Christ, like a clear window. In this way, we see clearly her close association with his work. “Mary’s function . . . in no way obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power . . . [it] flows forth from the superabun-

dance of the merits of Christ, rests on his mediation, depends on it, and draws all its power from it.’⁵¹³ ‘No creature could ever be counted along with the Incarnate Word and Redeemer; but just as the priesthood of Christ is shared in various ways both by his ministers and the faithful, and as the one goodness of God is radiated in different ways among his creatures, so also the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a sharing in this one source’⁵¹⁴ (C 970).

St. Paul says “there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tm 2:5); but “one” here (*eis*) means “first,” not “only.” Just as we share Christ’s sonship by participation (Jn 1:12), we share his work, we co-operate in our salvation (Phil 2:12). Mary does this too, in a preeminent way.

A key Catholic principle is that grace does not rival, demean, or suppress nature, but perfects it. God perfects the natural instruments he uses, and we see this eminently in Mary. And in fact, not only Mary but all Christians share in the work of cooperating with God (1 Cor 3:9), mediating his grace, being instruments in his work of salvation, and being advocates for others by effective intercessory prayer (Jas 5:16). If Mary cannot do these things, we certainly can’t; if we can, she certainly can. For “she uttered her ‘yes’ ‘in the name of all human nature” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, 30, 1).

This is how she is our spiritual “mother.” The title “mother” is not something subjective and sentimental, but a real analogy to physical childbearing. “. . . [S]he cooper-

ated by her obedience, faith, hope, and burning charity in the Savior's work of restoring supernatural life to souls. For this reason she is a mother to us in the order of grace^{'511}" (C 968). "This motherhood of Mary in the order of grace continues uninterruptedly from the consent which she loyally gave at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the cross, until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect. Taken up to heaven, she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix^{'512}" (C 969).

9. Mary as moral ideal

Her perfection. In Mary alone among all the merely human beings who have ever lived on earth, there is no gap between the real and the ideal, between what she was and what she should have been, between her will and God's will, between her actual life in time and God's eternal plan for her. That is why the Church applies to her, in the liturgy of her feast days, the Scriptural words about divine Wisdom, eternally in God's presence: because Mary's actual earthly life was no different from God's eternal plan for her. She alone perfectly realized God's perfect will; she is the greatest Artist's greatest masterpiece.

Her charity. Mary's holiness is not just negative (sinlessness) but positive (charity). Her freedom *from* all sin, both original and actual, is only a means to the greater end of her freedom – *for* perfect charity. Goodness is not primarily purity but plenitude, as perfect gold is not primarily

ly its lack of imperfections but its perfection. Purity is essential to gold only because gold is something worthy of being purified.

Her hope. Hope is faith directed to the future, to God's promises. That Mary is blessed because she has perfect faith and hope is the prophetic point of Elizabeth's words that prompted Mary's *Magnificat* (Lk 1:45): "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." Mary thought: "God promised it, I believe it, and that settles it."

The "Hail, Holy Queen" prayer also addresses Mary as "our hope." Our hope of what? Of moral perfection, for one thing. If no merely human being were ever sinless, like Mary, we would think avoiding sin was impossible; we would limit sinlessness to divinity, and despair of humanity. Mary gives humanity hope, a hope for perfection that will be fulfilled for each of us in Heaven. Mary is a sign that God still has high hopes for us.

Her joy. Mary's moral perfection also shows us the secret of joy. The first five mysteries of the Rosary, which center around events in her life recorded in the Gospels, are the "joyful mysteries." The secret of her joy is her self-surrender. She is "too self-renounced for fears." Fear is perhaps the commonest obstacle to joy because it is the commonest obstacle to sanctity. Many sins stem from fear: thieves fear poverty, the violent fear weakness, liars fear truth, cowards fear suffering, adulterers fear loneliness. But Mary's "perfect love casts out fear" (1 Jn 4:18). Mary is so in love with Christ and with us that she forgets herself, and so forgets her fears, and so is liberated from fear into joy.

There is no reason to keep her secret secret!

Her faith. Faith also casts out fear, and Mary's faith is perfect because it is simple: her "faith is to submit freely to the word that has been heard [from God], because its truth is guaranteed by God, who is Truth itself. . . . The Virgin Mary is its most perfect embodiment" (C 144). "The Virgin Mary most perfectly embodies the obedience of faith. By faith Mary welcomes the tidings and promise brought by the angel Gabriel, believing that 'with God nothing will be impossible' It is for this faith that all generations have called Mary blessed¹⁴" (C 148). "Nothing is more apt to confirm our faith and hope than holding it fixed in our minds that nothing is impossible with God. Once our reason has grasped the idea of God's almighty power, it will easily and without any hesitation admit everything that [the Creed] will afterwards propose for us to believe — even if they be great and marvelous things, far above the ordinary laws of nature¹⁵" (C 274).

Her simplicity. It is hard to be as saintly as Mary only because it is hard to be as simple as Mary, to simply say (and live) Yes to God and nothing more, no qualifications, no "ifs, ands or buts." The secret of all the saints is in Mary's single word: her *fiat*, her Yes, her "Amen." The word "*islam*," which means "submission," or "the peace that comes from submission to God," expresses that simplicity. (In the religion of Islam, by the way, Mary is also held in very high esteem as its example and embodiment.)

There is nothing more to be said about Mary as the perfect moral example. She is the perfect example precisely because there is nothing more to be said.

10. Devotion to Mary

“The Church’s devotion to the Blessed Virgin is intrinsic to Christian worship⁵¹⁵” (C 971). It is “homegrown,” not an alien addition, an imitation of paganism. It is authentically Christian and incarnational.

“The Church rightly honors ‘the Blessed Virgin with special devotion. From the most ancient times the Blessed Virgin has been honored with the title of ‘Mother of God,’ to whose protection the faithful fly in all their dangers and needs. . . . This very special devotion... differs essentially from the adoration which is given to the incarnate Word and equally to the Father and the Holy Spirit, and greatly fosters this adoration⁵¹⁶” (C 971).

We revere all saints with *dulia* (human reverence and devotion), and Mary with *hyperdulia* (the greatest human reverence and devotion), but worship and adoration (*latria*) is given to God alone. There is only a difference in degree between Mary and us, but a difference in kind between Mary and Christ. Therefore there is also a difference in degree between the reverence paid to Mary (*hyperdulia*, supreme human respect) and the reverence paid to other saints (*dulia*), but a difference in kind between our reverence to Mary and our *worship (latria)* to Christ. The same is true of their *work*: her intercession, the saints’ intercession, and the intercession of our friends who pray for us on earth, are different only in degree; but there is a difference in kind between Christ’s unique intercession and any human’s. Ours – and Mary’s – is totally dependent on him.

Devotion to Mary fosters and purifies our adoration of God rather than polluting it. Devotion to idols does not foster adoration of God, but devotion to his saints does. For a saint is like a stained glass window that makes us more aware and appreciative of the divine light. And the holier the saint, the better the window, the more our devotion to that saint fosters our adoration of God. Thus devotion to Mary “greatly fosters this adoration”⁵¹⁶ (C 971).

11. *The prayers of Mary*

- 1) Mary’s most essential prayer is her simple response to the angel. “She whom the Almighty made ‘full of grace’ responds by offering her whole being: ‘Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be [done] to me according to your word.’ *Fiat*: this is Christian prayer: to be wholly God’s . . .” (C 2617).
- 2) “The Gospel reveals to us how Mary prays and intercedes in faith. At Cana,⁸⁹ the mother of Jesus asks her Son for the needs of a wedding feast; this is the sign of another feast – that of the wedding of the Lamb where he gives his body and blood at the request of the Church, his Bride” (C 2618).
- 3) “[T]he Canticle of Mary, the *Magnificat* [Lk 1:46-55] . . . is the song both of the Mother of God and of the Church” (C 2619). It is truly “magnificent” because it “magnifies” the Lord, who has magnified his lowly saints who magnify not themselves but him.

12. *The prayer to Mary: the Ave Maria (Hail Mary)*

The Church has addressed Mary trillions of times with the most repeated prayer in human history, the “Hail Mary,” and its “string of roses” in the Rosary.

“Hail, Mary.” “[T]he greeting of the angel Gabriel opens this prayer. It is God himself who, through his angel as intermediary, greets Mary. Our prayer dares to take up this greeting . . .” (C 2676) and, by standing with the angel, becomes angelic. We say not “hello” (or “hi!”) but “hail;” our speech is high and holy as we hail her, meek and lowly.

“Full of grace, the Lord is with thee.” She is not just “graced,” but “full of grace,” 100 percent, up to the brim, to the creature’s limit. Why? Because Christ the Lord himself is with her, wholly in her soul and wholly in her womb. “These two phrases of the angel’s greeting shed light on one another. Mary is full of grace because the Lord is with her. The grace with which she is filled is the presence of him who is the source of all grace. ‘Rejoice . . . O Daughter of Jerusalem . . . the Lord your God is in your midst’³¹ [Zep 3:14, 17]. Mary, in whom the Lord himself has just made his dwelling, is the daughter of Zion in person, the ark of the covenant, the place where the glory of the Lord dwells” (C 2676).

“Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.” “After the angel’s greeting, we make Elizabeth’s greeting our own” (C 2676). Not a word of the prayer so far is our invention, only Scripture’s. When we say to Mary “blessed are *you*,” we bless *God*, for he is the one who blessed her. And then, as soon as we bless her, we immediately turn to Christ: “and blessed is the fruit of

your womb Jesus.” Musically, the movement of the prayer stops only here. This is its floor, its bottom, its weight. “The name of Jesus is at the heart of Christian prayer. . . . The *Hail Mary* reaches its high point in the words ‘Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus’” (C 435).

“Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us.” As with the “Our Father,” the first half of the prayer has been all self-forgetful praise. Only when we are transformed by this praise from fearful self-regard to joyful God-regard, do we now ask for our own needs, through her intercession. Our petition thus becomes trusting, not fretful or wheedling, for “[b]y entrusting ourselves to her prayer, we abandon ourselves to the will of God together with her” (C 2677). Her prayer is simply “be it done to me according to thy will.” When we ask her to pray for us, that is what we ask her to pray, for that is all she ever did pray on earth, and all she ever will pray in Heaven. We ask her intercession because she is “*holy Mary*,” spiritually closest to God; and because she is “*Mother of God*,” physically closest to God. She carried God in her womb!

“sinners.” Our petition is that of the publican, not the Pharisee; for mercy, not justice. The very act of asking Mary to pray for us expresses our humble acknowledgment that we are weak pray-ers, in need of her stronger help, like infants in need of a big sister. We further express this by confessing who we are: sinners, not despairing but hoping and trusting God’s mercy. In choosing Mary, the humblest of saints, as our intercessor we express our humble realization that we lack her humility.

“now and at the hour of our death.” We ask for her help at the two most important moments in our lives: the two times when time intersects eternity. “[O]ur trust broadens further, already at the present moment, to surrender ‘the hour of our death’ wholly to her care. May she be there as she was at her son’s death on the cross. May she welcome us as our mother at the hour of our passing³⁸ to lead us to her Son, Jesus, in paradise” (C 2677). We ask this also in the “Hail, Holy Queen” prayer: “And after this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus.” There is nothing she will do more willingly than that.

No one can comfort us more at the hour of our death than our Mother. No one can be a better “matchmaker” between ourselves and Christ, for no one else is closer to Christ and no one else is closer to us, and loves us more, than our Mother. Because she is Christ’s mother as well as ours, she makes him brother to us. Like all mothers, she longs for her children to be close to each other.

13. Mary as symbol of the Church

Since the times of the Church Fathers, Mary has been seen as both a symbol and an embodiment of “Holy Mother Church,” for two reasons: because she is mother and because she is holy.

- 1) Like “*Mother Church*,” she is the place where Christ comes to the world. She mothers Christ, births Christ, gives Christ to the world. She obtains for us, by her motherly intercession, the grace we need to live in Christ.

- 2) She is also *holy*. Holiness is one of the “four marks of the Church” (see Part I, Section 7, paragraphs 27-41). “[I]n the most Blessed Virgin Mary the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she exists without spot or wrinkle, [but] the faithful still strive to conquer sin and increase in holiness. And so they turn their eyes to Mary’;³⁰⁶ in her, the Church is already the ‘all-holy’” (C 829).

Holiness is the Church’s primary business. Everything else in her is a means to that end. Even the ministry of assuring unity and of teaching authoritatively in the Church, however essential, is but a means to the greater end of her holiness (i.e. her members’ holiness); and therefore the *Catechism* says that “the ‘Marian’ dimension of the Church [promoting holiness] precedes the ‘Petrine’¹⁹⁵” (C 773), that is, the ministry of Peter and his successors. For “Mary goes before us all in the holiness which is the Church’s mystery” (C 773).

14. Mary and the sins of Catholics

If “Mary goes before us all” in holiness, we all go behind her in holiness. We ask her to “pray for us sinners.” The Church is a hospital for sinners. Christ promised to keep his Church on earth free from error (infallible), but not her members free from sin. Her doctrine is pure, but her members’ life is not. Pope John Paul II publicly confessed and apologized for past sins of members of the Church. And whenever members of the Church have failed, throughout history, it has been by being unholy not just generically or in any way, but in a specifically un-Marian way. All their sins have had an anti-Marian character,

and could have been avoided if they had looked to Mary as their model. For example:

- 1) Pride instead of Marian humility made many seek earthly glory and empire for the Church when she acquired great political power.
- 2) They sometimes sought to attain a Heavenly end by worldly means: to save souls by power and control rather than by Marian humble, submissive love; thus the torture of heretics, evident in some instances of the Inquisition.
- 3) They sometimes encouraged worldly war and violence, but Mary defeats Satan (Gn 3:15; Rv 12:1-6) by her Christlike nonviolence; she suffers evil rather than inflicting it.
- 4) They often succumbed to greed for wealth, resulting in such corruption as provoked the Reformation. In contrast, when members of the Church embrace the poverty of Mary's stable, the Church thrives, even when persecuted and martyred, whether in ancient Rome or under totalitarian dictatorships today.
- 5) A number of Catholics have been guilty of anti-Semitism. But Mary is the flower of Israel, and in the *Magnificat* she exalts Israel as a holy vessel prepared for God's Incarnation, the ultimate point of God's 2000 years of work through patriarchs and prophets. God chose a people so that out of them he could choose this one person to be his own mother. Through Mary all Israel shares

in being God's mother. To hate Jews is to hate Jesus, and to hate God's mother.

- 6) Mary, and woman in general, is a peacemaker; but the Church, through the faults of her members, was rent by division in 1054 and in 1517. Mary, like her Son, longs to heal these divisions.
- 7) Churchmen have also been intellectually arrogant or ignorant, claiming authority outside the Church's God-given realm of faith and morals, as in the case of Galileo. When, instead, Catholics have had the patience to "ponder in her heart" the Church's "deposit of faith," as Mary did (Lk 2:19), the Church has matured profound and beautiful teaching, such as her Marian doctrines.
- 8) Catholics have sometimes substituted cleverness and complexity for intuitive wisdom and simplicity, and developed the Church's theology in a direction away from rather than back to Christ, like a tree whose complex system of branches grows too far from its roots. Vatican II has called us back to our roots in Christ, the Bible, and the apostolic Fathers, as Mary always turns us back to Christ and simplicity.
- 9) Over-complexity has also produced elaborate legalisms, similar to those of the Pharisees. This was another reason for the Reformation: the law of love was obscured by the love of law. Women instinctively perceive the primacy of love, especially when they are mothers, like Mary.

- 10) Pope John Paul II apologized to all women in the name of the Church, for churchmen have often shared the world's prejudices against women and treated them as inferior (contrary to the Church's own teachings), even though a woman, Mary, is her only sinless saint and stands before all others in her love for God, and many of the Church's greatest Saints and Doctors are women.
- 11) Most men and women in the Church today are infected with our secular society's obsession with lust. Lust among the clergy has caused great scandal and stumbling; and lust among the laity makes Catholics act (and sometimes think) no differently than non-Catholics on issues of sexual morality such as abortion, contraception, adultery, divorce, fornication, sodomy. Mary as Virgin Mother is radically counter-cultural to a culture which worships sex and denigrates motherhood. It is no coincidence that the Church has deepened her appreciation of Marian theology at the same time she has deepened her understanding of morality and has repudiated these sins. Mary shows us that doctrine and holiness are inseparable and interdependent.

15. Catholic wisdom is Marian wisdom

Just as the Church has suffered whenever her members have displayed an un-Marian character, so has she won the world (and will continue to do so) when her members have displayed specifically Marian characteristics, especial-

ly the wisdom that is distinctively Catholic. In fact, these characteristics run through all parts of these booklets, because they run through all parts of the Catholic faith. Five in particular stand out.

- 1) *Charity*. No one can argue with love; “everybody loves a lover.” God’s love in Christ is Christianity’s greatest “selling point.” It was the saints and martyrs – that is, the greatest lovers – who won the world for the Church. Saints are the irrefutable argument for Christianity. All morally sane human beings know the value of unselfish love. Among human institutions, religion emphasizes it the most. Among religions, Christianity emphasizes it the most. Among Christians, Catholics emphasize it the most. Within Catholicism, the saints exemplify it the most. And among the saints, Mary exemplifies it the most.
- 2) *Grace perfects nature*. Since charity “goes all the way up” into the divine nature; since God is unselfish and self-giving; that is why his grace always exalts, redeems, and perfects nature rather than depressing its value, bypassing it or despairing of it. For he is a Father, and a good father trains his children to be mature co-workers with him, even though he does not need them and could do everything himself. This is why God gives us free will; why he allows evil and suffering; why he uses miracles very rarely; why he makes us “our brother’s keeper,” and also why he arranges for Mary to be such a powerful co-operator. He gives *maxi-*

mally. He exalts Mary as much as any human being can be exalted.

- 3) *“Both/and” rather than “either/or.”* The Catholic instinct is to say Yes, like Mary, rather than No; to unite rather than divide; to make peace rather than war. The Church’s gospel is a “full gospel,” which always tends to a “both/and” instead of an “either/or” on potentially divisive issues like nature and grace, God and man, doctrine and morality, head and heart, truth and love, free will and predestination, individual and community, justice and mercy. Mary united these things perfectly, instinctively; and the Church has the same instinct.
- 4) *Optimism.* The Church’s seriousness about evil scandalizes a world that has ceased to believe in sin; yet there is always a radical underlying optimism in her philosophy. The natural moral law can never be abolished from the heart of man (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, 94, 6). Good is stronger than evil. God always wins. And he always surprises us, and prepares something better than we could ever have imagined – as he showed us with Mary.
- 5) *Christocentrism.* This has been a recurring theme in every single booklet in this series, and it is Mary’s supreme work: being totally centered in Christ. She is for him, and thus shows us ourselves, and the meaning of our lives, and who we are for.

16. *Mary and the future*

Marian apparitions. Apparitions (apparently miraculous appearances) of Mary have multiplied in the modern era, especially in recent decades. Some of these the Church has declared inauthentic (e.g. Bayside (Long Island) in New York); some of them, after long and careful investigation, she has declared “worthy of belief” (e.g. at Lourdes in France in 1854 and Fatima in Portugal in 1917). Many of them are still being investigated (e.g. Garabandal in Spain; Akita in Japan; Medjugorje in the former Yugoslavia; Scottsdale, Arizona; and Cairo in Egypt). What is the significance of so many apparitions of Mary today? What is their message?

Her messages usually have a prophetic tone: the need for repentance and conversion of heart to avoid disaster. It does not necessarily mean that the “end of the world” is near (though it may be, at any time: see Christ’s parables in Mt 24 and 25), but possibly that the “end of the age,” the end of the era of secularism and selfishness, is upon us.

Mary reveals no new secrets. All authentic apparitions and prophecies throughout Christian history repeat the message of Christ. All true prophets in Old Testament times too reminded God’s people of what they had been told from the beginning, when they had forgotten it. Mary’s message is not new; what she points to is still Christ, and the need for conversion of heart to him.

Ecumenism. Mary’s is an ecumenical message, a message of unity and peace. One of the most frequent and passionate themes of Marian apparitions is her desire for peace. For it is one of today’s most obvious needs, both

within the Church and within the world. But how can Mary be an agent for ecumenical unity? Protestants see Mary as a major *obstacle* to unity in the Church, since they object to the Catholic Church's Marian teachings. However, Protestants must agree that Mary's message is the key to unity, for her message is – today as always – simply to point to Christ. “Do whatever he tells you,” she told the waiters at the wedding feast at Cana; and their obedience was rewarded with Christ's first sign, turning water into wine. Christ has not stopped giving such signs, and Mary has not changed her formula. The formula is difficult only because it is so simple: “Do whatever he tells you.” This is the key to unity because insofar as Christ is the Lord of all Christians, he is like the conductor of a single orchestra, and insofar as Christians believe and obey Mary's message of conversion to Christ, they will play in harmony, like the diverse instruments of an orchestra, because they follow a single baton. And we know his will is unity (Jn 17); therefore Mary's message, simply to follow him, as she did, is the key to unity.

Mary is also the key to unity between men and women. In an age of many “feminisms,” Mary is the true “feminist,” “blessed among women.” Just as Christ reveals to us not only God but also ourselves, since he shows us what is a true and perfect and complete man – the only perfect man in history – so Mary shows us what a true and complete and perfect woman is, not just in words but in the flesh. In her we have something more than a set of abstract principles or ideals to argue about. We have instead the perfect “finished product,” the living model.

And she is not a *passive* model, like a picture, but active, like a mother. She does not just “sit there” to be imitated, letting us do all the work, but she acts, humbly and invisibly, as powerfully and as subtly as water wears away rock. She will not rest until her Son has finished his work of softening our hearts of stone by endless waves of prayer. For a mother’s work is never done.

Notes from the Catechism in Order of Their Appearance in Quotations Used in this Section

- ¹³² *LG* 56.
- ¹²⁸ Cf. *Gen* 3:15, 20.
- ¹³⁹ *Lk* 1:28-38; cf. *Rom* 1:5.
- ¹⁴¹ St. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haeres.* 3, 22, 4: PG 7/1, 959A.
- ¹⁴² St. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haeres.* 3, 22, 4: PG 7/1, 959A.
- ¹⁴³ *LG* 56; Epiphanius, *Haer.* 78, 18: PG 42, 728CD-729AB; St. Jerome, *Ep.* 22, 21: PL 22, 408.
- ¹⁴⁹ *Mt* 1:20.
- ¹⁵⁷ Cf. *Mk* 3:31-35; 6:3; *1 Cor* 9:5; *Gal* 1:19.
- ¹⁵⁸ *Mt* 13:55; 28:1; cf. *Mt* 27:56.
- ¹⁵⁹ Cf. *Gen* 13:8; 14:16; 29:15; etc.
- ¹⁶² *1 Cor* 15:45, 47.
- ¹⁶⁶ *Jn* 1:13.
- ¹⁶⁹ St. Augustine, *De virg.*, 3: PL 40, 398.
- ¹⁷⁰ *LG* 64; cf. 63.
- ¹⁴⁵ Council of Ephesus (431): DS 251.
- ¹⁰⁸ Cf. *Jn* 19:25-27.
- ¹³⁴ *Lk* 1:28.
- ¹³⁵ Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, 1854: DS 2803.
- ¹³² *LG* 56.
- ¹³³ *Lk* 1:28.
- ¹⁰² *Col* 2:9.

- 136 *LG* 53, 56.
- 508 *LG* 59; cf. Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950): DS 3903; cf. *Rev* 19:16.
- 511 *LG* 61.
- 513 *LG* 60.
- 514 *LG* 62.
- 511 *LG* 61.
- 512 *LG* 62.
- 14 Cf. *Lk* 1:48.
- 115 *Roman Catechism*, I, 2, 13.
- 515 *Lk* 1:48; Paul VI, *MC* 56.
- 516 *LG* 66.
- 89 Cf. *Jn* 2:1-12.
- 31 *Zeph* 3:14, 17a.
- 38 Cf. *Jn* 19:27.
- 306 *LG* 65; cf. *Eph.* 5:26-27.
- 195 Cf. John Paul II, *MD* 27.