

## **Facing Up to Mary**

By Fr. Peter E. Gillquist

Is it safe to say that no woman in history is more misunderstood by modern Christendom than the Virgin Mary? And is it also probable that in a discussion concerning Mary between two Christians, if their differences remain unresolved, most likely it will be due to differing interpretations of the biblical data? If I have heard him say it once, I have heard Billy Graham say it at least a half-dozen times over the years: We evangelical Christians do not give Mary her proper due. There is no doubt in my mind that he is correct. But his statement raises a crucial question about Mary. What is her proper due? Before we look to the Scriptures for some answers, let us acknowledge right up front a problem which makes our task much more difficult than it should be. The highly charged emotional atmosphere which surrounds this subject serves to blunt our objectivity in facing up to Mary. Therefore, those of us who were brought up to question or reject honor paid to Mary in Christian worship or art often have our minds made up in advance. That is why we have allowed our preconceptions to color our understanding even of the scriptural passages concerning her. We have not let the facts speak for themselves. As we attempt to face up to Mary honestly and openly, let us turn first to the Bible, the source book of all true Christian doctrine. We will consider what the New Testament teaches about her, and then we will turn to the Old Testament. To understand how the biblical record has been applied through the years by Christians, we will look specifically at Church history to understand both how she has been properly honored, and how excessive beliefs concerning her have crept into the picture. Lastly, we will look at how we must face up to her in light of the fullness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

### **THE NEW TESTAMENT RECORD**

What is it, then, that the New Testament clearly teaches concerning the Virgin Mary? The Gospel of Saint Luke, the book of the beloved physician, gives us at least four crucial answers.

#### **1. Mary is the greatest woman who ever lived.**

Whereas our Lord Jesus Christ tells us there is no greater man to walk the earth than John the Baptist, both the Archangel Gabriel and the

saintly Elizabeth confess to Mary, "Blessed are you among women" (Luke 1:28 and 42). She is the most blessed of women for several reasons, the greatest of which is that she conceived, carried, gave birth to, and nurtured the very Savior of our souls. The One who today occupies the heavenly throne of David, seated regally at the right hand of God the Father, entered the human race and became our Savior through her womb. She was sovereignly chosen by the Father to bear His only begotten Son. In that role, Mary is the first person in all history to receive and accept Christ as her Savior. You and I are called to enthrone the Lord in our hearts and lives-to follow her example in doing so. Early in Christian history she is called "the first of the redeemed". I remember entering a church some years ago and seeing a painting or icon of Mary with open arms front and center on the wall (the apse) just behind the altar. My first impulse was to wonder why Christ alone was not featured at that particular place in the church, though He was shown in a large circle that was superimposed over Mary's heart. When I asked why she was so prominently featured, the Christian scholar with me explained, "This is one of the greatest evangelistic icons in the entire Church. What you see is Christ living as Lord in Mary's life, and her outstretched arms are an invitation to you and me to let Him live in our lives as He has in hers". The power of that icon stays in my mind to this day. For she has set the pace for all of us to personally give our lives over fully to Jesus Christ. Mary is also blessed because she found favor in the sight of God. Gabriel's words of encouragement to her were, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28). Then he comforted her by saying, "Do not be afraid, Mary, *for you have found favor with God*" (Luke 1:30, italics mine). What does one do to become one of God's favorites, to be favored by Him? Remember Cornelius in Acts 10? He was the first Gentile to convert to Christ, "a devout man and one who . . . gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always" (Acts 10:2). Two verses later he is told in a vision, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God". The Lord took notice of his deeds of devotion and brought him salvation. In a similar way, Mary's purity found favor with God, and she was chosen to bear His Son. You say, "Wait a minute! Are you suggesting human merit earns salvation?" Not at all! As commendable as it is for us to live in purity, a devout life never merits salvation. Else why would Mary be called first of the *redeemed*, or why would Cornelius be *baptized* into Christ by Saint Peter? Prayer and devotion, however, do gain God's attention.

When we seek Him with all our hearts, we do find Him! Do you want to be favored of God? Then give Him everything you have, give Him your very life. This is precisely what Mary did, and why she is to be considered the greatest woman who ever lived.

## **2. Mary is our model for Christian service.**

While God certainly knew Mary desired to please Him, He did not take her service for granted. The angel explained how she would bear Christ. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest [God the Father] will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Now Mary had a decision to make. Was she willing? Hear her answer, for it is the doorway to the life of spiritual service for all of us. "Behold the maidservant of the Lord!" she said. "Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Even if we are totally sincere about wanting to follow God, He will never conscript us apart from our consent! This is why He is called "the God of all grace" (1 Peter 5:10). We are to choose freely to obey Him and do His will. Some thirty years later, by the way, Mary again had opportunity to exalt her Lord. She was with Jesus at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. The servants who were in charge of the celebration discovered they were out of wine. Mary had no doubt as to who could solve their problem. Referring to her Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, she advised them, "Whatever He says to you, do it" (John 2:5).

## **3. Mary is the Mother of God.**

Now things get a bit more touchy for some of us. Here is one of those emotional trouble spots I mentioned earlier. Whether we like to face it or not, the Bible teaches Mary is the mother of God. First let's look at the text, then we will discuss why this title is so important to our lives as Christians in the Church. After Christ had been conceived in her womb, Mary paid a visit to the home of relatives Zacharias and Elizabeth, soon to be parents of John the Baptist. When Mary greeted her cousin, Elizabeth called her blessed and said, "Why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:43). Elizabeth knew that her Lord, the Messiah of Israel, was in the womb of Mary. The title "Mother of God" took on great importance in the fourth century, when a heretic named Nestorius—a man who held high office in the Church—claimed that the one in Mary's womb was certainly man, but that He was not God. Orthodox Christians, with one accord,

said, "Wrong!" To see Jesus Christ as something less than God in the flesh is sub-Christian. For unless the one in Mary's womb was and is God, we are dead in our sins. To safeguard the full deity of Christ, the Church has always insisted that Mary be rightly called-as Elizabeth called her the Mother of God. This title, of course, does not mean mother of the Holy Trinity, for the Holy Trinity has no mother. Neither does it mean she originated the Person who is God the Son. It refers instead to Mary being the Mother of the Son of God, who assumed full humanity in her womb. Just as we insist on the Virgin Birth of Christ, we also insist that for the nine months Mary carried Him in His humanity He was at every moment fully God as well. Thus we say boldly and with great insistence that Mary is the Mother of God, *Theotokos*, God-bearer. To say anything less is to side with those who deny His deity. When a man buys a large plot of land and turns cattle out to graze on it, he fences in his acreage. He does so to protect his cattle, to keep them from wandering off, and to discourage rustlers. Similarly, the Church sets doctrinal fences around its foundational truths. And nothing is more basic and important to us than the deity of Christ. Because Christ is God, we set a firm and non-negotiable fence around His divinity by our unmovable confession that Mary is Mother of God.

#### **4. We are to honor Mary and call her blessed.**

Now comes the toughest test of all. Not only is Mary the most blessed of women, our model for obedience, and the Mother of God, we are called to honor her and to bless her. How do we know? The Bible tells us so. During her three-month stay at Elizabeth's house, Mary offered one of the most beautiful prayers of praise to the Lord in all the Scriptures. It begins, "My soul magnifies the Lord", and thus it has become known as "The Magnificat". In that prayer, inspired by the Holy Spirit, Mary prophesied, "henceforth all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:48). Essentially, all generations in Church history have done so; only the last few centuries have faltered. Our generation of American Christians is filled with those who refuse to bless her, and we must change our ways. For some Christian bodies have come to stand dogmatically against Christ and the New Testament by refusing to bless her. From the beginning of recorded Christian worship, Orthodox Christians have taken special care to venerate or honor Mary in the Liturgy. There is an ancient hymn which begins, "It is truly right to bless you, O Theotokos (Mother of God)".

She is also called in this hymn "ever-blessed and most pure". The biblical injunction to honor Mary is followed and taken seriously. We do not, of course, worship Mary, for worship is reserved for the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But she is most certainly to be honored and venerated. And because Christ is our elder brother, the firstborn of many brethren, we honor the Virgin Mary as our Mother, our Lady, as well. Just as Eve was mother of the old Adamic race, so Mary is the true Mother of the new race, the Body of Christ, the Church. Perhaps in part because we refuse to honor Mary, our generation seems to struggle with honoring anyone. For example, next time a presidential news conference comes on T.V., watch closely how most of the press corps behave! Far from merely trying to get the story, many are out for intimidation and willful dishonor. While God's word tells us to honor the king (1 Peter 2:17) and to give preference to each other (Romans 12:10), our generation seems to delight in challenging and humiliating other people, especially those in authority. Not only are we who are Bible-believing Christians urged to give honor to whom honor is due (Romans 13:7), we are called by God in no uncertain terms to bless the Mother of our God. We cannot get around that point in Scripture.

### **THE OLD TESTAMENT AND MARY**

We know that the Old Testament is more than just an inspired account of the history of mankind, or of Israel in particular. In its pages-indeed central to its message-is also the prophetic record concerning our Lord Jesus Christ. He is typified throughout. Moses is a type of Christ, in that he leads the people out of bondage into the land of promise. David typifies Christ as King of Israel. Adam was a type of Christ as head of the human race. Often overlooked, however, is the fact that the Virgin Mary is also seen in the prophetic pages of the Old Testament. Most Christians are aware that the Prophet Isaiah predicts Mary's virgin conception of Christ when he writes: "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). But there are numerous other passages which speak of Mary as well.

### **EVER-VIRGIN**

From the very early years of the Church, Mary was called not only Virgin, but Ever-Virgin. She was seen as never having had a sexual union with Joseph, before or after the birth of Christ. Ezekiel 44:1, 2 is a passage often referred to by the early Fathers in this regard. It

states: "Then He brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary which faces toward the east, but it was shut. And the LORD said to me, `This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter by it, because the LORD God of Israel has entered by it; therefore it shall be shut.'" In traditional interpretation of this passage, Mary is the temple and Christ is the Prince of Peace. The gate mentioned is seen as a picture of Christ's passage through the door of Mary's womb. You might not find that interpretation in some of today's commentaries, but it was held by the great majority of early Church Fathers, as well as many of the Reformation leaders. At this point, however, a very valid question can be raised. If she remained a virgin, why does the Gospel of Matthew tell us that Joseph knew not his wife until Christ was born (Matthew 1:25)? From a scriptural standpoint, the presence of the phrase, "*until* she had brought forth her firstborn Son" does not automatically mean that Joseph must have known her afterward. This is because in both Greek and Hebrew the word *until* or *to* can have several different meanings. We find it in 2 Samuel 6:23: "Michal the daughter of Saul had no children to [until] the day of her death". It is used again in Matthew 28:20 where the risen Christ says "Lo, I am with you always, even to [until] the end of the age". And in Deuteronomy 34:6 we read that Moses was buried "in a valley in the land of Moab . . . but no one knows his grave to [until] this day". Obviously the use of the word in these passages does not imply that Michal had a child *after* her death, that Christ *will depart* at the end of the age, or that Moses' burial place was discovered *the day* Deuteronomy 34:6 was written. By the same token, the word *until* in Matthew 1:25 does not mean that Joseph and Mary began a sexual union after Christ was born. Such a teaching is found nowhere in Scripture and is contrary to the consistent voice of the entire early Church. But doesn't the Bible also mention other brothers and sisters of Christ? Who are they and where did they come from? For one thing, they are never directly called the sons and daughters of Mary and Joseph. In several passages the Bible speaks of the children or relatives as "brothers". Abraham and Lot are called brothers, although Lot was actually Abraham's nephew. And Jacob and Laban are called brothers, even though Jacob was the son of Rebecca, Laban's sister. Scripture is therefore silent concerning the nature of this relationship between Christ and these brothers and sisters. Early Fathers differed slightly in their understanding of what the terms meant. Some, such as Saint Ambrose, believed that they were children of a former

marriage between Joseph and a wife who died prior to Matthew chapter 1. Others taught that they were cousins. But on one point, almost everyone is in agreement: Mary and Joseph had no sexual union whatsoever, before or after the birth of Christ. I must say in all candor that had my betrothed been the woman chosen by the Father to bear His eternal Son in the flesh, my view of her would have been utterly transformed and my honor for her infinitely heightened. Imagine being betrothed to the Mother of God. It was so with Joseph. His betrothed was ever-virgin.

### **ROYALTY**

If we as the Church are called to be "not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but . . . holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:27), does it not follow that she who is the progenitor of the Lord of that Church should be of that same holy character? Not only has Mary by the mercy and power of God conquered both sin and death, the psalmist sees a glimpse of her in heaven through prophetic eyes. For in Psalm 45, Christ is King and Mary is at His side as Queen and rightly so. If God can make us "kings and priests" (Revelation 1:6) for all eternity, certainly He has the prerogative to crown her with higher honor in heaven's royal procession. Little did John and James realize, the day they argued about which of them might occupy the seat of honor at Christ's right hand in the Kingdom, that God the Father had already reserved that space for the marvelous woman He chose to bear His Son for our salvation. The honor is appropriate for the most blessed of all women, the one who is our very icon of holiness. Who else could be more rightly rewarded? Thus the psalmist is well within the mark when he writes of Christ, "At Your right hand stands the queen" (Psalm 45:9)!

### **OTHER TRADITIONS**

There are two other beliefs concerning Mary that must be briefly mentioned and addressed. The first is her bodily assumption into heaven, the other her immaculate conception. It was widely reported in the early Church that shortly after her death, Mary's body was assumed into heaven. In later centuries, the Roman Church ratified this belief as dogma, while the Eastern Church withheld such an official imprimatur. Most Christians agree that such a miracle is within the realm of firm biblical precedent, Enoch and Elijah being two examples. Further, there is no known record of any gravesite or relics of the Holy

Virgin. The assumption of the Virgin is safely seen as an historic Christian tradition, though not recorded in the Scriptures. The Immaculate Conception of Mary is a doctrine unique to the modern Roman Church. In an effort to distance Mary (and protect Christ) from the stain of sin, the Immaculate Conception holds Mary was conceived and born without sin. The Orthodox Church firmly rejects this doctrine on the basis of both Scripture and tradition. Whatever other excesses may have cropped up in history, the Roman Church has never believed or officially taught that Mary was in any way coequal with the Trinity or was to be worshiped with the Trinity. Such allegations are sometimes set forth by critics of the Roman Church, but without basis in fact.

### **THE VESPERS PRAYER**

Near the end of Vespers in the Orthodox Church, the officiant says, "O holy Mother of God, save us". What does this mean? The Orthodox Church has taught from the very beginning that Mary is the supreme example, or prototype, of what happens to a person who fully places trust and faith in God. Everything we aspire to become in Christ, she already is. We are all to "receive" Christ (John 1:12). And as we noted previously, Mary was the first human being who did receive Christ. Out of the millions of "decisions" made for Christ, Mary's was the first. Therefore, whatever promises the Holy Scriptures hold for us, Mary already possesses. If the sacred Scriptures declare that we are all kings (Revelation 1:6), is it so strange that the Church refers to Mary as Queen? If the Holy Bible promised that you and I shall judge angels (1 Corinthians 6:3), is it so odd that the Church should sing that Mary is "more honorable than the cherubim and more glorious beyond compare than the seraphim"? If we who are called "holy brethren" (Hebrews 3:1) are commanded to be holy as God is holy (1 Peter 1:15, 16) and are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1), is it so unthinkable that she whose holy body was the recipient of God Incarnate should be called "most holy" by the Church? If Saint Paul instructs us to "[pray] always . . . for all the saints" (Ephesians 6:18), is it so outrageous to confess with the Church that Holy Mary (along with all the saints who have passed from death to life and continually stand in the presence of Christ) intercedes before her Son on behalf of all men? Mary volitionally relinquished her will to the will of God, thus cooperating fully with the purpose of God. So the original question, "Can Mary save us?" leads to another question: "Can we

save others?" Again, the Holy Scriptures speak with resounding clarity. Here are some examples: "Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you" (1 Timothy 4:16). "Let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins" (James 5:20). "And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire" (Jude 22, 23). Fire saves (1 Corinthians 3:15), prayer saves (James 5:15), angels save (Isaiah 63:9), baptism saves (1 Peter 3:21), preaching saves (1 Corinthians 1:21), the Apostle Paul saved (Romans 11:14). New life in Christ, or salvation, is both personal union with Him and an incorporation into the wholeness of the Body, the Church. Salvation is a Church affair, a Church concern, because we are all affected by it. In another biblical image, salvation is seen as a family matter-God's family ("the whole family in heaven and earth"-Ephesians 3:15). Everybody gets into the act, so to speak. Therefore, under Christ we each have a part to play in the corporateness of His saving act. We do not save alone; Mary does not save alone. Jesus Christ is our wellspring of salvation. And He said, "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). But, "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you" (John 15:7). Mary has a unique role in our salvation because she provided the physical body of Christ and thereby became the "mother" of all those who would be saved. That is why Jesus, while on the Cross, said to His mother, "Woman, behold your son!" and then said to Saint John, "Behold your mother!" (John 19:26, 27).

### **TAKING ACTION**

Many Christians have been grossly misinformed in the last 150 years concerning the historical Church's view of Mary. Therefore, I would suggest that you keep this booklet and use it to help others when the question arises. And remember also that there are things that are unique to the Virgin Mary. She was the only one who gave her flesh to the Son of God, and she is uniquely to be blessed throughout all generations (Luke 1:48). What we do about Mary is connected directly to what we do about Church. The community of Christ's followers is called to act together. Taking action with regard to Mary is not simply personal or private; it has to do with responding as The Church. And where in Christendom has the fullness of truth concerning Mary been preserved? Even most Protestants-both liberal and conservative-know

she is slighted in their circles. The answer for Protestants who take the biblical and historical evidence seriously lies neither within the Protestant Churches nor in the Roman Church, with its questionable late dogmatic additions concerning Mary. I urge you to visit and get to know the historic Orthodox Church which has maintained the biblical fidelity concerning Mary and Christian Faith in general. Within the boundaries of Orthodoxy, the faith and practice of the Church safeguard true commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ together with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. It is there that the truths of the Bible are taught in their entirety, where the worship of God is experienced in Spirit and in truth, and where Mary and the great cloud of witnesses for Christ throughout the ages are honored and revered. The hour is at hand for all of us who love Christ and take seriously the Holy Scriptures to set our hearts and minds to giving Holy Mary her proper due in the proper Church. We do so because God has done great things for and through her (Luke 1:49). As Christians we do not live by feelings, we live by faith. Let us once for all rise above those things the devil has sown in our hearts to neutralize us against this precious woman who gave birth to our Savior. Bless her in the midst of God's people. Follow her example in exalting Christ. Confess her as the Mother of God. Come home to the Church that has kept intact our Holy Faith. And may we help turn our generation back to giving Mary the honor and blessing which God has commanded.