

8. CATHOLICS AND MARY

Why do Catholics honour Mary, the Mother of Jesus?

Mary was the church's first disciple. She is our sister in faith, a woman who was disturbed and puzzled by God, who was challenged to trust and give without knowing all the answers, whose life was a journey of faith.

“Behold your mother!”

From the cross, Jesus entrusted to his mother a new motherhood, asking her to treat the disciple John as her son: “Woman, behold, your son!” Jesus then said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” In the traditional Catholic understanding, this role of Mary's new motherhood is in relation to all members of the Church. Mary was constituted, one might say, Mother of the Church by her Son on the cross. She is a gift which Christ crucified made to us by leaving us his own mother as our mother.



Following God in the way of Mary

We follow God in the way that Mary did. Our love of Mary is a sure way of centring our hearts on Jesus, since she always points to her son.

The biblical figure of Mary

Contemplation of the biblical figure of Mary reveals her as one who received a particular call from God. Her life is an authentic human journey, ever open to the life-long invitations that God makes to her. With complete freedom, she actively responds with sincerity and generosity.

Mary declares herself the “servant of the Lord” (Luke 1: 38). Elizabeth names her “she who believes what the Lord spoke” (Luke 1: 45). She is a model of how Christians act.

She co-operates with the working of the Holy Spirit when she says “yes” to God. Because of her openness to God, God does wonderful things through her. When the angel leaves her, Mary is alone, face-to-face with her resolution to serve God's purposes, the total extent of which she cannot yet measure. It is enough for her, for the moment, to know that the Lord is with her. After the birth of Jesus and the visit of the shepherds, she treasures all these things and ponders them in her heart (Luke 2:19).



She proclaims God's power in turning upside down the order of the world, “pulling down the mighty and raising up the lowly; filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty” (Luke 1:46-55). At the wedding feast of Cana, right at the start of the ministry of Jesus, she tells the servants at the wedding, “Do whatever he [Jesus] tells you” (John 2:1-12).

At the presentation of Jesus in the Temple, Simeon prophesied that a sword would pierce Mary's heart. Mary willed to participate in the very depths of the sufferings of Jesus because she did not reject the great sufferings foretold by Simeon.

Through Mary's ever-deepening attentiveness to Jesus, her faith as a young Jewish woman is transformed into the first and truest witness of the Christian life. She becomes the first believer and apostle of the son whom she recognises, little by little, as her God. At the cross, Jesus entrusts to Mary her mission as "our mother" (John 19: 27). After the resurrection, she is there praying with the apostles (Acts 1:14) and with them she is filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).

Mary had dust on her feet. She faced social disgrace (Matthew 1:18-19), was a refugee (Matthew 2:13-15), and sorrow pierced her heart like a sword (Luke 2:35). Mary is not just a model of how we should behave: she is a person we relate to. She is our Sister, one with us.

To see Mary as having a noteworthy role in God's plan of salvation is actually a way of glorifying Jesus. Mary always points to Jesus. Properly understood, the Catholic doctrines of the Immaculate Conception (not the same thing as the Virgin Birth!) and the Assumption are not so much declarations about Mary as they are declarations about who Jesus is.

The "Hail Mary"

The "Hail Mary" is a prayer commonly recited by Catholics. The words of the first part of the prayer come directly from scripture:



Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.

This is the greeting of the angel Gabriel to Mary when he came to announce to her that she was to be the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:28).

Blessed are you amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

This is Elizabeth's greeting to Mary when Mary went to visit Elizabeth (Luke 1:42).



The second part of the prayer simply asks Mary to pray for us.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of death. Amen.

How can Mary be called "Mother of God" ?

Mary is called "Mother of God". To understand this calls for a somewhat involved theological explanation! Very briefly: in the early church, the term *Theotokos* (bearer or mother of God) was a popular term in the Western Church to refer to Mary. At the time, the church grappled with the question of how divinity and humanity are joined together and related to each other in Jesus Christ. Some wanted to reduce Jesus either to only a human being or to only God. Others felt that Jesus was both human and divine. There was a view held by some that the term *Christotokos* (bearer or mother of Christ) more accurately represented Mary's relationship to Jesus.

The term *Theotokos* was formally affirmed at the Third Ecumenical Council held at Ephesus in 431. The competing *Christotokos* view (advocated by Nestorius, then Patriarch of Constantinople) was seen as restricting Mary's role to the mother of Christ's humanity only. This divided Jesus into two distinct persons, the human Jesus who was Son of Mary, and another, the divine Christ, who was not. This would mean that the second person of the Trinity was actually two persons. Such a notion went against the fullness of the incarnation and, by extension, the salvation of humanity.



Nestorius' view was seen by the Council as heresy, and the title *Theotokos* for Mary was thus affirmed.

The Council of Chalcedon in 451 finally declared that Jesus is one person with two natures, fully human and fully divine.

The expression "Mother of God" specifically excludes the understanding of Mary as Mother of God in the eternal sense; that is, Mary is not understood as having eternally given birth to God the Son in the same way that he is eternally begotten by God the Father.

Rather, in the Incarnation, the divine person of God the Son took on a human nature in addition to his divine nature, and it is through Mary that this takes place.

Since Jesus Christ is seen as both fully God and fully human, to call Mary "Mother of God" is to affirm the fullness of his Incarnation.

The Angelus

The Angelus is a prayer repeated three times each day, at 6.00 a.m. in the morning, noon, and 6.00 p.m. in the evening. The prayer recollects for us the Incarnation. Incarnation means to "become flesh". We believe that the Son of God "became flesh" when he was miraculously conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. We read in the first chapter of John's Gospel (John 1:14) that Jesus took flesh and lived amongst us as a man. In the first chapter of Luke's Gospel (Luke 1:26-38) we read about the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary and telling her that God had chosen her to bear a child, whom she was to name Jesus, who would be called the Son of God. Mary wondered how this could be, for she was a virgin, but the angel told her that this would happen by the power of the Holy Spirit. Mary answered that she was the handmaid of the Lord, and assented that this should be done to her according to the word of the angel.

When we pray the Angelus, we recall these events. The prayer is a way for us to pause in the middle of every day and give thanks to God for saving us by sending his Son to live among us and teach us about the Kingdom of God. The



prayer also reminds us of how Mary said "Yes" to God and cooperated in God's plan for our salvation. Like Mary, we also try to say "Yes" to God in our lives.

During the Easter Season (that is, from Easter to Pentecost), the Angelus is not prayed. It is replaced by the *Regina caeli laetare* (Queen of Heaven, rejoice), which is a prayer rejoicing with Mary that her son has risen from the dead.

The Angelus consists of three texts from the Gospel of Luke, recited as versicles with responses, each followed by a Hail Mary; and a concluding prayer.

The name of the prayer, the Angelus, comes from the opening words of the prayer in Latin, *Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariæ* (the Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary).

Originally the Angelus was prayed kneeling, except on Sundays and on Saturday evenings, when people took a standing posture to remind them of the resurrection of Jesus, which took place on a Sunday.

The tradition of praying the Angelus goes back to the eleventh century.

The Angelus has always been associated with the ringing of a bell. The manner of ringing the Angelus is a triple stroke repeated three times, with a pause between each set of three (a total of nine strokes), three tolls for each of the invocations. There is then a ring of nine consecutive strokes for the concluding prayer.



In St Peter's Square in Vatican City, every Sunday at noon tens of thousands of people gather in the Square to hear the Pope's Angelus address. At the end of the address they pray the Angelus with the Pope. The address and the Angelus are broadcast by Italian public television.



The Angelus bells are broadcast on the main radio station in Ireland (RTE 1) at noon every day, and many of those listening (even if they are not Catholics) stop for a moment of prayer. The Angelus is also broadcast every night at 6.00 p.m. on the Irish TV channel RTE One. Many Catholic radio stations all over the world broadcast the Angelus.

There is a famous painting by Jean-Francois Millet entitled *The Angelus*. It depicts a man and a woman praying the Angelus in a field. They are farmers, and have paused in prayer near the end of the work day. At the woman's feet is a basket of potatoes, and at her side rests a wheelbarrow full of sacks. At the side of the man is a pitchfork spiked upright in the ground. In the background is the spire of the village church ringing the Angelus bell.



The artist, Jean-Francois Millet, was born in 1814 in Gruchy, a hamlet in northwest France. His parents were farmers and people of great faith and devotion. It was in 1859 that Jean-Francois Millet painted *The Angelus*. Vivid were his memories of the Angelus bell ringing while peasants were still working at twilight. Often he had seen his father standing, bare-headed, cap in hand, and his mother with bowed head and folded hands at the sound of the evening Angelus bell.

Millet recorded that impression to show the quiet peace of twilight, the rosy glow of sunset engulfing the fields, the church bells filling the evening air, and the devout attitude of the peasants. When his agent, Sensier, first saw the picture on Millet's easel, the painter turned to him and asked, "Well, what do you think?"

"It is the Angelus," replied Sensier. "Yes," Millet said with satisfaction. "Can you hear the bells?" Today the painting hangs in the Louvre in Paris.

English text

- V. The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary.
 R. And she conceived by the Holy Spirit.
 Hail Mary ...
 V. Behold the handmaid of the Lord.
 R. Be it done unto me according to thy word.
 Hail Mary ...
 V. And the Word was made Flesh.
 R. And dwelt among us.
 Hail Mary ...
 V. Pray for us, O holy Mother of God.
 R. That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

LET US PRAY

Pour forth, we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy grace into our hearts, that we to whom the Incarnation of Christ Thy Son was made known by the message of an angel, may by His Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of His Resurrection. Through the same Christ Our Lord. Amen.

or

LET US PRAY

Lord, fill our hearts with Your love, and as You revealed to us by an angel, the coming of Your Son as man, so lead us through His suffering and death to the glory of His resurrection, for He lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever. Amen.



The Rosary

The Rosary is a Christian devotion which uses a sequence of prayer and meditation.

Praying the rosary unites vocal and mental prayer in meditation on the central mysteries of the Christian faith – significant events from the life of Christ such as the Nativity, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. The beads are used to “count” prayers (the word *beads* is actually derived from the Anglo-Saxon word *bedes* which meant prayers).

The conscious mind is engaged in constantly repeating the words of set prayers, but this is more than just praying by rote, because at the same time you also enter an inner silence, wherein you contemplate Christ and his love for us in the mystery at hand.

The Rosary lets you move back and forth between these types of prayer. When the vocal prayer becomes routine, you let your mind wander to the mystery. When your attention wanders in meditation, you can fix its focus on the words of the prayers. All the while, the movement of your fingers in a slow rhythm over the beads provides an anchoring by keeping track of where you are, and leads you to the next vocal prayer.

The repetitive chanting of the set prayers helps to still the mind, which can be diverted by the cares of daily life and the distraction of one’s surroundings. The ability of one’s ego to undermine your prayer with distracting thoughts is minimised, if not done away with altogether. You are able to access the deeper regions of your soul to simply rest in the Divine Presence, the essential heart of contemplation.

It is traditional to pray for a specific grace during the contemplation of each mystery. We ask God to grant us that grace, which will help us grow in some virtue related to that mystery.

Apophatic and kataphatic spiritual traditions

Not everyone will find the rosary useful or enjoyable. Spiritual seekers with a more *apophatic* (imageless) inclination, who

“To recite the Rosary is nothing other than to contemplate with Mary the face of Christ. Against the background of the words Ave Maria, the principal events of the life of Jesus Christ pass before the eyes of the soul. They put us in living communion with Jesus, we might say, through the heart of his Mother. Our hearts can embrace in the decades of the Rosary all the events that make up the lives of individuals, families, nations, the Church and all mankind. Thus the simple prayer of the rosary marks the rhythm of human life.”

- Pope John Paul II

“... the Rosary is not a pious practice banished to the past, like prayers of other times thought of with nostalgia. Instead, the Rosary is experiencing a new springtime. Without a doubt, this is one of the most eloquent signs of love that the young generation nourishes for Jesus and his Mother, Mary. In the current world, so dispersive, this prayer helps to put Christ at the centre, as the Virgin did, who meditated within all that was said about her Son, and also what he did and said. When reciting the Rosary, the important and meaningful moments of salvation history are relived. The various steps of Christ's mission are traced. With Mary the heart is oriented toward the mystery of Jesus. Christ is put at the centre of our life, of our time, of our city, through the contemplation and meditation of his holy mysteries of joy, light, sorrow and glory. May Mary help us to welcome within ourselves the grace emanating from these mysteries, so that through us we can ‘water’ society, beginning with our daily relationships, and purifying them from so many negative forces, thus opening them to the newness of God. The Rosary, when it is prayed in an authentic way, not mechanical and superficial but profoundly, it brings, in fact, peace and reconciliation. It contains within itself the healing power of the Most Holy Name of Jesus, invoked with faith and love at the centre of each ‘Hail Mary’.

-- Pope Benedict XVI

naturally find joy and comfort in the profound emptiness of contemplative meditation which emphasises God's hiddenness, may find the rosary to be busy, even frenetic. But for those whose spiritual personality leans more toward *kataphatic*, or image-based, meditation, the vivid imagery and symbolism of the prayers and mysteries of the rosary can bring joy in themselves, as well as the benefit of a deep sense of stillness and grounding in the changeless stability of God.

Apophatic and *kataphatic* are strange-sounding terms, used by masters in the spiritual life. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, by an anonymous Englishman of the fourteenth century, is a classic of apophatic spiritual contemplation. It urges a kind of prayer where one learns to be at home in a dark cloud beyond all thoughts and images. One lets one's mind rest in the consciousness of God, loving and praising Him for what He is in Himself. In this state where one is taken outside oneself to live in God, one is immediately and directly experiencing one's union with God.

The Mysteries of the Rosary

The Joyful Mysteries

Mondays and Saturdays

1. The Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38) [Spiritual fruit – Humility]
2. The Visitation (Luke 1: 39-56) [Spiritual fruit - Love of Neighbour]
3. The Nativity (Luke 2:1-20) [Spiritual fruit - Poverty of Spirit]
4. The Presentation (Luke 2:21-38) [Spiritual fruit - Purity of mind & body]
5. The Finding of Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:41-52) [Spiritual fruit - Obedience]

The Glorious Mysteries

(Wednesdays and Sundays)

1. The Resurrection (Matthew 28:1-8, Mark 16:1-18, Luke 24:1-12, John 20:1-29) [Spiritual fruit - Faith]
2. The Ascension (Mark 16:19-20, Luke 24:50-53, Acts 1:6-11) [Spiritual fruit - Christian Hope]
3. The Descent of the Holy Ghost (Acts 2:1-13) [Spiritual fruit - Gifts of the Holy Spirit]
4. The Assumption [Spiritual fruit - To Jesus through Mary]
5. The Coronation [Spiritual fruit - Grace of Final Perseverance]

The Sorrowful Mysteries

Tuesdays and Fridays

1. The Agony in the Garden (Matthew 26:36-46, Luke 22:39-46) [Spiritual fruit - God's will be done]
2. The Scourging at the Pillar (Matthew 27:26, Mark 15:15, John 19:1) [Spiritual fruit - Mortification of the senses]
3. The Crowning with Thorns (Matthew 27:27-30, Mark 15:16-20, John 19:2) [Spiritual fruit - Reign of Christ in our heart]
4. The Carrying of the Cross (Matthew 27:31-32, Mark 15:21, Luke 23:26-32, John 19:17) [Spiritual fruit - Patient bearing of trials]
5. The Crucifixion (Matthew 27:33-56, Mark 15:22-39, Luke 23:33-49, John 19:17-37) [Spiritual fruit - Pardoning of Injuries]

The Luminous Mysteries or Mysteries of Light

Thursdays

1. Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan (II Corinthians 5:21, Matthew 3:17 and parallels) [Spiritual fruit - Gratitude for the gift of Faith]
2. Jesus' self-manifestation at the wedding of Cana (John 2:1- 12) [Spiritual fruit – Fidelity]
3. Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God, with His call to conversion (Mark 1:15, Mark 2:3-13; Luke 7:47- 48, John 20:22-23) [Spiritual fruit - Desire for Holiness]
4. Jesus' Transfiguration (Luke 9:35 and parallels) [Spiritual fruit - Spiritual Courage]
5. Jesus' institution of the Eucharist, as the sacramental expression of the Paschal Mystery. (Luke 24:13-35 and parallels, 1 Corinthians 11:24-25) [Spiritual fruit - Love of our Eucharistic Lord]

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The Haven • St Vincent School for the Deaf • Jellicoe Avenue • Melrose
 PO Box 2635 Saxonwold 2132 • Tel +27 (0) 11 447 9219/9211 • Fax +27 (0) 11 447 9129
 E-mail info@cso.za.or