

## How can Mary be the “Mother of God” as the Catholic Church claims?

By Graham Osborne

On hearing this title, many mistakenly assume that the Church is saying that, somehow, Mary was older than God -that somehow she, gave rise to His eternal divinity, or that she is the Mother of the Father or the Holy Spirit as well. But this is not what the Church is saying at all.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church summarizes things beautifully: *The One whom [Mary] 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.” (CCC 495)*

Put simply, the Church reasons that if Mary is the mother of Jesus and Jesus is God, then Mary is the Mother of God.

Now the doctrine of the Trinity, which is held by virtually all Christians, states that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are three divine persons who are one divine being (God). The second person of this Trinity, Jesus, is a divine person with two natures –divine and human, joined inseparably through what theologians refer to as the hypostatic union. But some insist that Mary was only the mother of Jesus’ human nature. However, if we examine this view carefully, we quickly see a problem. A mother is a mother of a person and **not** of a nature. So to make this view work, one would have to believe that Jesus is actually 2 persons [this was essentially what the heresy called Nestorianism claimed], and that Mary gave birth only to the human Jesus. But I suspect virtually no Christian today would want to knowingly make this claim.

But again, it is important to remember that this title does **NOT** mean that Mary is the source of Jesus’ divinity, any more than any mother is the source of her child's spiritual soul. In both cases the spiritual element is from God. But as a mother, Mary is the mother of the second divine person of the Trinity, Jesus, who **is** God. So with this understanding, Mary can rightfully be called the Mother of God.

And the testimony from Sacred Scripture is equally convincing on this question. Unquestionably, the strongest reference to Mary as the Mother of God comes in **Luke 1:41-43** where Elizabeth literally uses this title as she greets Mary: *“Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out... ‘Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen... that **the mother of my Lord** should come to me?’”*

Now many Christians would immediately see Elizabeth's use of the word "Lord" [the Greek word "Kurios"] as an unarguable reference to Jesus' divinity. The New Testament uses this word repeatedly to refer to Jesus’ divinity, such as in **1 Cor 8:6** where it says, "Yet to us there is one God, the Father... and one Lord [Kurios], Jesus Christ... through whom we exist." And similarly, the Old Testament often uses the word “Lord/Kurios” to refer to God as well, such as in the great Sh’ma of **Deuteronomy 6:4**: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord".

But some will contend that this word “*Lord/Kurios*” can simply be used to refer to some earthly person of importance, and so, Elizabeth is not essentially saying, “*how is this that the mother of [God] comes to me*”.

But ultimately it is the context that gives the proper understanding to the word “*Lord*”, and even a fairly cursory reading of the passage shows that Elizabeth is clearly using “*Lord*” here in reference to Jesus’ divinity. In particular, Elizabeth is literally paraphrasing **2 Samuel 6:9** where David, referring to God’s presence associated with the Ark of the Covenant, says, “*How can the ark of the Lord come to me?*”

In this context, Elizabeth is clearly using the title “*Lord*” or “*kurios*” as a divine title for Jesus. And interestingly, Elizabeth is also referencing Mary as the *New Ark of the Covenant* as well – the old Ark carrying the Word of God in stone [the Ten Commandments], but the new Ark carrying the Word of God made of God made Flesh.

And there are many more references to this title sprinkled throughout the New Testament. For example, in **Matthew 1:23**, St Matthew writes that the “*Virgin will conceive, & bear a son... Emmanuel (God is with us)* [a reference to the great Messianic prophesy of **Isaiah 7:14**]. And in **Luke 1:35**, St Luke stresses the divinity of Jesus as a child, stating that the “*Child ... will be called the son of God*”. And similarly, in **Galatians 4:4**, St Paul testifies that “*God sent His Son, born of a woman*”. And to round this out and clearly make the connection between Mary’s motherhood and Jesus’ earthly and divine sonship, St Mark clearly states that Jesus is “*the son of Mary*” [**Mark 6:3**].

Additionally, the testimony from the first 400 years of the Church is unanimous on this point. The title of Mary as Mother of God remained virtually unchallenged through the first 4 centuries of Christianity.

For example, in 110 A.D., St Ignatius of Antioch, a disciple of St John and martyred Bishop of Antioch, would write: “*For our God, Jesus Christ, was conceived by Mary in accord with God’s plan...*”. And around 365 AD, St Athanasius, the great defender of Trinitarian orthodoxy would state that, “*The Word begotten of the Father from on high... is He that is born in time here below of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God*”. And the great 4<sup>th</sup> century Scripture scholar, St Jerome would echo this, writing, “*Do not marvel at the novelty of the thing, if a Virgin gives birth to God*”. And the testimony from the early Church goes on.

The ironic thing is that, today, many Protestants would not concede this title to Mary, yet all the major Reformers held it. Martin Luther would write, “*In this work whereby she was made the Mother of God, so many and such good things were given her that no one can grasp them....*”.

Perhaps the larger issue here is a reluctance to give Mary any particular attention or honor, for fear that this might somehow diminish our reverence for Jesus. But this certainly is not the case here. God commands us to honor our mother and father, and Jesus keeps this commandment perfectly. We are all called to imitate Jesus, and Scripture itself attests that all generations will call Mary “*blessed*”. What better way to do this than to honor Mary as who she is: the mother of Jesus – the Mother of God.