

The Blessed Mother in Scripture –An Overview

By Graham Osborne

As we prepare for Christmas, it is fitting that we also reflect on the profound place the Blessed Mother has in salvation history. Unfortunately, she is often a source of contention with our separated brothers and sisters in Christ. While I have covered all the following topics in greater detail in past Shy Catholic columns, I thought this might be a good time to give a brief but very concise overview of why Catholics believe what they do about Mary, in hope that it might contribute to a better understanding with our separated brothers and sisters, and help foster the growing Christian unity we are currently witnessing and hoping for [see **John 17:17-23** and Jesus prayer for “perfect” Christian unity as the key to the world knowing that the Father sent Him – the key to evangelization!]

We DO NOT worship Mary!

Worship is reserved for God alone. Idolatry in ANY form is absolutely condemned and the Catechism of the Catholic Church spells this out clearly (**CCC 2110-2114**). Anyone who suggests Catholics believe otherwise is mistaken and seriously misrepresents Catholic teaching.

Intercession of Mary and the Saints

A Catholic kneeling in prayer by a statue or picture of Mary, or any other saint, *is not worshipping or praying to that statue*. Statues are nonliving matter and have *no power whatsoever*.

However, statues or pictures can be used to both honor and call to mind a particular saint. And it absolutely is Catholic teaching that not only can we pray to saints [and “pray”, here is understood as, “to talk to”, just as we would talk to any human person], but that saints can then take those prayers, addressed to them, to God on our behalf. Catholics call this intercession.

But of course we never attribute divine power to a saint, statue or image – or that a particular saint has power within themselves to answer or fulfill prayers directed to them. It is *ALWAYS* God that answers the prayers brought before Him [see **Rev 5:8, 8:3-4** below].

But some question why anybody would pray to or ask the Blessed Mother, or any other saint, for their intercession? They point out that there is “one mediator between God” and man: Jesus [**1 Timothy 2:5**]. Why not go directly to the “one mediator”, Jesus?

Interestingly, the context of this verse is St Paul urging *intercession for ALL men*: “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions... be made for all men... This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior”. St Paul confirms here that it is Jesus’ intention to share his power as the “one mediator” with his followers, just as he

sent His 72 disciples out with power to heal and cast out demons in **Luke 10:9-19** [see further discussion below]. And further, **James 5:16** confirms that, “the fervent prayer of a righteous person *is very powerful*”. We are *supposed* to intercede for each other! There is no inconsistency in asking a fellow Christian, whether they are in Heaven or on earth, to pray for us. All of these prayers are ultimately directed to the “one mediator”, Jesus. But Jesus desires that we intercede for each other, and further, that “this is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior”. In this manner, all Christians share in the one mediation of Jesus.

But again, Catholic teaching insists that all such intercession and mediation is ultimately directed to Jesus, and further, that it is Jesus that answers *all* these prayers, and *NOT* the person who is asked to pray or intercede, whether this intercessor is in heaven or on earth.

But others object that the saints are either dead, or can't hear us in heaven, some even contending that prayer to saints is a violation of the Old Testament command against necromancy.

But necromancy involves communication with the shadowy underworld of the dead through mediums and wizards, particularly in Old Testament times. Praying to the saints is not praying to the dead in some shadowy, unknown underworld, but to those who are fully alive and in Heaven – in the presence of God Himself. As Jesus clearly reminds the Sadducees in **Luke 20:37-38**, God is “not God of the dead, but of the living, for to him *all are alive*”. And at the Transfiguration in **Luke 9:29-31**, Jesus Himself talked with Moses and Elijah, both being long “dead”.

Additionally, **Hebrews 12:1** reminds us that, “we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses” [the saints in Heaven]. And **Romans 12:5** confirms that “we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another”. St Paul would never exclude those alive in Heaven from the Body of Christ, so this must include the saints fully alive in Christ in Heaven as well.

So those in Heaven are not only alive, but are connected to us as part of the Body of Christ, and through this connection, can aid us with their prayers like any other Christian. Just as we would not hesitate to ask a friend on earth to pray/intercede for us, we can ask members of the Body of Christ, alive in Heaven, to intercede for us as well.

Rev 5:8 gives us some insight as to how these intercessory prayers can be brought before God: “*the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb each... with golden bowls full of incense which are the prayers of the saints.*” Similarly, in **Rev 8:3-4** we read that, “*another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God.*” And recall that in New Testament times, the term “saint” was a term given to all Christian believers, whether still alive on earth, or in Heaven. And further, a saint in Heaven no longer has need of anything for themselves, so their prayers must be *for others who are not in Heaven!*

Ultimately, God desires to give us all a share in his work. And so, he gives us a share both in his power, authority and mediation to accomplish this work as well. Again, remember the 72 sent out by Jesus with authority to cast out demons and heal [**Luke 10:9,17-19**]. Or recall when Jesus breathes on the Apostles and says, “whoever sins *you* forgive are forgiven” (**John 20:21**). It's the same idea. Power given by God to do *His* work – work that, otherwise, no one would be able to do on their own power.

Intercessory prayer to the saints in Heaven relies precisely on Jesus sharing his power and his mediation with his Body, the Church – the Body of Christ both in Heaven and on earth. Otherwise, no one on earth should ever ask someone else to pray for them – unless he has indeed been given a share in Jesus' ministry of mediation, which all Christians have.

It is also worthy to note that there have been literally hundreds of intensively documented medical miracles of healing attributed to the intercession of the saints in Heaven in the history of the Church, further confirming that these saints in Heaven definitely can hear our prayers, even if we can't fully understand how Jesus does this.

The Rosary and the Hail Mary

Looking at the Rosary in particular, it is a series of Biblically based prayers built around, and reflecting on, the life of Jesus. All the twenty “mysteries” or special prayer focuses of the Rosary are

right out of the Gospels. And the Hail Mary in particular is a prayer right from Scripture as well, both honoring Mary as the Mother of Jesus, and then asking for her intercession:

- “Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee” [Luke 1:29]
- “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb’ Jesus [Luke 1:42]
- It then concludes with a request for Mary, the “Mother of God” [cf Luke 1:43] to intercede or pray for us: “pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death”

Catholics DO NOT worship statues!

As mentioned above, a statue itself has *no power whatsoever, and Catholics certainly do not worship or pray to them*. A Catholic kneeling in prayer at a statue or image is not worshipping or praying to that that statue. Let us be absolutely clear about that. Maybe they are asking the person represented by the statue for their intercession, or maybe they are inspired to prayer by the particular saint’s holy example. But they are not praying/talking *to that statue*, or asking a particular saint to do what only God has the power to do.

But some press further, still unconvinced that Catholics don’t worship statues. They claim Catholics actually changed the numbering of the 10 Commandments, removing the second commandment against not creating graven images. But such a charge shows a misunderstanding of Catholic doctrine.

For starters, the Bible itself does not number the 10 Commandments individually, and over the centuries different groups have chosen to group and number these collective commandments differently. The present Catechism follows the numbering and grouping proposed by St. Augustine, which also follows the oldest known Hebraic numbering of the 10 Commandments that we have from the Dead Sea Scrolls. This was also the numbering adopted by Martin Luther! Many Protestants are unaware of this significant detail.

Catholics have NOT removed the Second Commandment, but have included the directives forbidding creating and worshipping graven images *in* the First Commandment – just as St Augustine, the early Jews and Martin Luther did – because they naturally belong to it: worship God alone, and nothing else. And even a cursory examination of the Catholic Catechism shows this inclusion. The unshortened First Commandment from the Catechism reads: “*I am the LORD your God... You shall have no other gods before me. **You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything... in heaven... in the earth... or... in the water... you shall not bow down to them or serve them***” (Exodus 20:2-5). There is no question that Catholics have not omitted the part of the Commandments that forbid creating graven images for the purpose of worshipping them.

But some still contend that having statues at all breaks the commandment, “*You shall not make... a graven image...*” [the word, “graven” means something earthly, non-living, that is sculpted, carved or engraved by man’s hand]. *The Church* answers by saying that the context of **Exodus 20:1-6**, especially, “*You shall not make for yourself an idol... you shall not bow down to them or serve them*”, indicates that this prohibition applies only to images created for the purpose of worship and idolatry. It’s not the making of statues or images that is the problem, it is making them **to worship!**

We can clearly see this in **Exodus 25:18-22**. Shortly after giving the Ten Commandments, God Himself commands Moses to make two large, golden statues of cherubim for the Ark of the Covenant (and similarly for the cherubim in the temple in **1 Chronicles 28:18-19**, and *the bronze serpent in Numbers 21:8–9*).

Mary Mother of God

This is Mary's greatest title, and the one from which all her other titles proceed. Put simply, the Church reasons that if Mary is the mother of the person, Jesus, and Jesus is God, then Mary is the Mother of God.

However, this title does NOT mean that Mary is the source of Jesus' eternal 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.

But some argue that Mary is only the mother of Jesus' human nature [and there are all kinds of theological problems – that space doesn't allow us to get into here – attached to a mistaken notion like this, that lead to all kinds of heresies in the early Church]. But a mother is the mother of a person, and not just a nature.

And in **Luke 1:41-43**, 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?'"

Additionally, we should not neglect the numerous places in the Old Testament where the position of the Queen Mother ["Gebirah" in Hebrew] is repeatedly highly honored, especially as an intercessor with the king, and as a confirmation to his rightful claim to the throne, foreshadowing Mary's role as the mother of *THE* King. And there is not a word of Scripture that would suggest that Mary ceases to be Jesus' mother in Heaven, but quite the opposite [for example **Rev 11:19 - 12:6** below, speaking of the woman who gives birth to the Messiah seen in Heaven]. People may not marry after the resurrection, but a mother never ceases to be what she is by nature and grace – a mother, even in Heaven.

Additionally, Catholics see Jesus' giving of his mother to St John in **John 19:26-27** – "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 home" – as Jesus symbolically giving his mother to *all* Christians.

And we get an even stronger sense of this in **Revelation 12:4-17** where it says that the Devil "pursued the woman [literally Mary, and symbolically the Church] who had borne the male child" [the Messiah]. But she escapes into the wilderness. But "the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus." In this we see a clear universality to the motherhood of Mary towards *all* Christians – to "those who... bear testimony to Jesus."

Ironically, this doctrine was not an article of contention at the time of the Reformation. All the major Reformers held this belief. For example, Martin Luther, arguably the primary leader of the Reformation, 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".

Did Mary have other Children?

Nowhere in Scripture does it say that Mary herself had other children. However, Scripture does speak of Jesus as "*THE* son of Mary" [**Mark 6:3**], and not "a son of Mary", and the Greek expression used here does imply that Jesus is Mary's only son.

For well over 1500 years, virtually all of Christianity, including all of the Reformers, held the view that Mary was perpetually virgin. For example, Martin Luther declared, “It is an article of faith that Mary is Mother of the Lord and still a virgin”. Ulrich Zwingli was equally adamant: “I esteem immensely the Mother of God, the ever chaste, immaculate Virgin Mary”. John Wesley would write that Jesus was “born of the blessed Virgin Mary, who, as well after as before she brought Him forth, continued a pure and unspotted virgin.”

Additionally, in **Luke 1:34-35** Gabriel says to Mary that “The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you”. After Mary agreed to this proposal, in a spiritual sense, she became the spouse of the Holy Spirit. From that point, it would have been unfitting for St. Joseph to have relations with her.

But what about Jesus’ “brothers” in places like **Mark 6:3** and **Matthew 13:55**: “Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?”

A key point here rests in the fact that the Hebrew language used in Jesus’ day had no word for cousins or other close relations. If you had a cousin or near relative in Biblical times, in the Jewish culture of the day, they were usually called “*brother*” or “*sister*”. We see a perfect example of this in **Gen 14:14** where Lot is called Abraham’s “brother”, though we know from Biblical genealogies that Lot is his nephew. And this tradition persists in many middle eastern cultures even today.

For example, in **Gal. 1:18-19** we read: “*I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, and... saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother.*” Here James is called “*the Lords brother*”. But he can’t be Jesus’ actual blood brother, because St Paul clearly states he’s an Apostle, and a little detective work quickly reveals that of the two Apostles named James, one was the son of Zebedee, and the other the son of Alphaeus. Neither was a son of St Joseph.

Examining Scripture more closely, we can potentially trace all four of these “brothers” in **Matthew 13:55** to another Mary and her husband, Clopas/Alphaeus [see **Matthew 27:56**, **Mark 15:40**, **John 19:25** and **Jude 1:1**]. Additionally, the second-century historian, Hegesippus and others, record that Clopas/Alphaeus was both the brother of St Joseph, and also the father of all four “brothers” of Jesus: James the younger, Joseph, Simon and Judas. This would then make all 4 “brothers” cousins of Jesus, explaining well why they were called Jesus’ “brothers” in **Mat 13:55** and **Mark 6:3**.

But still, people insist that in **Matthew 1:25** – “*Joseph... knew her not until she had borne a son*” – the word, “*until*”, implies that Joseph and Mary later *did* have relations. But this misunderstands how the word “*until*” could be used in Biblical times. It often meant that a particular action happened, or didn’t happen, up to a certain point, but didn’t necessarily imply *any other future actions* after that. For example, in **I Corinthians 15:25**: “[Christ] *must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.*” Does this mean that Christ will cease to reign afterwards? Certainly not! (similarly, see **2 Sam 6:23**, **1 Timothy 4:13**, **Gen. 8.7**, **Ps. 109.2**, **Dan. 6.24**, **I Mac. 5.54** and many others).

And similar reasoning applies to **Matthew 1:18**: “before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit”. “Before” is often used to refer to events that occurred up to a certain point, implying no further action. St Matthew is simply indicating that it is God who is the Father of Jesus, and not Joseph, implying nothing about Mary and Joseph’s future relationship. **John 4:49** gives a perfect example of such usage: “Sir, come down before my child dies.” This child did not die after Jesus came, but in fact was healed!

Writing on **Matthew 1:18-25**, St Thomas Aquinas, arguably one of the greatest theologians in Christian history, insisted that, “this error [that Mary had marital relations with Joseph after Jesus’

birth] is an insult to the Holy Ghost, whose "shrine" was the virginal womb, wherein He had formed the flesh of Christ: wherefore it was unbecoming that it should be desecrated by intercourse with man."

Protestant Reformer, John Calvin, also wrote profoundly on these exact points: "There have been certain folk who have wished to suggest from this passage [**Mathew 1:25**] that the Virgin Mary had other children than the Son of God, and that Joseph had then dwelt with her later; but what folly this is! The gospel writer did not wish to record what happened afterwards; he simply wished to make clear... that Joseph had been well and truly assured that it was God who had sent His angel to Mary. He had therefore never dwelt with her nor had he shared her company.... And... Jesus... is called the first-born. This is not because there was a second... Scripture speaks thus of naming the first-born whether or no there was any question of the second."

And finally in **Luke 2:7**, Jesus is referred to as Mary's "first-born son". Some conclude that this implies Mary must have had other sons as well. But "First-born" is a title given to the first son opening the womb, whether other children are born afterwards or not [see **Exodus 13:1-16**]. This title includes certain rights and responsibilities, but it implies no further children whatsoever. There need not be a second child to have Firstborn son.

The Immaculate Conception

The Church teaches that "from the first moment of her conception... she [Mary] was preserved free from every stain of original sin". A Scriptural precedent for this teaching is clearly seen in Genesis, as our first parents, Adam and Eve, were created in exactly this same state.

Why could God not do the same for Mary? And especially considering the 3rd Commandment: honor your father and mother. Jesus keeps this Commandment perfectly! It is absolutely fitting that Jesus honors his mother perfectly by creating her perfectly! This also prepares a worthy vessel to hold the Word Made Flesh. Recall the holiness and God-given authority needed to even *touch* the Old Testament ark that carried the Word of God in stone? What about the New Testament "ark" that would carry the Word of God made Flesh?!

But also note that the Church teaches that none of these gifts were essential. God could have created Mary however he wanted. But they are certainly *fitting*. And this understanding also removes the mistaken idea that Mary's mom would also have needed to be immaculately conceived as well – and her mom, and her mom, in perpetuity.

Others further object claiming that Mary would then not need a savior. But again, this misunderstands the teaching. It is *Jesus* that does this *for* his mother. She is preserved from original sin through a positive act by her savior and son, Jesus. A person can be saved from falling into a hole in at least 2 ways. They can be prevented from falling in in the first place – in advance. Or they can be pulled out of the hole afterwards. But both situations require a "savior".

Scripture provides strong evidence for this doctrine as well. In **Genesis 3:15** we see that there will be "enmity" [complete opposition] between Satan and "the woman", and a battle between his seed and hers. And as you read on, in the context of all of Scripture, her "seed" can only be Jesus, and the "woman" can only be Mary.

But key in all this is that she is *NOT* of the devil's seed! This is profound! It means that she *must* have been born into God's friendship and family right from the beginning, just as this doctrine teaches.

1 John 3:7-11 gives further powerful testimony, literally interpreting **Gen 3:15** for us: “Whoever sins belongs to the devil... No one who is begotten by God commits sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot sin because he is begotten by God. In this way, the children of God and the children of the devil are made plain”.

Luke 1:28 gives us further incite. In the angels greeting, “Hail, full of grace”, Gabriel uses the Greek word, “Kecharitomene” – properly translated, “full of grace”. Greek, like English, can use tenses of words to convey more information through that word. Kecharitomene is in the perfect tense, revealing that this filling of grace has been completed in the past, resulting in a present and ongoing, perpetual state of grace. So this grace was not a result of the angel’s visit, but *a state that Mary was already in*. As a result, Elizabeth would then twice exclaim, “most blessed are you” [**Luke 1:42, 45**]

Was the Blessed Mother Sinless?

We often hear that to sin *is* human, as if we have no choice in the matter – that sin is an inevitable consequence of being human. But sin does *not* make us *more* human, but less! God always provides sufficient grace in every situation to avoid sin [cf **1 Cor 10:13**]. So could a person remain sinless their entire lives. By the grace of God, potentially yes!

Scripture gives us a good sense of this potential. For example, **Jude 1:24-25**: “Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing...”. Sounds just like the Blessed Mother!

Similarly, in **1 Thessalonians 5:23-24** we read: “May the God of peace himself make you *perfectly holy* and may you entirely, spirit, soul, and body, be *preserved blameless* for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”. Equally powerful is **1 John 5:18**: “any one born of God does not sin, but He [Jesus] who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him”. But note that in all of these quotes, it is God that is working. What is impossible for us is possible by the grace of God.

And again, **1 John 3:6-10** reminds us that, “Whoever sins belongs to the devil... No one who is *begotten* by God commits sin, because God's *seed* remains in him; he cannot sin because he is begotten by God. In this way, the children of God and the children of the devil are made plain.” This is a beautiful, Scriptural picture of the spiritual protection given Mary by her Son during her earthly life – sinlessness – by the grace of God.

But “all have sinned”, Romans 3:23 clearly says! But this is St Paul emphasizing a general principle, and he is not intending this verse to be taken literally. How do we know? Because there are obvious exceptions to this statement, that he notes in other places.

For example, Jesus has not sinned [Hebrews 4:15: “Christ was tempted in all points even as we are and yet he was without sin”]. And neither have babies, young children or others not fully able to reason and discern wrong and right [you must be able to properly comprehend wrong and right before being culpable of sin]. St Paul alludes to this in **Romans 9:11** when he speaks of Jacob and Esau as unborn babies that “had done nothing either good or bad”. Jesus and young babies are exceptions to this verse, and so is the Blessed Mother.

We are made in the image and likeness of God, “created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (**Eph. 4:24**). Again, Adam and Eve were also created in perfect friendship with God – free from original sin, their souls infused with sanctifying grace. They were meant to spend eternity this way – to never sin and to never die. So is there a Biblical foundation to the concept of earthly sinlessness? Absolutely! It was the original plan!

Was Mary Assumed Bodily Into Heaven?

Scripture absolutely provides precedence for this teaching, noting several people who were taken bodily into Heaven. In **2 Kings 2:11**, we see the great prophet, Elijah, being taken “up to heaven in a whirlwind”. In **Revelation 11:3-13**, we see the dramatic testimony of the “two witness”. In the end “their corpses will lie in the main street of the great city”. But then “a loud voice from heaven” says to them: “Come up here.’ So they went up to heaven in a cloud as their enemies looked on.”

Similarly, at the final coming of Jesus, **1 Thessalonians 4:16-17** teaches that, “the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air”. A bodily assumption into Heaven!

And in **Hebrews 11:5** we read that, “By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death; And he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken, he was attested as *having pleased God*”. Now who has pleased God more than Blessed Mother?! If Enoch “*pleased God*” and “*was taken*” bodily up into Heaven, it certainly makes sense that the Blessed Mother would be taken too.

But some point out that in **John 3:13**, Jesus says, “*No one has ascended up to heaven, but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man.*” But the Church does not teach that Mary “*ascended*” into Heaven on her own power like Jesus did. She was *assumed* – taken bodily up into Heaven by God Himself. There is a great difference in the two.

But perhaps the most powerful testimony from Scripture is **Rev 11:19 -12:6**: “Then God’s temple *in heaven* was opened, and *the ark of His covenant could be seen* in the temple”.

Recall that the early Christian Church considered Mary the “New Ark of the Covenant”, as she carried, not God’s Word in stone like the Old Testament Ark, but the Word of God made flesh. Then, in the next verse, we read that, “A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars... She gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod. Her child was caught up to God and His throne.”

Now, while the Book of Revelation is a highly symbolic book, the foundational rule in Scriptural exegesis is to always consider the literal sense first, abandoning that only if it is obviously problematic. But that said, Scripture certainly can have multiple senses, both literal and symbolic.

And such may be the case here, as the woman can represent both the Church and the joining of 2 covenants, old and new. But turning to the literal sense first, we essentially have a heavenly description of Jesus’ Mother in Heaven. Heaven is opened, God’s ark is seen there, then a woman is described in the sky, in cosmic, heavenly language, who then gives birth to a son. That Son is unquestionably Jesus, and so the woman *must* be Mary! And this fits **Psalms 132:8** prophetically and perfectly: “Arise, O Lord, into your resting place: *you and the ark which you have sanctified.*”

“All generations will call me blessed”. Do we “*imitate Christ*” [**1 Cor 11:1**] and honor Jesus’ mother the way He does [**Matthew 19:19**]? “*Never be afraid of loving Mary too much. You can never love her more than Jesus does*” [**St. Maximilian Kolbe**].