

Dear Grace

Answers to Catholic Questions

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Dear Grace,

My daughter-in-law, who is not Catholic, said that one of the "problems" she has with the Catholic faith is our reverence for Mary and the fact that we pray to her for intercession. She believes that we put Mary on the same level as Jesus. How can I best explain to her that we do not?

It is sad indeed that there exists so much misunderstanding regarding the love and reverence that Catholics and other Christians have for the Mother of Jesus. More than likely, the problem stems from the fact that the Blessed Virgin Mary is not regarded by some as a personal, spiritual mother. For it is only by recognizing her as our true Spiritual Mother, that we will be led to an authentic response to Mary. When Catholics say, "Mary is our Mother," these are not just empty words. They mean rather that we recognize Mary for who she is and also for her role in the plan of God. That Mary was the mother of Jesus the God-Man is almost universally accepted among all Christians and probably many non-Christians as well. Therefore, in this small space, let us focus instead on her role in the life of the Church today. We will then be better able to explain why we love, revere, and honor her and also why we are thus led to seek her intercession and protection.

Looking first at Scripture, the principal basis for the doctrine of Mary as Spiritual Mother of *all humanity* is found in the Gospel of John. In this scene, Mary is at Calvary at the foot of the Cross with John, the beloved disciple. John tells us, "When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold your mother'" (John 19: 26-27). Throughout the Church's history, numerous popes, theologians, and writers have confirmed their belief that here John is symbolic of all humanity. In other words, that Jesus from the Cross gave His Mother to every human person for all time.

Our Lord said, "Behold your mother." He was not *suggesting* that Mary become our mother, but that Mary *is* our Mother. And to Mary He gave us as children. But, if this is true, how do we make theological sense of this relationship? Turning again to Scripture, we can best understand it by considering St. Paul's beautiful doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ (cf. Colossians 1:18, Ephesians 4:15). In this whole Body, St. Paul refers to Christ as the Head and the Church as the Body. Head and Body make up the entire and whole Mystical Body of Jesus Christ. Now, if we say that Mary gave birth to Jesus, the Head of the

Body, then it must be that she gave birth to the entire Body since a true body cannot be separated. Thus, it would mean that she gave birth to the members as well. In giving physical birth to Jesus, we can say that Mary made it possible for us to receive spiritual life through Him. We were dead, and through Him we have come back to life. And it was Mary's "yes" at the Annunciation that made our rebirth possible. To question this is to question the plan of God. For it was He who decided from all eternity that it would be so. And the list of those who have believed it is almost endless.

Once we have established that Mary is our true Spiritual Mother, we must ask what this means for us in our everyday lives? What is a mother, anyway? What does a mother do? Why did God arrange it so that every human person would come into the world through a mother? There must be a reason. Does a mother simply give birth to a child only to abandon him or her? Of course she does not. A mother not only gives birth, but she also is given by God so that she might nurture, feed, teach, guide, and protect her child. God entrusts her with these tasks. In the human family, a mother is not optional. So too, in the spiritual family of the Mystical Body of Christ, Mary, our Mother is not optional.

Any person who studies the history of the early Christian Church will easily discover the solid witness of how lovingly and faithfully these first believers in Christ, and countless others who went after them down through the ages, turned confidently with love and devotion to the Mother of Jesus for protection, guidance, and assistance in their hours of gravest need. Why did they do this? It seems safe to assume they did so because they wished to obey Jesus. And, after all, she had given birth to Him, nurtured, fed, guided, and protected Him. If God allowed Himself to be born of her and chose her as His Mother, can we do anything but accept her as ours? To put our trust and confidence in her will always be pleasing to God because everything she does will always lead us closer to Him.

How could we possibly dare to claim that she is on an equal level with God? She is not. But, nonetheless, because we are her spiritual children, she looks tenderly on us and after us with a love so profound that we are moved to plead, "Oh Blessed Mother, pray for us, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

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