

# *Apologia*: MARIOLOGY, WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR LUTHERANS?

By Rev. Heath Curtis

## *Introduction*

What the Church says about Mary is primarily based on two facts. First, Jesus of Nazareth is God Almighty and perfect humanity in one person. Second, Mary is His mom. Thus, all of what we say about Mary is a confession about her Son.

The Scriptural proof for these two facts is well known and extensive; however we might just repeat Matthew 1:18, 22-23 here “Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. . . .All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, ‘Behold, the virgin will conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us).” Thus far the text.

## *Mary the Mother of God*

From these two statements (Jesus is God and human in one person. Mary is his mom.) flow other statements as well. Perhaps the most famous of these is that Mary is the Mother of God. This statement, or really this word in Greek Theotokos (literally God-bearer), was rejected by an early heretic in the Church named Nestorius. He and his followers didn’t want to call Mary the Mother of God, but only the Mother of Christ. But why would you ever hesitate to say that Christ is God? If Jesus Christ is God and if Mary is his mother, how could you not call her the Mother of God? Thus, again, all of what we say about Mary is a confession about her Son.

Our Lutheran Confessions put it this way, “Therefore, we believe, teach and confess that Mary did not conceive and give birth to a child who as merely, purely, simply human, but she gave birth to the true Son of God. Therefore, she is rightly called and truly is the Mother of God.” (FC Ep. VIII.12)

## *Mary the Dignity of Woman*

The Scriptures can be misread in a variety of ways, one of the most popular of our time is to read them in such a way that the dignity of womanhood is infringed. Thus, some folks read the creation and patriarchal accounts in Genesis and say, “See, your God made the man first – the woman was just an afterthought that then led mankind into sin. Then there is this whole historical parade of polygamy, abuse, and general misogyny. Obviously, your religion doesn’t look kindly upon woman.”

Any and all such interpretations are shattered by Mary. Mary is, as it were, God’s answer to feminist critiques of Christianity. Do you doubt that God loves woman? Do you doubt that woman is even truly and fully human in God’s eyes? Simply look at Mary, the Mother of God. When God decided to take up humanity into himself and so become incarnate, he took his humanity from Mary alone. There is no human father for the human nature which God the Son took up. If Mary is not truly and fully human in the purest and truest sense, then neither is Jesus.

In Mary God blesses and honors all that is in womanhood for she is both Virgin and yet wife and Mother. Thus all the vocations of women are blessed in Mary – no woman ever need doubt God’s love and approval for her gender and her calling for no other person in all of history has been more approved by God than this woman.

## *Mary: The Archetypical Church*

In all this Mary is also the archetype of the Church, the Bride of Christ, the New Eve, truly the Mother of us all. She is the first to believe in the Incarnate Christ. And as we are all Jesus’ brothers and sisters by our adoption through the womb of the baptismal font, so is Mary our mother in the Faith. It was not for nothing that the angel said all generations would call her blessed. John understood this and used Mary as the symbol for the Church in Revelation 12:1-6.

## *Mary: Ever-Virgin, Assumed, and Immaculate?*

On all of the above Christians the world over are united in their confession. But we now turn to a few issues about Mary that have caused controversy in Christendom. Namely, did Mary remain a virgin her entire life (the ever-virginity), was she immaculately conceived (free from original sin by a special grace), and was she assumed into heaven after her death (the Assumption)?

## *Perpetual Virginity*

Today Lutherans are generally taught that the ever-virginity and assumption of Mary are open questions that theologians can have different opinions about so long as they don't require others to go along with them. Indeed, from Luther himself to well into the 20th century Lutherans universally taught the ever-virginity as a Biblically supported fact. The reasons for this are many and go beyond the scope of this brief essay. I will only here produce two quotes to demonstrate this. The first is from Luther and the second from the official dogmatics (doctrine textbook) of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod written in the 1920's by Francis Pieper.

“According to His humanity, He, Christ, our Savior, was the real and natural fruit of Mary's virginal womb (of which Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to her in Luke 1:42: “Blessed is the fruit of your womb!”). This was without the co-operation of a man, and she remained a virgin after that. Everything else that a mother imparts to a child was imparted by Mary, the mother of God's eternal Son. Even the milk He sucked had no other source than the breasts of this holy and pure mother.” (Luther's Works, vol. 22, page 23. See also page 214ff.)

“If the Christology of a theologian is orthodox in all other respects, he is not to be regarded as a heretic for holding that Mary bore other children in a natural manner after she had given birth to the Son of God.” (Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, II.308)

Thus, as Luther and Pieper demonstrate, for the vast majority of the history of Lutheranism, the orthodox position was to uphold Mary perpetual virginity. If you are interested in exploring this topic further, you might consult the Winter 2004 and Spring 2005 issues of Lutheran Forum which contain articles on the topic.

## *Bodily Assumption*

That Mary was assumed bodily into heaven after her death was declared to be an official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church only in the 20th century. Lutherans see this as a gross abuse of supposed power possessed by the papacy. Rather, Lutherans leave this issue to pious opinion. There is indeed an old tradition in the Church that Mary was bodily assumed into heaven just as Enoch and Elijah were in the Old Testament. Arguments can be made on both sides which would still support an orthodox confession of Christ. Thus, since Scripture is silent on the matter, Lutherans will neither confirm nor deny Mary's assumption: we are free in the Gospel to hold to it or not so long as we do not bind the consciences of others.

## *Immaculate*

To be immaculate means to be without spot, blemish, or sin. One day you will be immaculate. God has promised this. He has already washed you clean in Baptism and justified you by faith alone and set you upon the foundation upon which you are to build by his grace (I Cor. 3:10ff). He will finally complete and fulfill your salvation when he comes back and raises you and all the dead in Christ. In heaven, you will then be spotless, immaculate, washed clean in the blood of the Lamb, fully and completely sanctified.

Some in the Church's history have claimed that God has given this gift of being immaculate, of being fully sanctified by his grace, to some people even while here on earth. The most well-known example of this is Mary (though it was also claimed of John the Baptist as well). The idea here is once again one of confessing Jesus. The connection between Mary and Jesus is so close, the notion goes, that Mary is completely sanctified even from the first moment of her conception. The Roman Catholic Church has declared this to be the truth.

Lutherans are certainly not ready to declare that Scripture teaches that Mary was immaculate even from her conception – the evidence seems a little too scanty for that. However, neither can Lutherans deny this outright as long as it is considered a pious opinion and not forced on others. Indeed, Luther himself seemed to be of two minds on the issue. Quotations can be found in Luther that seem to deny that Mary was free of original sin, but then again here is a quote from the latter years (1543) of Luther that certainly seems to say the opposite:

“That is why it was necessary that [Jesus'] mother was a virgin, a young virgin, a holy virgin, who [was] freed of original sin and cleansed by the Holy Ghost[.]” (Vom Schem Hamphoras und Geschlecht Christi, paragraph 168 as translated by G. Falk in his book *The Jew in Christian Theology*, McFarland Press, 1992).

Luther, who was educated as an Augustinian monk, no doubt was influenced by Augustine's thought on this point as well. The great African theologian of the 5th century writes in his work *De natura et gratia* (On Nature and Grace), “With the exception of the holy Virgin Mary, in whose case, out of respect for the Lord, I do not wish there to be any further question as far as sin is concerned, since how can we know what great abundance of grace was conferred on her to conquer sin in every way, seeing that she merited to conceive and bear him who certainly had no sin at all?” (36, 42; PL 44, 267; CSEL 60, 263)

So, for both Augustine and Luther, Mary's lack of sin was first of all by grace alone and therefore no different than the sinlessness you and I will enjoy in heaven. Second, it was meant to be a confession of Christ's person and sinlessness. Today most Lutherans would not support this teaching, but it is important to understand where it came from and in what way it still can be held as a pious opinion. For more information on these controversial topics and the Lutheran reaction to them, see A. C. Piepkorn's essay “Mary's Place within the People of God

According to non-Roman Catholics” in *The Church: Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn*, ALBP, 1993.

### *Conclusion*

Jesus is true God and true human. Mary is his mom. This mystery, that God should come in the flesh, is called the great mystery of the faith by St. Paul (I Tim. 3:16). We will never fully understand it this side of heaven. This blessed woman Mary is so intricately tied up in this mystery that she reflects and shines with the glory of her Son in a way no other person can. As the hymnist says,

O higher than the cherubim,  
More glorious than the seraphim,  
Lead their praises, Alleluia!  
Thou Bearer of the eternal Word,  
Most gracious, magnify the Lord,  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
-The Lutheran Hymnal, #475

Note: Please read Luther’s comments on the “Hail, Mary” which is posted in conjunction with this essay. In Luther’s day the Hail, Mary read, “Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you! Blessed are thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.” The last line, familiar to Roman Catholics today, “Pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death,” was added by the Pope after the Reformation to offend Lutherans who do not invoke the saints.

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