

Sermon for the Solemnity of the BVM  
Sunday, August 13, 2023  
“Why Does Mary Matter to You?”

Text: Luke 1:46-55

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.*

Today we are celebrating the Feast or Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which actually occurs this Tuesday, on August 15. It is a feast, because it is one of the holy days when any abstinence is dispensed, particularly in fasting seasons. In past times when meat was scarce and livestock was an important part of agricultural livelihood, a feast day meant that farmers could kill a cow or a pig, a chicken, and such for eating, which was one less animal to provide milk, eggs, or the strength to pull a plow. This holy day is also a solemnity, because it recalls and glorifies an important event in the life of Jesus and the most significant mysteries of catholic Christian faith. As we celebrate this great holy day honoring blessed Mary, two questions deserve attention: Why does the Church venerate Mary with such importance? and second, How is Mary important to you?

So, why does the Church venerate Mary? For starters, the Bible tells us that Mary is full of grace and is the most blessed woman among women for all time. When the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary to inform her that she had been chosen by God to bring him into the world in human form, he addressed her by saying, “Hail, thou full of grace. (Χαῖρε, κεχαριτωμένη)” St. Luke utilized the verb (χαριτώω), which means to endow with grace. (We get the word *charisma*, meaning a free gift of grace, from the same verb). But crucially, he expressed that verb in a grammatical form that meant that God made her full of grace from her beginning, here state continued in the present, and would be so throughout all time. Then, a short time later, when she went to meet with her relative, Elizabeth, mother of St. John the Baptist, upon her arrival, John leaped in Elizabeth’s womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, exclaimed “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Once again, Luke utilized the Greek verbal form that meant she had been blessed, or spoken highly of, by God from the beginning, into the present, and would continue to be for all time.

Next, early in its history, the Church declared Mary to be the Mother of God. The Church has venerated Mary for at least 1,900 years and placed special prominence upon the Blessed Virgin since its beginning. From the days the early church Mary was considered the first among all the saints. In the year 431, the Third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus (a city in modern-day Turkey) declared Mary as the *theotokos*, or ‘God-bearer.’ Because she bore him in her womb, that makes her the mother of him whom she bore. She provided the womb and supplied the genetic material for God to become human in the person of Jesus. We know that Jesus is God-incarnate, the Word made flesh, and

one of the persons of the one, holy and undivided Trinity. We also know that Jesus is fully divine and fully human. Therefore, Mary is the Mother of God, because it is through Mary that Jesus received his humanity. That does not mean that she is older than God; that does not mean that she is the source of his divinity or was at the Creation. Rather, Mary gave birth to a person, and that person also happened also to be God. Because of that, we believe she has a special place in the heart of God, which is why we can ask her to intercede for us—to pray for us—to God who hears her petitions directly.

Because of that special place, something mysterious happened to her at the end of her days. In the Eastern half of the Church, commonly referred to as the Orthodox, she is said to have experienced dormition, or falling asleep; in the Western half, commonly called the Catholic Church, she was assumed into heaven. The idea of her Assumption can be found in homilies of the Church as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, in both the East and the West, but it wasn't until 1950 that Pope Pius XII defined the Assumption as an official dogma of the church. However, the details what happened to her at the end of her days are not specifically recorded in scripture and remain a mystery.

From the earliest days of the Church, it was understood that Mary's mortal fate was like that of the rest of humanity. According to Paul in his First Letter to the Thessalonians, those "who sleep in death" and have "fallen asleep" before the second coming and await the resurrection of the dead (1 Thessalonians 4:13); that would suggest her dormition, or falling asleep. The Church has also taught since ancient times that at the moment of her conception, she was granted by God the grace to be free of original sin (that is the sin of the Fall of Adam and Eve), the result of which is corruption of the body. There are apocryphal writings by early Church Fathers that claim that the apostles were present when Mary died and that when St. Thomas asked to have her tomb opened, she was not there. Since, according to the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John only he who descended from the Father would ascend back to the Father, it was presumed that she did not ascend into Heaven, but was assumed—that somehow, her body was reunited with her soul in heaven before it could experience normal decay and corruption.

These two events can be wonderfully seen in the image on the cover of the bulletin, which shows both Mary's dormition and assumption beautifully depicted by the Eastern-European contemporary painter, Svitozar Nenyuk.

Mary has clearly been important to the Church for a very long time. And she is important to all of us, too, because we believe that Mary humbly accepted God's invitation and call to be the bearer of Jesus the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah. She showed incredible faith in the Almighty and faithfulness to him when she said, "Yes," to God. She was an unmarried teenage girl who risked shame and rejection by her family and community in order to fulfill God's purpose for her.



What a risk! That kind of faithfulness takes incredible strength and courage, but she accepted the challenge. God knew she would and he knew she was courageous enough to do it and do it well. Mary should have been married to have a child, but she trusted God, and by her visitation to Elizabeth, she trusted Elizabeth, who accepted her and welcomed her with the same inclusive love that Jesus would eventually show to many who didn't fit society's mold. So often in Scripture God used the most unexpected people to work out his purpose in the world. Think about Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Ruth, David, Elizabeth, Peter, Paul, and Mary...and many others. And God can use unexpected people like you and me, to do his work.

It is this aspect of Mary's story that resonates the most for me. Mary is the highest example of how God can do the most extraordinary things with the most ordinary people. God can use any one of us for his purpose, no matter where we've come from, what we've done, who we've been, God can interrupt our lives to allow his plan to unfold. God can interrupt our lives in his call to us to be his agents to bring about his kingdom. The most important thing that we can do is humbly accept God's invitation and pray for his assistance to help us carry it out.

But how is Mary important to you? Has her intercession helped you during a rough time in your life? Does she serve as a loving mother figure for you? Are you inspired by her incredible strength to say, "Yes" to God to be the mother of his Word made flesh, and still endure the pain of watching her son be tortured and crucified? Does she help keep you focused in your desire to follow Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. As we celebrate her holy day today, as we celebrate her feast on Tuesday, ponder over what Mary means or can mean for you.

God saw in Mary such overwhelming potential to accept his invitation with humility, that he entrusted her and conferred his grace upon her to be the vessel by which the divine would become human. In so doing, she became the Mother of God-incarnate. As you think about the Blessed Virgin Mary, ask yourself, "How and where is God using me today?" Pray and listen to how God might be calling you to help work out his purpose in the world. There are so many ways in which we can all participate in furthering God's desire for a better world: there is much work to be done here among us as the community of God's people—the Church—and there is much work to be done for God's people and his creation. Put away all anxiety, anger, and confusion. God is calling you to say, "Yes."

Mary matters to all of us because she *is* the most blessed among women for all time, she *is* the Mother of God, and she humbly accepted God's call to her.

*Hail Mary, full of grace. Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.*

## Resources

“Commentary on Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)” in *The Working Preacher*, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2723](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2723)

“Mary, Mother of God,” <http://www.catholic.com/tracts/mary-mother-of-god>

“The Dormition of Mary,” <http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/the-dormition-of-mary.html>

“The Assumption of Mary: A Belief since Apostolic Times,” <https://www.ewtn.com/library/ANSWERS/AOFMARY.HTM>

<https://www.franciscanmedia.org/saint-of-the-day/assumption-of-the-blessed-virgin-mary/>