

This belief is beautifully illustrated in the message of our Blessed Mother at Guadalupe, when she appeared to St. Juan Diego in 1531. On Dec. 9, she said, "Know for certain, least of my sons, that I am the perfect and perpetual Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus, the true God, through whom everything lives, the Lord of all things near and far, the Master of Heaven and earth. It is my earnest wish that a temple be built here to my honor. Here I will demonstrate, I will manifest, I will give all my love, my compassion, my help and my protection to the people. I am your merciful mother, the merciful mother of all of you who live united in this land, and of all mankind, of all those who love me, of those who cry to me, of those who seek me, and of those who have confidence in me. Here I will hear their weeping, their sorrow, and will remedy and alleviate all their multiple sufferings, necessities, and misfortunes."

Then on Dec. 12, she said, "Hear and let it penetrate into your heart, my dear little son: let nothing discourage you, nothing depress you. Let nothing alter your heart or your countenance. Also, do not fear any illness or vexation, anxiety or pain. Am I not here who am your mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Am I not your fountain of life? Are you not in the folds of my mantle, in the crossing of my arms? Is there anything else that you need?" These beautiful messages underscore the role of Mary as Mother of God and our mother.

As we begin our new year, let us look to our Blessed Mother's example and rely on her prayers. May we turn to her always as our

own Mother, pleading, "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

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Pamphlet 207

Mary: True Mother of God

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My Protestant relatives wanted to know about Mary being called, "Mother of God". Could you please help me?

To understand the title "Mother of God," we must first clearly understand Mary's role as mother of our Savior, Jesus Christ. As Catholics, we firmly believe in the incarnation of Our Lord: Mary conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Confer Lk 1:26-38 and Mt 1:18-25.) Through her, Jesus Christ — second person of the Holy Trinity, one-in-being (consubstantial) with the Father, and true God from true God — entered this world taking on human flesh and a human soul. Jesus is true God and true man. In His divine person are united both a divine nature and a human nature. Mary did not create the divine person of Jesus, who existed with the Father and Holy Spirit from all eternity: "In fact, the One whom she 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' (*Theotokos*)" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 495). As St. John wrote, "The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us, and we have seen His glory: The glory of an only Son coming from the Father filled with enduring love" (Jn 1:14).

For this reason, sometime in the early history of the Church, our Blessed Mother was given the title "Mother of God." St. John Chrysostom (d. 407), for example, composed in his Eucharistic Prayer for the Mass an anthem in honor of her: "It is truly just to proclaim you blessed, O Mother of God, who are most blessed, all pure and Mother of our God. We magnify you who are more honorable than the Cherubim and incomparably more glorious than the Seraphim. You who, without losing your virginity, gave birth to the Word of God. You who are truly the Mother of God."

However, objection to the title "Mother of God" arose in the fifth century due to confusion concerning the mystery of the incarnation. Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople (428-431), incited a major controversy. He stated that Mary gave birth to Jesus Christ, a regular human person, period. To this human person was united the person of the Word of God (the divine Jesus). This union of two persons — the human Christ and the divine Word — was "sublime and unique" but merely accidental. The divine person dwelt in the human

person "as in a temple." Following his own reasoning, Nestorius asserted that the human Jesus died on the cross, not the divine Jesus. As such, Mary is not "Mother of God," but simply "Mother of Christ" — the human Jesus. Sound confusing? It is, but the result is the splitting of Christ into two persons and the denial of the incarnation.

St. Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria (d. 440) refuted Nestorius, asserting, "It was not that an ordinary man was born first of the Holy Virgin, on whom afterwards the Word descended; what we say is that, being united with the flesh from the womb, [the Word] has undergone birth in the flesh, making the birth in the flesh His own...." This statement affirms the belief asserted in the first paragraph — Mary is truly the mother of God.

On June 22, 431, the Council of Ephesus convened to settle this argument. The Council declared, "If anyone does not confess that the Emmanuel is truly God and therefore that the holy Virgin is the Mother of God (*Theotokos*) (since she begot according to the flesh the Word of God made flesh), *anathema sit*." Therefore, the Council officially recognized that Jesus is one divine person, with two natures — human and divine — united in a true union. Second, Ephesus affirmed that our Blessed Mother can rightfully be called the Mother of God: Mary is not Mother of God, the Father, or Mother of God, the Holy Spirit; rather, she is Mother of God, the Son — Jesus Christ, true God from all eternity who entered this world becoming also true man.

The Council of Ephesus declared Nestorius a heretic, and the Emperor Theodosius ordered him deposed and exiled. (Interestingly, a small Nestorian Church still exists in Iraq, Iran and Syria.)

The incarnation is indeed a profound mystery. The Church uses very precise — albeit philosophical — language to prevent confusion and error. Since we have just celebrated Christmas and the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, we must continue to ponder this great mystery of how our divine Savior entered this world, taking on our human flesh, to free us from sin. We must also ponder and emulate the great example of our Blessed Mother, who said, "I am the handmaid of the Lord; be it done unto me according to thy word."

Let us not forget that Mary is truly "mother": She is not just the physical means by which our Lord entered this world, but she is also in the fullest sense mother. As mother, she always wants to present her Son to others, and to lead others to her divine Son. In the Gospels, she presented Him to the shepherds, the Magi, the Priest Simeon and Anna, and to the wedding party at Cana. She desires to do the same for each of us. When Our Lord died on the cross, standing there were His mother, Mary, and St. John the Apostle; Jesus said to Mary, "Woman, there is your son," entrusting His widowed mother to the care of St. John; and to St. John, "There is your mother" (Jn 19:26-27). Traditionally, we have always held that here Jesus gave Mary as a mother to the Church as a whole and to each of us.