

The life of Mary told through the Church's Liturgy

The Immaculate Conception (8 Dec)

'We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.' - Pope Pius IV, 1854.

What this means is that Mary is so intimately connected with the saving work of her own Son that she is redeemed from the moment of her conception. It is this freedom from original sin that allows her to live a life that is all holy and free from every stain of sin. Mary can give her total 'yes' to God at the annunciation because Jesus has saved her, but Jesus is only able to save her because her 'yes' at the annunciation paves the way for the incarnation. The collapse of these two things into one by this rupture in linearity is the reason for the dogma of the immaculate conception - Mary and Jesus can't be unravelled from each other, even from the moment of Mary's conception.

The Immaculate Heart of Mary (29 June)

A devotion linked with the dogma of the immaculate conception. This relates to the sinlessness of Mary, as attested to by the Early Church Fathers. To quote just one Father of the early church 'Mary, a Virgin not only undefiled but a Virgin whom grace has made inviolate, free of every stain of sin.' St Ambrose, 388.

The Birth of our Lady (8 Sept)

Happy birthday! Mary's parents, Ss Joachim and Anna, were married many years before they conceived Mary. Joachim was a temple priest, but had been thrown out of the temple because their lack of children was seen (wrongly!) as a mark against them. He went off into the desert to pray, and at the exact moment Anna was praying in her garden. God sent the Angel Gabriel to both of them telling them they would be blessed with a child. Joachim headed back towards Jerusalem, and Anna came south looking for her husband - they found each other by the gate to the city, and when you see them depicted its often the two of them running to hug each other at the city gate.

The Most Holy Name of Mary (12 Sept)

Names have meaning in the Bible, that's why God is always naming and renaming people throughout the Scriptures. The name reflects the person. Mary means 'wished-for-child', having the double meaning of the child Ss Joachim and Anna wished for, and the one creation has been waiting for as well.

Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (21 Nov)

From the age of three till twelve Mary lived in the Jewish Temple, consecrated to the Lord as a temple handmaid (hence Mary describes herself as 'the handmaid of the Lord' in Luke's Gospel - it's not just a nice turn of phrase!) This temple dedication is a very early belief of the Church, recorded in writing by the mid 2nd century. It also relates to the dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity, that she was a Temple Virgin consecrated to the Lord. So what about Joseph? Well the tradition goes that because women in 1st century Israel didn't enjoy rights and protections of their own, temple virgins were betrothed to older widowers who would look after them and ensure their legal rights - in Mary's case that man was Joseph. Hence when we read about the brothers and sisters of Jesus in the Scriptures, tradition tells us they are in fact half-siblings from Joseph's earlier marriage. At the age of twelve Mary left the temple to be betrothed to Joseph back in Galilee. From a second century text: "The high priest said, "Joseph! You have been chosen by lot to take the virgin into your own keeping." And Joseph replied, saying, "I have sons and am old, while she is young [...]" Fearing God, Joseph took her into his own possession. And he said to her, "Mary, I took you from the temple of the Lord and now I bring you into my house."

It's all worth noting that the above five feasts, the conception, immaculate heart, birth, holy name, and presentation of Mary, mirror five feasts of the Lord celebrating the Annunciation, Sacred Heart, birth, holy name and presentation in the Temple.

The Annunciation of the Lord (25 March)

The angel Gabriel visits Mary with the news that she will conceive God in the flesh. This is a pivotal moment in human history, Mary here is the new Eve, offered again the choice that Adam and Eve faced in the garden. Mary's 'yes' here, her obedience, can undo the disobedience of our first parents. As our ancient parents deprived us of dwelling in the presence of God through their disobedience, now Mary, through her obedience, welcomes God to dwell amongst us. We get the first part of the Hail Mary from this passage of scripture; Gabriel greets Mary saying, 'Hail Mary, Full of Grace, the Lord is with thee.'

Mary is often compared with the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament. In the Ark of the Covenant was kept the miraculous Manna the Hebrews ate in the desert, the priestly staff of Aaron, the first Levitical High Priest, and the tablets of the 10 commandments. It represented the Law, the Priesthood and heavenly

food. Jesus is the fulfilment of the Law, our heavenly High Priest, and instituted the Eucharist in which we are fed with his Body and Blood. Mary fulfils the type of the Ark, it represented God's presence on earth - in Mary's womb we have the true presence of God.

The Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (31 May)

Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, who is pregnant with St John the Baptist. Jesus blesses John from the womb, sanctifying him for his mission as the last and greatest of the prophets. Elizabeth gives us the next part of the Hail Mary when she greets Mary, 'Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.' Mary also sings her great hymn of praise, the Magnificat, which the Church sings every day at Vespers (Evening Prayer).

Christmas (25 Dec)

Mary gives birth to Jesus. Angels appear singing in the sky, wisemen travel from afar, shepherds worship the God child. Mary is the Mother of God, yet as a human being and the first disciple of Jesus she is also the daughter of her own son.

The Holy Family (Sunday after Christmas)

Thought it shouldn't bear any emphasising, but one of the things this feast teaches us is that Mary was not just some passive vehicle for God to come into the world. She was Jesus' mother in every way, and cared for him and brought him up just as any other mother would. Think about it, it was Mary who first taught the Only Begotten Son of God to pray (and everything else for that matter!).

Mary, Mother of God (1 January)

Mary is called the 'Mother of God' or in Greek Theotokos (meaning God-bearer). This dogma was decreed at the Council of Ephesus (341) and believing it was one of the hallmarks of being an orthodox Christian in the early church. The title was given to Mary both to honour her, but most importantly to protect what we believe about Jesus - that he is fully God and fully man. If Jesus is God then Mary can rightly be called the mother of God.

The Presentation of the Lord (2 Feb)

When Jesus was presented in the temple 40 days after his birth Simeon prophesied that Jesus will redeem the world. He also prophesied that 'and a sword will pierce through your own [Mary's] soul also.' It's worth noting that Mary doesn't bring the ritual offering for purification after childbirth as the law says, this is due to her perpetual virginity - which the church believes was not diminished by childbirth but sanctified.

Our Lady of Sorrows (15 September)

This Feast falls one day after the feast of the Exultation of the Holy Cross. It looks at the same events, i.e. the crucifixion, but through the eyes of Mary. Even at the very moment that Jesus cries out to heaven 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,' experiencing the abandonment of the Father, his mother remains. This is the power of a mother's love, it held Mary there, at the foot of the cross, even when all others had forsaken Jesus - 'a sword shall pierce through your own soul also.'

Mother of the Church (Pentecost Monday)

On the Cross Jesus gave John to Mary and said to her, 'this is your son' and to him 'this is your mother.' This is a sign for us of Mary's motherhood of all Christians. We are incorporated into the Body of Christ, the Church, by baptism - from that moment onward Mary becomes our mother. We are sisters and brothers of Jesus by adoption, that therefore makes Mary our mother. This feast was introduced by Pope Francis just last year, and it falls the Monday after Pentecost. It reminds us both of Mary's presence on the day of Pentecost, and also the special role she has in the life of all believers.

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (15 August)

At the end of her earthly life Mary was taken up, body and soul, into heaven. She was the first and most faithful disciple of the Lord, and as such is the first to share in the bodily resurrection from the dead that will come at the end of time. Mary and Jesus' lives are so intertwined, from the very moment of Mary's Immaculate Conception, that even death cannot separate them. Some people believe Mary never died, and was simply taken up into heaven, others believe she died and was then raised in a similar way to Jesus. The Church doesn't define exactly how it happened. The most ancient traditions speaks of Mary dying and being buried by the apostles, and three days later her tomb being found empty with the smell of fresh flowers in the air.

Our Lady, Mother and Queen (22 August)

The last glorious mystery of the Rosary speaks of Mary as being crowned Queen of Heaven. This feast is about the same thing. We know from the Old Testament that in the King's court in Israel the queen was not the wife of the king, but rather his mother. We believe this is an image of how things work in the heavenly kingdom. Mary reigns as queen with her son, fulfilling the promise of God to Mary at the Annunciation, that Jesus would be given the throne of his ancestor David. Well David's throne always had a special place for the queen mother.

Different degrees of faith

Not everything has to be believed in the same way. Some things we believe are revealed by God, and thus believing them is what makes us Catholic. Other things the church has worked out based on what has been revealed by God, and these again we accept as true. After that there are things contained within the deposit of faith that are generally accepted, but not defined as articles of faith by the church - these we may believe, or we may not. These things are on a spectrum from 'recommended' to 'tolerated' (nothing above is not recommended!). A good example of something that a Catholic can choose to believe, or not believe, is the apparitions of our Lady at Lourdes (or anywhere else for that matter) - though if you've been to Lourdes it's unlikely you'll doubt it! When it comes to Mary the things that we believe in order to be Catholic are:

The Immaculate Conception

Mary was conceived without original sin.

Perpetual Virginity

Mary conceived Jesus as a virgin, her virginity was hallowed in giving birth to God, and she remained a virgin her entire life.

Mother of God

That Mary really and truly gave birth to God in the flesh, and is fittingly called the Mother of God.

The Assumption

That at the culmination of her earthly life Mary was taken up, body and soul, into heaven.

Praying to Mary

Since the earliest centuries of Christianity Christians have turned to our Lady in prayer for guidance and protection. The earliest prayer to our Lady we have a written record of is the Sub tuum praesidium, which dates from the 4th century:

Beneath your compassion, we take refuge, O Mother of God: do not despise our petitions in time of trouble: but rescue us from dangers, only pure, only blessed one.

The Hail Mary, as mentioned above in several places, is of Biblical origin, putting together phrases from the Annunciation and the Visitation, and adding an intercessory phrase at the end:

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among 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.

Asking the prayers of Mary and the Saints seems strange to Protestant Christians. For Catholics it is the

most natural thing in the world. We believe that there is only one Church spanning across time and space. Jesus has defeated death, and no-one who has died in his mercy is truly dead - for not even death can separate us from the love of God. Just as we might ask the prayers of our friends here on earth, so also we ask the prayers of our friends who are already in heaven. After all we are all one in Christ.

Degrees of Veneration

When we pray to Mary or the Saints we are doing something different than when we pray to God. We worship God alone, but we pay veneration to Mary and the Saints. There are three Latin terms for this (the Latin is not important, the idea is):

Latria

The worship due to God alone. Only God do we adore, and only to God do we offer sacrifice. This worship is reserved to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is this worship that we pay to the Eucharist, as the Eucharist is the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ.

Hyperdulia

This is the height of 'reverence' or 'veneration', which is offered to the Virgin Mary alone. She is venerated to a greater height than the saints because of her intimate link to Christ, and because scripture says 'all generations will call me [Mary] blessed.'

Dulia

The veneration or reverence due to the saints. Like hyperdulia this is about respect and love, there is no notion of adoration or sacrifice in it.

