

Mary Today According To The New Catholic Catechism

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In the last three decades there have been numerous doctrinal dialogues between ecumenical Lutherans and ecumenical Catholics. From 1983 to 1990 the topic of dialogue in the U.S. was Mary and the saints. The 1992 "Common Statement" published by the dialogue participants noted nineteen "church-uniting convergences" between Lutherans and Catholics concerning the role of the saints and only four "divergences." The majority of the dialogue participants did not think that the remaining divergences were divisive of fellowship. The Lutheran participants would be willing to join a church that teaches invocation of Mary and the saints, but does not require all its members to practice such invocation. An additional condition is that the sole mediatorship of Christ must be safeguarded.

The sinlessness of Mary and her role as mediator are thus the key issues with a potential for dividing the two parties. Catholics do not look upon Mary as a *propitiator* but official Catholic documents frequently present her as a *mediator* to such a degree that the role of Christ as our sole mediator is undermined.

The recent appearance of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* gives us an opportunity to see if there really has been any narrowing of the gap between Lutherans and Catholics concerning the role of Mary. By and large, we will let the Catechism speak for itself, keeping comments to a minimum.¹

One of the most striking things about the role of Mary in the catechism is how pervasive she is throughout the whole catechism; she appears in the presentation of many doctrines. In fact, the papal dedication to the whole catechism concludes with a prayer to Mary as a sort of patron saint of catechesis:

Presenting the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, I beseech the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Incarnate Word and Mother of the Church, to support with her powerful intercession the catechetical work of the entire Church on every level.

Mary is praised as the supreme model of faith, the woman promised in Genesis 3:15, the new Eve, the sinless Mother of God. Her Immaculate Conception is clearly reaffirmed.

Mary benefited first of all and uniquely from Christ's victory over sin; she was preserved from all stain of original sin and by a special grace of God committed no sin of any kind during her whole earthly life. Par. 411

The splendor of an entirely unique holiness by which Mary is enriched from the first instant of her conception comes wholly from Christ; she is redeemed in a more exalted fashion by reason of the merits of her Son. Par. 492

Mary played a key role in salvation by her assent to the virgin birth and by suffering along with Christ.

The Father of mercies willed that the Incarnation should be preceded by assent on the part of the predestined mother, so that just as a woman had a share in the coming of death, so also should a woman contribute to the coming of life. Par. 488

Espousing the divine will for salvation wholeheartedly, without a single sin to restrain her, she gave herself entirely to the person and work of her Son; she did so in order to serve the mystery

¹ All references are given as paragraph numbers since the pagination varies in different printings of the catechism. The catechism was reviewed in the Winter 1996 issue of the Quarterly, p 74.

of redemption with him and dependent on him, by God's grace. As St. Irenaeus says, "Being obedient she became the cause of salvation for herself and the whole human race." Par. 494

Jesus desires to associate with his redeeming sacrifice those who were to be its first beneficiaries. This is achieved supremely in the case of his mother, who was associated more intimately than any other person in the mystery of his redemptive suffering. Par. 618

In the section entitled "The Spirit of Christ in the Fullness of Time" the portion devoted to Mary (Par. 721-726) is as long as the section devoted to Christ.

Mary, the all-holy ever-virgin Mother of God, is the masterwork of the mission of the Son and the Spirit in the fullness of time....Through Mary the Holy Spirit begins to bring men, the objects of God's merciful love, into communion with Christ. Par. 721, 725

The holiness of the Church derives from Mary, the Mother of the Church.

Mary goes before us all in the holiness that is the Church's mystery as "the bride without spot or wrinkle." This is why the "Marian" dimension of the Church precedes the "Petrine." Par. 773

While in the most Blessed Virgin the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she exists without spot or wrinkle, the faithful still strive to conquer sin and increase in holiness. And so they turn their eyes to Mary: in her, the Church is already the all-holy. Par. 829

The section specifically devoted to Mary is Par. 963-975. It collects and summarizes claims about Mary which also appear throughout the catechism. It affirms that she is the Mother of God and the Mother of the Church, a worthy object of devotion.

Mary's role in the Church is inseparable from her union with Christ and flows from it. This union of the mother with the Son in the work of salvation is made manifest from the time of Christ's virginal conception up to his death; it is made manifest above all at the hour of his Passion. Thus the Blessed Virgin advanced in her pilgrimage of faith and faithfully persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross. There she stood, in keeping with the divine plan, enduring with her only begotten Son the intensity of his suffering, joining herself with his sacrifice in her mother's heart, and lovingly consenting to the immolation of this victim, born of her. Par. 964

In a wholly singular way she cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope, and burning charity in the Savior's work of restoring supernatural life to souls. For this reason she is a mother to us in the order of grace. Par. 968

The Church's devotion to the Blessed Virgin is intrinsic to Christian worship. Par. 971

Like the figure of the precious and life-giving cross, venerable and holy images of our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ, our inviolable Lady, the holy Mother of God, and the venerable angels, all the saints and the just, whether painted or made of mosaic or another suitable material, are to be exhibited in the holy churches of God, on sacred vessels and vestments, walls and panels, in houses and on streets. Par. 1161

The perpetual virginity of Mary is also reaffirmed, as well as her assumption into heaven.

Christ's birth did not diminish his mother's virginal integrity but sanctified it. Par. 499

Jesus is Mary's only son, but her spiritual motherhood extends to all men. Par. 501

Finally, the Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from all stain of original sin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul to heavenly glory and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, so that she might be the more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of lords and conqueror of sin and death. The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is a singular participation in her Son's Resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians. Par. 966

Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation. Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix. Par. 969

Because she gives us Jesus, her son, Mary is Mother of God and our mother; we can entrust all our cares and petitions to her: she prays for us as she prayed for herself: "Let it be to me according to your word." Par. 2677

If there has been any change in Rome's view of Mary, it is certainly hard to detect in this new official catechism. All of the unscriptural doctrines—the Immaculate Conception and sinlessness of Mary, her bodily assumption to heaven, her cooperation in the work of salvation and her unique role as mediator, the display and veneration of her images—all of them are reaffirmed here. To be sure, the Catechism claims that all of this in no way detracts from the uniqueness of Christ as mediator, and it gives credit to Jesus for everything that Mary is and has. But this in no way changes the fact that Rome still holds a view of Mary which is unscriptural and does undermine the scriptural truth that Christ is the one mediator between God and man. If some Lutherans no longer see any barriers to fellowship in Rome's view of Mary, it is clear who it is that has changed.