

LESSON 51: THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Instruction for Faith Educators

For Basic Level / Age 9	:	Cover points 1-3, 7-9, 13-15, and 20-22
For Intermediate Level / Age 12	:	Cover points 1 to 23 , 28
For Advanced Level / Age 15	:	Cover points 1 to 28

Revision from previous lesson:

In the previous lesson, we learned about our devotion to the saints and the angels of God because of their holy lives that inspire us in our faith. We also learned how to relate with them in our daily lives. Today, we will learn about the one who is considered the greatest among all the saints, that is, our Mother Mary herself.

Current lesson:

1. There are four important things that the Catholic Church has said about Mary that we are obliged to hold as Catholics:
 - A) that she is the Mother of God (*theotokos*);
 - B) that she was perpetually virgin throughout her life (perpetual virginity);
 - C) that she was conceived free from the stain of Original Sin (immaculate conception);
 - D) that she was assumed body and soul into heaven at the end of her earthly life (assumption).
2. **Mary, the Mother of God (*Theotokos*).** This dogma teaches that since Mary conceived Jesus, who is God, she is therefore the Mother of God.
3. Scripture shows us that Mary is the Mother of God. But before that, we should identify biblical references to the fact that Jesus is truly God.

A) We find such references in Paul’s Letter to the Colossians.

Colossians 1:19: “For in Him (Jesus) all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.”

Colossians 2:9: “For in Him (Jesus) the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.”

When it is stated that the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in Jesus, it means that in Jesus dwelled the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit to the fullness. These two biblical passages affirmed that Jesus, while being fully human, was also fully God. In Jesus was present two natures, the Divine nature and the human nature.

B) In the Second Letter of John, we read: “Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist” (2 John 7).

The name “Jesus” (or *Yeshua* in Hebrew) means “Yahweh is salvation” or in simple terms, “God saves”. The name “Christ” means “the anointed one”. The full name of “Jesus Christ” means that “the anointed One, Yahweh is salvation”. “Yahweh” is one of the names given to God in the Old Testament. The Second Letter of John states that the anointed One, Yahweh (God) has come in the flesh to save mankind.

The Second Letter of John further states that anyone who rejects the truth that Jesus Christ is the anointed One, Yahweh the Saviour (meaning “God the Saviour”) in the flesh, such a person is a deceiver and the antichrist.

C) Another biblical passage that affirms the deity of Jesus is found in the Gospel of John where it states, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1).

D) Having affirmed beyond any doubt the deity of Jesus, we now turn to a biblical passage that clearly states that Mary is the Mother of God.

Luke 1:39-45: “In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’”

When Elizabeth said, “the mother of my Lord”, while filled with the Holy Spirit, she clearly meant that Mary was the mother of God. Through Elizabeth, the Holy Spirit revealed the truth to mankind.

4. Sacred Tradition reveals to us that the faithful of the Catholic Church, from the days of its birth, have always believed that Mary was the Mother of God. Because of this belief that existed during the first centuries of the Church, the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus (431 AD) proclaimed the dogma of Mary, Mother of God. Such a proclamation did not affirm a new doctrine, but rather affirmed what was the common belief of the Christians.

5. The Church Fathers also affirmed the same about the Motherhood of Mary:

Irenaeus *Against Heresies*, 5:19:1 (189 AD): “The Virgin Mary, being obedient to his word, received from an angel the glad tidings that she would bear God.”

Peter of Alexandria, *The Genuine Acts of Peter of Alexandria* (305 AD): “They came to the church of the most blessed Mother of God, and ever-virgin Mary, which, as we began to say, he had constructed in the western quarter, in a suburb, for a cemetery of the martyrs.”

Letter to all non-Egyptian Bishops 12 (324 AD): “We acknowledge the resurrection of the dead, of which Jesus Christ our Lord became the firstling; he bore a body not in appearance but in truth derived from Mary the Mother of God.”

Ambrose of Milan, *The Virgins 2:2[7] (377 AD):* “The first thing which kindles ardour in learning is the greatness of the teacher. What is greater than the Mother of God? What more glorious than she whom Glory itself chose?”

6. CCC 495: “Called in the Gospels ‘the mother of Jesus,’ Mary is acclaimed by Elizabeth, at the prompting of the Spirit and even before the birth of her son, as ‘the mother of my Lord.’ 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*).”
7. **Mary’s Perpetual Virginity.** This dogma states that Mary was a virgin all throughout her life and never had sexual union with Joseph even after the birth of Jesus, and therefore had no other children.
8. Read the story of the Annunciation in Luke 1:26-38. After the archangel Gabriel tells our Lady that she is to be the Mother of the Messiah, she responds with a simple question: “How can this be? Since I have no relations with a man.” Mary does not doubt that she will indeed conceive and bear a son, but what she does not understand is the mode of conception. The literal translation of what Mary said is: “Since I do not know man” (ἐπεὶ ἄνδρα οὐ γινώσκω). Mary does not say, “Since I have not yet known a man” or “Since I have never known man” – i.e. she does not speak in the past tense. Rather, our Lady uses the present indicative: “Since I do not know man.” She does not merely affirm that she has been a virgin, but implies that in the moment she intends to remain a virgin. This is what confused our Lady: That she was a virgin and intended to remain so, and yet the angel said she would conceive and give birth to a son.

Now, our Lady was already betrothed to St Joseph (cf. Luke 1:27) – she had not yet come into his home, but she was soon to do so (cf. Matthew 1:18,24). If the Blessed Virgin Mary had intended to have sexual relations with Joseph – according to the ordinary mode of married life – then she would not have been confused by the words of the angel, because she would naturally presume that the son promised by the angel Gabriel would have come about by her sexual relations with Joseph. But here, she was puzzled because she had no intention of entering into sexual relations with Joseph or with any other man. (The vow of celibacy was common among some Israelite sects at that time.)

9. Another passage showing the doctrine of perpetual virginity is of the sayings of Jesus on the cross, i.e. the pair of commands first to his mother “Woman, behold your son!” and then to his disciple “Behold, your mother!” in John 19:26-27. The Gospel of John then states that “from that hour the disciple took her unto his own home”.

Since the time of the Church Fathers this statement has been used to reason that after the death of Jesus there was no one else in the immediate family to look after Mary, and she had to be entrusted to the disciple given that she had no other children.

10. Hence, since the early Christians, the Church has always believed that Mary retained her virginity all throughout her life and never had any children with Joseph.

Athanasius (Alexandria, 293-373 AD);
Epiphanius (Palestine, 315-403 AD);
Jerome (Stridon, present day Yugoslavia, 345-419 AD);
Augustine (Numidia, now Algeria, 354-430 AD);
Cyril (Alexandria, 376-444 AD);

11. The Council of Constantinople II (553-554 AD) twice referred to Mary as “ever-virgin”.
12. Some doubts exist in certain quarters about the perpetual virginity of Mary. There are several arguments presented:

- A) Scripture frequently speaks of the “brothers” and “sisters” of Jesus (Mark 3:3, 6:3; Matthew 13:55-56).

Firstly, it is important to note that the Bible does not say that these “brothers and sisters” of Jesus were children of Mary.

Secondly, the word for brother (or sister), *adelphos (adelpa)* in Greek, denotes a brother or sister, or near kinsman. Aramaic, which was the native language of Jesus and His disciples, and other semitic languages could not distinguish between a blood sibling and a cousin. Hence, John the Baptist, a cousin of Jesus (the son of Elizabeth, cousin of Mary) would be called “a brother” (*adelphos*) of Jesus.

- B) Scripture says that Joseph had no sexual relations with Mary *before* she bore Jesus (Matthew 1:25), but this would surely mean that they had sexual relations after she bore Jesus.

The use of the word *heos* in Matthew’s gospel, “He [Joseph] had no relations with her at any time before (*heos*) she bore a son, whom he named Jesus” does not imply anything about what happens after the time indicated. In the Greek and Semitic uses of this word *heos*, there is no necessary implication that Joseph and Mary had sexual contact or other children after Jesus.

- C) Scripture says that Mary gave birth to Jesus as her first-born (Luke 2:7), which implies there were others after the first-born.

The attribution of the word *prototokos* (“first-born”) to Jesus in Luke’s gospel in referring to his relationship with Mary does not imply that Mary had other children. The term “first-born” was a legal term under the Mosaic Law (Exodus 6:14) referring

to the first male child born to Jewish parents regardless of any other children following or not.

13. **Mary's Immaculate Conception.** This is the dogma that Mary was, by God's grace and perfect plan, preserved from the stain of Original Sin.

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was officially defined by Pope Pius IX in 1854. Pius IX, who was highly devoted to the Virgin, hoped the definition would inspire others in their devotion to her.

14. This dogma has been wrongly defined by many people. Some people think the term refers to Christ's conception in Mary's womb without the intervention of a human father; the proper name for that is the Virgin Birth. Others think the Immaculate Conception means Mary herself was conceived "by the power of the Holy Spirit", in the way Jesus was, but it does not.
15. The Immaculate Conception means that Mary, whose conception was brought about the normal way, was conceived in the womb of her mother without the stain of Original Sin. The essence of Original Sin consists in the lack of sanctifying grace. Mary was preserved from this defect; from the first instant of her existence she was in the state of sanctifying grace.
16. At the Annunciation, Gabriel greeted Mary by saying, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28). The phrase "full of grace" is a translation of the Greek *kecharitomene*. This word actually represents the proper name of the person being addressed by the angel, and it must on that account express a characteristic quality of Mary.

The traditional translation, "full of grace", is actually more accurate than the one found in many recent versions of the New Testament, which give something along the lines of "highly favoured daughter". True, Mary was a highly favoured daughter of God, but the Greek implies more than that. The newer translations leave out something the Greek conveys, something the older English versions convey, which is that this grace (and the core of the word *kecharitomene* is *charis*) is at once permanent and of a singular kind.

The Greek indicates a perfection of grace. This perfection must be perfect not only intensively, but extensively. The grace Mary enjoyed must not only have been as "full" or strong or complete as possible at any given time, but it must have extended over the whole of her life, from conception. That is, she must have been in a state of sanctifying grace from the first moment of her existence to have been called "full of grace". If she was merely "highly favoured", in the normal connotation of those words, her status would have been indistinguishable from that of some other women in the Bible.

17. There have been doubts in some quarters about the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. There are concerns that Mary was merely a creature, and we are told that "All have sinned" (Romans 3:23). Besides, Mary said her "spirit rejoices in God my Saviour" (Luke 1:47), and only a sinner needs a Saviour.

There cannot be doubt that Mary required a Saviour. Like all other descendants of Adam, by her nature she was subject to the necessity of contracting Original Sin. But by a special intervention of God, undertaken at the instant she was conceived, she was preserved from the stain of Original Sin and its consequences. She was indeed redeemed by the grace of Christ, but in a special way, by anticipation. This doctrine does not contradict Luke 1:47.

The statement in Romans 3:23, “all have sinned”, is a general statement referring to humanity as a whole. St Paul was by no means speaking about Mary in his statement. His general statement does not mean that Mary could not have been exempted for a special purpose.

18. Some people claim that the dogma of the Immaculate Conception contradicts Mary’s own description of herself: “He has looked graciously on the lowliness of his handmaid” (Luke 1:48). How could she be lowly if she were the highest creature? If she understood herself to be lowly, does it not mean that she understood herself to have sinned?

Sin is not the only motive for lowliness. Compared to God, any creature, no matter how perfect, is lowly, Mary included. A self-expression of lowliness is also an indication of one’s humility, and this is certainly so in the case of Mary, which is precisely why God would have chosen her as the suitable candidate for this role.

19. Even though we consider Mary to be so great, this does not mean that she did not need God’s grace to save her. There is a central, unifying concept in Catholic teaching which supplies the basis for virtually everything the Church teaches us concerning Mary. We know that from time to time God picks people to play special roles in his plan: Abraham had a special role, Moses had a special role, David had a special role, and Christ had by far the most special role of all. But except in the case of Christ, each of these people received their special role as an act of God’s grace. Apart from God’s grace, there was nothing special about Abraham or Moses or David. They were special people and had a special role only because of the grace God gave them. Same for Mary. Everything that was special about her and her place in God’s plan came from God’s grace. After all, is this not what we are saying when we pray the words of the Angel Gabriel in Luke’s gospel, “Hail Mary, full of grace”? Everything about Mary that makes her and her place in God’s plan different from ours is only because of God’s grace to her. Mary is entirely a product of God’s grace.
20. **Mary’s Assumption.** Pope Pius XII, in *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950), defined that Mary, “after the completion of her earthly life was assumed body and soul into the glory of Heaven”.

Pius XII said the Assumption is really a consequence of the Immaculate Conception: “These two singular privileges bestowed upon the Mother of God stand out in most splendid light at the beginning and the end of her earthly journey. For the greatest possible glorification of her virgin body is the complement, at once appropriate and marvelous, of the absolute innocence of her soul, which was free from all stain. ... [S]he shared in [Christ’s] glorious triumph over sin and its sad consequences.”

21. It is also necessary to keep in mind what the Assumption is not. Some people think Catholics believe Mary “ascended” into heaven. That is incorrect. Christ, by His own power, ascended into heaven. Mary was assumed or taken up into heaven by God. She did not do it by her own power.
22. In *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950), Pope Pius XII cites several Scripture passages that give rise to this dogma:

I Corinthians 15. In this passage Paul alludes to Genesis 3:15 (in addition to the primary reference of Psalms 8:6), where it is prophesied that the seed of the woman will crush Satan with his feet. Since Jesus arose to Heaven to fulfil this prophecy, it follows that the woman would have a similar end, because she shared this enmity with Satan.

Psalms 132. This is a psalm commemorating the return of the Ark of God to Jerusalem and lamenting its subsequent loss. The second half of the psalm says that the loss will be recompensed in the New Covenant, and so it is hopefully prayed, “Go up, Yahweh, to your resting place, you and the ark of your strength” (verse 8). Since the Church sees this New Covenant ark in Mary, it understands that she was taken into Heaven in the same manner as the Lord – that is, body and soul.

Revelation 12:1-2. The “woman clothed with the sun” whom John the Apostle contemplated on the Island of Patmos is the Blessed Virgin Mary.

23. There is also what might be called the negative historical proof of Mary’s Assumption. (The term “negative” means that the absence of evidence is an evidence itself.) In the early Christian centuries, relics of saints were jealously guarded, highly prized. The bones of those martyred in the Colosseum (Rome), for instance, were quickly gathered up and preserved; there are many accounts of this in the biographies of those who gave their lives for the faith. Yet here was Mary, certainly the most privileged of all the saints, certainly the most saintly, but we have no record of her bodily remains being venerated anywhere.
24. Mary is believed by the Church to be the New Eve. Because of Eve’s disobedience to God and Adam’s cooperation with her, they lost sanctifying grace for themselves and their offspring. Like Eve, Mary was created full of grace. But unlike Eve, Mary remained obedient to God, just as Christ, unlike Adam, remained obedient to God. In cooperation with God, Mary became Mother of the Redeemer and, in cooperation with Christ, she became Mother of the redeemed as well.

Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* (around 150 AD): Explained that evil entered the world through Eve while she was still a virgin; so too salvation entered through Mary while she was still a virgin. Each woman willingly participated in the act they performed. Neither was an unconscious instrument. Eve listened to the serpent and conceived death. Mary listened to the angel Gabriel and conceived life.

Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.22.4: Irenaeus said that just as Eve cooperated with Adam, the covenant head of humanity, so Mary cooperated with Jesus Christ, the covenant head of the new humanity. Just as Eve “by disobeying became the cause of death for herself and

the whole human race, so also Mary...was obedient and became the cause of salvation for herself and the whole human race.”

Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.19.1: “Just as the human race was subject to death by a virgin, it was freed by a virgin, with the virginal disobedience balanced by virginal obedience.”

25. Mary is the Mother of the Church and of every individual member of the Church. In 1964, Pope Paul VI declared the Blessed Virgin Mary as “Mother of the Church”. This means that all Christian people call her our most loving Mother. The Church has decreed that the Mother of God should be further honoured and invoked by the entire Christian people by this tenderest of titles.

St Augustine of Hippo (4th century) said that Mary is the mother of the members of Christ, because with charity she cooperated in the rebirth of the faithful into the Church. Pope Saint Leo the Great (5th century) said that the birth of the Head is also the birth of the body. Putting both these teachings together, we see that Mary is at once Mother of Christ, the Son of God, and Mother of the members of his Mystical Body, which is the Church.

26. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Mary proclaimed: “All generations will call me blessed” (Luke 1:48). These words hold true today in the form of the many millions of Catholics around the world who love her. Catholics do not worship or adore Mary, but we venerate her very deeply. Catholics hold her in a special place of honour and venerate her with special devotions (such as the Rosary).

To venerate is to honour someone with a very deep sense of respect. Worship and adoration is due only to God, while veneration and devotion to Mary and the saints is possible as a recognition of God’s grace within them. When we pray to Mary or the saints, we pray with them or ask for their intercessory prayers to God on our behalf. We venerate Mary because of the special grace that is within her. We also venerate her because of her sacrifices in doing God’s will that has enabled us to be members of Christ’s Church. She loves us precisely because she loves her Son, Jesus Christ.

CCC 971: “The Church’s devotion to the Blessed Virgin is intrinsic to Christian worship. The Church rightly honours “the Blessed Virgin with special devotion. From the most ancient times the Blessed Virgin has been honoured with the title of ‘Mother of God,’ to whose protection the faithful fly in all their dangers and needs.This very special devotion...differs essentially from the adoration which is given to the incarnate Word and equally to the Father and the Holy Spirit, and greatly fosters this adoration.” The liturgical feasts dedicated to the Mother of God and Marian prayer, such as the rosary, an “epitome of the whole Gospel,” express this devotion to the Virgin Mary.”

27. There are times when God has allowed for the Blessed Virgin Mary to appear in certain places to certain people for a purpose. These sightings are called apparitions. The twentieth century has been filled with reports of alleged apparitions by Our Blessed Mother. Apparitions of Mary have been reported on every continent in the world, and the alleged seers have been all sorts of people: men, women, and children. The locations of these



alleged apparitions were also numerous: large cities, remote areas, caves, churches, fields, homes, monasteries, and other places.

The Church is very prudent to approve, disapprove, or condemn reported apparitions. An alleged apparition that has been carefully investigated is usually classed as either “not worthy of belief”, “not contrary to the Faith”, or “worthy of belief”. An officially recognised apparition must not carry a message that contradicts the teachings of the Church.

To study an alleged apparition, a local bishop has to appoint a committee to take testimony, investigate, study, and report its findings to him before proceeding to obtain approval from the Holy See on the matter. Such investigations are not simple, as they could either yield a positive outcome (which means that the alleged apparition is authentic and the devotion arising from that apparition is permitted/recognised) or a negative outcome (which means that the alleged apparition is either demonic or untrue and the devotion arising from it is prohibited) or inconclusive (which means that the authenticity of the alleged apparition is still uncertain, but the devotion arising from the alleged apparition could either still be permitted or prohibited all together).

If the Church makes a negative ruling about a particular apparition, we are not to believe in that apparition. If the bishop makes a positive ruling about an apparition, we are not bound to assent to the apparition, but we must not condemn it once the Church declares it valid. In the majority of cases, the Church has neither taken action nor made a final decision about an alleged apparition. Hundreds of alleged apparitions have been reported in the 20th century alone, the vast majority of them have not been given a decision, and only less than ten have been officially recognised upon thorough investigation: Fatima (Portugal), Beauraing (Belgium), Banneux (Belgium), Akita (Japan), Syracuse (Italy), Zeitoun (Egypt), and Betania (Venezuela). One of the most well-known apparitions in the world today is the one at Lourdes, France, which was recognised in 1862, where millions of people visit each year until now in their strong devotion to the Blessed Mother.

28. There are important things that we learn from the life of Mary.
- A) Humility. While being chosen to be the Mother of God, Mary remained humble and most willing to serve her Son and His disciples all throughout her life.
 - B) Simplicity. Mary had a faith simple enough to accept the angel’s words about her pregnancy and to trust and obey that God’s plan would be carried out in her life.
 - C) Charity. Mary loved God enough to do His will, and she loves us enough to continue in her role as Mother of the Church. Even in the glory of heaven, she continues to intercede for us and to accompany the Church on our path towards heaven.



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