

The Early Foundations of Mariology



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Visiting and working in a predominately Roman Catholic country like Mexico can be an intriguing experience for someone who has grown up with little knowledge of catholic beliefs. The shrines and cathedrals stand out among some of the most beautiful buildings one can find. Behind all of these shrines and basilicas lies a belief system that is almost as foreign as the language that is spoken there.

Roman Catholicism practices and teaches a special devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Although the Catholic Church attempts to differentiate between the worship (*latría*) given to God, the veneration (*dulia*) of the saints, and the special veneration (*hyperdulia*) given to Mary, at times it is difficult to distinguish the differences.¹ The special devotion to Mary contains many beliefs about her that have developed throughout the centuries, including the Immaculate Conception, Mary's perpetual virginity, her Assumption, and others.

The development of devotion to her is difficult to follow because it has evolved and continues to evolve throughout the history of the church, and its scope is too large for a paper of this size. The purpose of this paper is to examine the development of the devotion to Mary in the first five hundred years of the church, beginning with the New Testament and ending with the time following the Council of Ephesus. Many historians agree that devotion to Mary was not widespread until after the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431, steadily increasing until the 7th Century, but there were many events in earlier times that laid the groundwork for this increase.²

¹ John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Facts on Roman Catholicism: What Does the Roman Catholic Church Really Believe?* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1993), 41

² Michael P. Carroll, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 5

It is upon these early events that contemporary Catholic scholars claim that their beliefs are based, and we will overview some of these events.

The earliest mention of Mary in church literature and tradition is the New Testament. Before A.D. 60 Paul alluded to Mary when he wrote of God's Son being "born of a woman" in his letter to the Galatians (Gal 4:4). Mary is also spoken of in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, where she plays an important role in the birth of Jesus, the wedding feast at Cana, the crucifixion of Jesus, and other events in the life of Christ. The Gospel of Luke is sometimes referred to as "Our Lady's Gospel" for its accounts of Mary.³ It records the Annunciation, the Visitation, the journey to Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus, His circumcision and presentation at the temple, the visit of the Magi, the family's escape to Egypt, their visit to the temple when Jesus was twelve years old, and others. Mary is also portrayed as being present during the Passion of Christ on the cross.

There is little else said in the NT about Mary, other than the accounts mentioned. After Christ's death, she is mentioned by name only in the book of Acts (1:14) as being present with the apostles in the upper room, and she may also be portrayed in the prophecy of the book of Revelation. These accounts in the New Testament are seen as the foundations upon which the devotion to Mary has its beginning.⁴

Mary is not seen as a focus of the authors of the New Testament, and many scholars agree that she is not supposed to be the focus. The purpose of the NT was to spread the good news about the Messiah, not to share stories about His mother. His honor was to come first

³ Rev. John F. Murphy. "Origin and Nature of Marian Cult" in *Mariology*, 3:1-21. Edited by Carol, J.B. 3 Vols. (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1955), 2-3

⁴ Ibid.

before anything else.⁵ The place of Mary in the early church was not a matter of urgency, but the command of Jesus to preach the gospel to every nation is what motivated the NT writers.⁶

In the following years, however, many apocryphal books were written with stories of His mother. The apocryphal book that has attributed the most to the devotion of Mary is the Gospel account of James, also known as the *Protoevangelium of James*. Written near the end of the 2nd Century, the *Protoevangelium of James* includes many detailed stories about the life of Mary. The stories included in this book suggest many of the doctrines associated with the present day devotion to Mary and are probably where many of them have their beginnings.

The *Protoevangelium of James* gives an account of the miraculous birth and childhood of Mary to her father Joachim and mother Anna. The account of her birth is similar to the account of Hannah and Samuel in the OT. After her miraculous birth, when she was six months old, the child Mary walked seven steps, and from then on until she was presented at the temple at the age of three, she was kept from touching the ground. An angel fed her while she was a child, and she lived at the temple from the age of three. The priests took care of her until she was twelve when they understood the need for her to be married. They looked for a husband for her among the widowers of Israel, and God chose Joseph through a miraculous sign. Although he was reluctant because of his age and because he had sons already, he agreed to take Mary as his wife.⁷

This book also includes some other stories about the birth of Jesus, including an important change in the details of the Gospel accounts. Mary gave birth but retained her virginity even after the childbirth. This would be a foundation for the later belief and teaching of

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ John Martin, *Roses, Fountains, and Gold: the Virgin Mary in History, Art, and Apparition*, (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1998), 26-27

⁷ The New Testament Apocrypha – Revised Edition. Edited by Schneemelcher, Wilhelm; English translation edited by Wilson, R. McL. (Louisville: James Clarke & Co. Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 423-430

her “virginity *in partu*,” meaning that her body remained pure even after childbirth.⁸ This belief is also put forth in a fragment from the early 2nd century called the Ascension of Isaiah, in which it is written, “her womb was found as formerly before she had conceived.”⁹

Some would say that the *Protoevangelium* was written simply to promote the veneration of Mary, and it was never accepted into the NT canon and was condemned by the Western church. However, it does suggest a high regard for Mary by some people at the time of its writing in the early history of the church and gives a basis for many of the beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church.

Another apocryphal book about Mary written near the end of the 2nd century is the *Gospel of the Nativity of Mary*. Many of the stories in this book are the same as the stories of Mary’s childhood in the *Protoevangelium of James*. She is portrayed as being advanced in spiritual knowledge and given special blessings by God.¹⁰ While the *Gospel of the Nativity of Mary* is smaller than the *Protoevangelium of James*, it too has contributed to the development of the devotion to Mary and gives a glimpse of some of the stories surrounding Mary in the early part of church history.

Besides the apocryphal books of this time, iconography began to appear during this period in Christian history. Many Christians were unable to read, so the primary way to pass along the stories of Christianity was to create paintings of them. In the early part of the 2nd century Christians began to paint murals in the catacombs. One of the first paintings of Mary and the Christ child with the Magi was found in the catacomb of Priscilla, an ancient Christian cemetery in Rome. Dating from the 3rd century are pictures of Mary in the cemeteries of

⁸ Walter J. Burghardt, “Mary in Eastern Patristic Thought” in *Mariology* 2:88-153. Edited by Carol, J.B. 3 Vols. (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1955), 102

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary*. 12 August 2003 <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/8049.htm>>

Domitilla and Calixtus. These pictures include one of Mary and the baby Jesus standing next to a prophet that is thought to be Isaiah, Micah, or even Balaam. When Constantine officially recognized the Christian religion, the paintings, sculptures, and murals became even more popular. There are even records of paintings of Mary on gilt glasses.¹¹ Many of these early paintings showing Mary added to the beliefs and legends already circulating from the Apocryphal books. Following the decision of the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431, numerous other paintings and icons began to appear in devotion to Mary. These were far more extravagant than the earlier ones as the devotion to her progressed.

It was also during the persecution of the 2nd Century that the earliest prayers to Mary are recorded.¹² The *Sub tuum praesidium*, is recorded near the end of the 3rd century as the oldest written Marian prayer. Gaef quotes the English translation by saying, “Mother of God [hear] my supplications: suffer us not [to be] in adversity, but deliver us from danger.”¹³ While this prayer was not used like the Rosary that is prayed today, it was certainly used as a foundation for the prayers to Mary that would develop later in history.

The earliest record of liturgical feasts to Mary is in the *Transitus Mariae*. Jerusalem celebrated a feast to Mary as early as A.D. 428, and there was a feast celebrated to her in Gethsemane by A.D. 458.¹⁴ These feasts are still celebrated today in the liturgical calendar of the Roman Catholic Church as part of the eighteen feasts dedicated to Mary. Many of the early feasts in which Mary is a focus are feasts honoring Christ. She is included in the stories because

¹¹ J. Lafontaine-Dosogne, “Iconography of the Blessed Virgin Mary” in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* 9:271-281, Second Edition. Edited by Marthaler, Berard L., 15 Vols. (Washington: Gale 2003), 271

¹² Martin, 44

¹³ Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion, Volume 1*, New York: (Sheed and Ward, 1963), 48

¹⁴ Christopher O’Donnell, *At Worship with Mary: A Pastoral and Theological Study*, (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc, 1988), 13-14

of her association with Jesus. However, these feasts are foundational to the present day honor of Mary and certainly played a role in the development of the modern liturgical calendar.

Many church fathers played an important role in the development of the adoration of Mary. While their writings do not focus entirely on Mary, many of them show a devotion to her in their theology. The main theological teaching of this early period regarding Mary referred to her as the “second Eve,” which was to become one of the foundational teachings regarding Mary in the first five centuries of the church. Although we are unsure of the theologian who introduced this concept, a key advocate was Irenaeus. Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons, was a student of Polycarp, who was taught by John the Apostle.¹⁵ In “Against Heresies”, written between A.D. 182 and 188, Irenaeus taught a relationship between Mary of the NT and Eve of the Old Testament by writing,

“For just as the former (Eve) was led astray by the word of an angel, so that she fled from God when she had transgressed His word; so did the latter (Mary), by an angelic communication, receive the glad tidings that she should sustain God, being obedient to His Word. And if the former did disobey God, yet the latter was persuaded to be obedient to God, in order that the Virgin Mary might become the patroness of the virgin Eve. And thus, as the human race fell into bondage to death by means of a virgin, so is it rescued by a virgin; virginal disobedience having been balanced in the opposite scale by virginal obedience. For in the same way the sin of the first created man receives amendment by the correction of the First-begotten, and the coming of the serpent is conquered by the harmlessness of the dove, those bonds being unloosed by which we had been fast bound to death.”¹⁶

He was teaching that Mary was called in to help carry the burden of Eve. Mary was her advocate, playing a part in Eve’s redemption and the redemption of mankind. Her work in carrying the Messiah was seen to balance the sin committed by Eve in the garden. Mary’s importance in the redemption of mankind was amplified because of her obedience to the angel when he informed her of the work of Jesus.

¹⁵ Martin, 44

¹⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*. Edited by Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James. The Ante-Nicene Fathers: translations of the writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 547

Irenaeus was not the only one to compare Mary to Eve in his theology. Justin Martyr, a contemporary of Irenaeus, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, also compares the two women. While speaking with Trypho, a Jew, Justin says, “We know that He...by means of the Virgin became man, that by that way the disobedience arising from the serpent had its beginning, by that way also it might have an undoing. For Eve, being a virgin and undefiled, conceiving the word that was from the serpent, brought forth disobedience and death; but the Virgin Mary, taking faith and joy, when the Angel told her the good tidings...answered, ‘Be it to me according to Thy word’.”¹⁷ His comparison of the sin of Eve to the obedience of Mary is similar to the comparison made by Irenaeus.

Tertullian also alluded to this comparison when he wrote, “God recovered His image and likeness, which the devil had seized, by a rival operation. For into Eve, as yet a virgin, had crept the word, which was the framer of death. Equally into a virgin was to be introduced the Word of God which was the builder up of life; that, what by that sex had gone into perdition, by the same sex might be brought back to salvation. Eve had believed the serpent; Mary believed Gabriel; the fault which the one committed by believing, the other by believing has blotted out.”¹⁸

These three men, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, and Tertullian, all writing from different parts of the world at the same time, were expounding on a principle that would become a cornerstone for the devotion of Mary that was to come. Ephrem of Syria, a poet known as one of Mary’s faithful worshipers, continued the adoration of Mary in the late part of the 4th century when he

¹⁷ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, Translated and edited by R.P.C. Hanson. (New York: Association Press, 1964), 61

¹⁸ Martin, 31

wrote that Eve had “covered Adam in a shameful coat of skins, but Mary has woven a new garment of salvation.”¹⁹

Many other church fathers alluded to Mary in their writing. According to Graef, Cyprian of Carthage, writing around A.D. 258, “was the first Father to relate Isaiah 7:14 to Genesis 3:14.”²⁰ He showed how the prophecy about the seed of Eve would come to the virgin who would conceive. Epiphaneus, writing near A.D. 373, called Mary the mother of the living. Also around A.D. 370, only 150 years following the writings of Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, and Tertullian, Jerome wrote, “Death by Eve, life by Mary,”²¹ telling us how far the devotion to Mary had come. Augustine states that since death came to all of us through a woman, so also life comes to us through a woman, and Ambrose devoted a series of writings to Mary at the end of the 4th century.

While these church fathers did not focus solely on Mary in most of their theology, they certainly give her a place of honor as the Mother of the Messiah. Their understanding of her importance in bringing Jesus the Savior into the world was developing into what it would become in the future teachings of the Catholic Church. Their writings add to the historical context on which the devotion to Mary is built.

When Constantine came to power in A.D. 312, the relationship between the church and the state drastically changed. While riding into battle, he saw a vision of a cross and heard a voice that said, “In this sign you shall conquer.” After that, Christianity became a state recognized religion, and Constantine’s government was forever linked to the church.

¹⁹ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, 1976), 60

²⁰ Graef, 46

²¹ Martin, 31

Even Constantine, in some of his actions, showed devotion to Mary. In A.D. 326, he had a cathedral built in Nazareth where it was believed that Mary was visited by the angel.²² When he decided to have a basilica built on Vatican Hill and dedicated to Peter, he had it built with three stained windows on the front to honor the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As Martin writes, there was also to be a mosaic over these windows, “depicting and exalting Jesus, His blessed mother, and Peter.” He also dedicated an entire portion of his new capital city to Mary. It was during the time of Constantine that Mary was “impressively and publicly honored.”²³ If the emperor who would forever be linked with the church was honoring Mary in such a way, the church would certainly follow.

While the early church councils focused primarily on the person and work of Jesus Christ, they contained some decisions that would influence popular devotion to Mary in the following centuries. Constantine called the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 to confront the problem of Arianism. It was primarily a question of the relationship between the Father and the Son in the Godhead. Arius, a presbyter, had begun to teach that there was a time when the Son was not. The council decided that the Son was begotten, not made, and that He was of the same substance of the Father. Most of the voting members of the council agreed to the Nicene Creed, which would guide the Eastern Church up until the present day. Speaking of Jesus, the end of the creed included the words, “And was made flesh by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary was made man.”²⁴ This phrase was included to uphold the virgin birth of Jesus, but it would also be used as a foundation for early church Mariology, including a decision that was to be made in the next council of the church.

²² Salvatore J. Bonano, “Marian Shrines and Apparitions” in *Mariology* 3:326-352. Edited by Carol, J.B. 3 Vols. (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1955), 327

²³ Martin, 44

²⁴ Ibid, 47-48

Perhaps the most important decision about Mary during the first 500 years of the history of the church came 106 years later in A.D. 431 at the Council of Ephesus. Although the major issue facing the church was still the nature of Jesus, the debate was over the title of Mary. When Nestorius, the bishop of Constantinople, heard Proclus preach about Mary using the title *Theotokos*, or God-bearer, he was outraged. While this was not the first time the title was given to Mary (Origen was the first to use it in his writing in the 3rd century, and Athanasius also used it in the 4th century²⁵), Nestorius did not agree with the use of the title of *Theotokos*, and he preached against it.

Nestorius held the view that this title for Mary did not sufficiently define the humanity of Jesus, and he made the statement that God does not have a mother. He did not believe there could not be a time when God was ever a baby. He said that Mary bore the human nature of the Son in the person of Jesus, but the *logos* was eternal. Jesus did not become fully the Son until he was baptized. Nestorius was attempting to uphold the humanity of Jesus, but many people around him believed that he taught that there were two Sons.

Cyril, the passionate patriarch of Alexandria, opposed and defeated Nestorius. Cyril had more power and convinced the council to depose Nestorius. Mary was given the title *Theotokos*, and twelve anathemas were pronounced. The first anathema declared, "If anyone will not confess that Emmanuel is very God, and that therefore the Holy Virgin is the Mother of God (*Theotokos*), inasmuch as in the flesh she bore the Word of God made flesh: let him be anathema."²⁶

²⁵ Ibid, 31

²⁶ Henry R. Percival, 1900. "Council of Ephesus" excerpted from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 14*, American Edition. Online edition edited by Knight, Kevin 1999
<<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3810.htm>> [12 August 2003]

Lawrence Cunningham says, “Even subsequent doctrinal statements about Mary’s Immaculate Conception or her Assumption into heaven derive finally from the meaning of Mary as God bearer.”²⁷ With the decision of Mary as *Theotokos* came many future teachings of the church. While the Council of Ephesus was trying to uphold the divinity of Jesus, its final decision became the cornerstone in the foundation of the devotion to Mary. Throughout the history of the church, the years following the Council of Ephesus and during the 11th and 12th centuries are the times when the devotion to Mary has developed the greatest.²⁸

Churches to Mary, the *Theotokos*, began to be built in every significant city, and the devotion to Mary would increase steadily in the years following the Council of Ephesus. St. Mary Major in Rome was rebuilt the year after the council of Ephesus in honor of the decision about Mary. According to John Martin, this church would become the most significant Marian church in the West, even to this day.²⁹

The information regarding the devotion to Mary in the first five hundred years of the church varies greatly depending on the theological background and belief of the source. There is no doubt that Mary played an important role in the history of the church, as she was the mother of Jesus, the Savior of the world. While many scholars believe that the devotion to Mary is a recent phenomenon, there is no doubt that the early church laid much of the groundwork for this devotion. The apocryphal books, paintings depicting Mary and Jesus, writings and teachings of some church fathers, prayers during persecution, feasts honoring Jesus and His mother, Constantine’s devotion, and the early councils of the church during the first five hundred years of church history certainly laid a foundation for later devotion to Mary.

²⁷ Lawrence Cunningham, “There’s Something about Mary,” *U.S. Catholic*, October 1999, 15

²⁸ E.R. Carroll, “The Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary” in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* 9:266-271, Second Edition. Edited by Marthaler, Berard L., 15 Vols. (Detroit: Gale 2003), 271

²⁹ Martin, 40

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