

SOLEMNITY OF MARY, MOTHER OF GOD – January 1, 2012
Fr. Jerry Kopacek

First, I again want to wish all of you a very blessed Christmas as we continue to celebrate the great feast of the birth of Jesus—the Word that became flesh and dwelled among us. Christmas is not over with on December 26; instead, we keep this season through the feast of the Lord’s baptism in early January. And speaking of January, I also want to wish all of you a very happy and blessed new year on this New Year’s [Eve]/Day—may you receive all the grace and goodness that God desires for you in 2012.

The Church observes an entire Christmas season because the incarnation and birth of Jesus is such a supremely important event; we really do need more than one day to reflect on the many aspects of this utterly unique birth. And so December 25, of course, is all about his birth. Then on Friday we celebrated the feast of the Holy Family—remembering that this child grew up in a family like we did, and thus reminding us of the central importance of family for our own progress in love and holiness. Next Sunday we celebrate the feast of Epiphany, reminding us that Jesus came to save the entire human race as symbolized by those wise men who came from the east.

And today we celebrate the feast, the solemnity of Mary under her title of ‘Mother of God’. This is a title that goes back to the earliest centuries of the Church’s life and that is part of our Marian devotion, part of the Catholic air that we breathe. “Holy Mary, **Mother of God**, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.” – that, of course, is the second half of the “Hail Mary”. It is also a title that many others find confusing or even scandalous: “how can you dare to call Mary the Mother of God? She was only a human being; surely she did not and could not exist before God!”

On first hearing, these certainly seem to be reasonable questions and concerns. But this title emerged very early in the Church’s life, and it did so because of the Church’s concern to preserve the truth about Mary’s child. In prayerfully reflecting on the preaching of the apostles and the inspired writings of the New Testament, the Holy Spirit guided the Church in her earliest councils to affirm ever more clearly and precisely her belief that the one Person Jesus Christ was fully divine and fully human—true God and true man—at one and the same time. We will once again profess that belief in the Nicene Creed in just a few moments. And as those early Christians reflected more fully on the mystery of this God-man Jesus, they began to realize the importance of Mary’s role in consenting to God’s plan for our salvation. In doing so, they began to refer to her as the Mother of God, and reasonably enough. After all, if Mary is the mother of Jesus (which of course she is), and if Jesus is true God as well as true man (which of course he is), the it is only logical to conclude that Mary can be called the Mother of God.

An early fifth-century bishop named Nestorius, however, could not handle that. He declared that Jesus was two distinct persons—one divine and one human—in a sort of moral union, and that Mary was only the mother of the human Jesus. The Church responded at the Council of Ephesus in 431 by affirming that Jesus is only one Person in which are combined his divine and human natures. Mary is certainly not the mother of Jesus’ divinity; there is no way she could be. But women do not give birth to natures—they give birth to persons. Mary is the mother of the person of Jesus Christ, he who was and is true God as well as true man. Therefore, it does indeed make sense, it logically follows that Mary truly can be called the Mother of God. It is said that when the people of Ephesus heard this decision from the council affirming that title for Mary, they celebrated with great joy by a torch-lit procession. They perhaps did not understand all the theological vocabulary of ‘person’ and ‘nature’. They did, however, have an instinctive notion that Mary’s child was no mere teacher or good man but was instead God incarnate—and their instinct was right on target.

I hope you will forgive me this brief digression into history, but it is important in helping us to understand what we mean. When we call Mary the Mother of God, we are in no way saying or implying that Mary

existed before God as mothers always exist before their children—that would be utterly impossible. Instead, this title of Mary’s is one of the Church’s most powerful ways to affirm our belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ. To say that Mary is the Mother of God is saying a whole lot more about Jesus her Son than it says about Mary. She is indeed only a creature; Mary is no god or goddess. But God the Father wanted Mary to be the means by which his Son would be born into the world to save the human race. Mary freely consented to God’s plan as we heard in the Annunciation gospel two weeks ago. Thus did God accomplish the miracle and the mystery of the Incarnation: God becoming man in Jesus without losing in any degree his divinity, his ‘God-ness’.

This title of Mary as Mother of God and the doctrine that it affirms regarding the divinity of Jesus—these are important ways to explain what we believe. But we must also keep in mind that we are dealing with mystery here in the truest sense of that word—mystery as something that we cannot fully grasp with our limited human language or intellect. And the Incarnation—God becoming man in Jesus—is one of the most fundamental mysteries of all. Sometimes we can get more of a glimpse of such things through the power of art and imagination. Many of you have heard a song called “Mary, Did You Know?”; our musicians have sung this before during the Advent and Christmas seasons and at our Lessons & Carols program. It is a beautiful set of reflections on what Mary might have known or imagined about her Son; one verse in particular has special power: “Mary...Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod? When you kiss your little baby, you’ve kissed the face of God.” This is the mystery of the Incarnation that we celebrate during this Christmas season, the mystery of the divine maternity of Mary who is Mother of God because her Son is God, the mystery before which we can only bend our knee in humble awe, wonder and adoration.

