

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE WORSHIP OF MARY  
IN THE EARLY CHURCH

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Mariology, or the study of the Virgin Mary, continuously appears in theological debates because Mary is one of the most well-known figures of the Bible. Within the Bible, it is obvious that she plays a significant part in Jesus' incarnation, but the extent of her role is widely contested among Christian sects, especially in the Catholic and Protestant debates. Mariology is an especially important study within modern Catholic theology, but many historical events and writings, both in Catholic and protestant circles, contributed to make Mariology what it is today. This paper will explore how the theology of veneration of Mary developed within the Patristic Period until the Second Council of Nicaea and how this theology translates into some modern Catholic doctrines related to the Virgin.

Mary rarely appears in the writings of the apostolic fathers. Because many of the hellenistic religions upheld feminine deities, the apostolic fathers knew that emphasizing Mary could cause wrong interpretation and possibly deifying of her.<sup>1</sup> Another reason for their silence could be simply the fact that the Bible itself remains mysterious concerning Mary's role. Ignatius of Antioch reflected this mentality in his writings and teachings. He rarely mentions Mary, but when he does, such as in his letter to the Ephesians, he talks about Mary as the mother of Christ because this illustrates Christ's dual nature.<sup>2</sup>

In the second century, the apologists Aristides and Justin Martyr wrote concerning Mary. Aristides, in his apology, mentioned Mary in the context of explanation of Jesus' incarnation.<sup>3</sup> He approaches Mary in a similar way that Ignatius did, addressing her in the context of her

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<sup>1</sup> Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 28.

<sup>2</sup> Ignatius, "To the Ephesians," New Advent, accessed October 6, 2021, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0104.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Aristides, "The Apology of Aristides the Philosopher," Early Christian Writings, accessed Oct. 6, 2021, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/aristides-kay.html>.

relationship with Christ without focusing on her alone. Justin Martyr writes concerning Mary in his first *Apology*. In chapter 32, Justin explains the Scriptural evidence of the virgin birth as well as the significance of it in relation to Jesus. He explains that Mary became pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit, not from intercourse, which is what is so significant about Jesus' birth.<sup>4</sup> Justin is also considered one of the first authors to make the comparison between Mary and Eve, which ultimately led to closer examination into Mary's role in soteriology.<sup>5</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons explains the parallel between Mary and Eve more clearly in his third *Against Heresies*. In chapter 12, Irenius gives Mary a role in redemption by emphasizing her obedience and contrasting it with Eve's disobedience.<sup>6</sup>

Mary's obedience is one thing which modern Catholic doctrine emphasizes to prove her superiority to other humans on earth. In Catholicism, Mary is ranked higher than any other created being because in Luke 1:28, the angel Gabriel called her "highly favored." This honor and praise of Mary by the church is called her "hyperdulia."<sup>7</sup> Mary is worthy of honor because she brought redemption into the world through Jesus, undoing the condemnation that Eve caused. Other church fathers in addition to Irenius contributed to this idea. In his work, *De Carne Christi*, Tertullian explains this parallel, and his writing is proof that the Mother of God was becoming a more popular object of reflection in the West just as it was in the East with Irenaeus.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Justin Martyr, "The First Apology of Justin," Early Christian Writings, accessed Oct. 6, 2021, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-firstapology.html>

<sup>5</sup>Gambero, 47.

<sup>6</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, "Against Heresies Book 3," Early Christian Writings, accessed Oct. 6, 2021, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/irenaeus-book3.html>

<sup>7</sup> Mark Slick, "Catholic Terminology," Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry, Dec. 3, 2008, <https://carm.org/roman-catholicism/catholic-terminology/>

<sup>8</sup>Gambero, 66.

The fourth century began a shift in the Mariology of the church because not only were people discussing the doctrine of Mary, but the idea of paying devotion to her also began to progress.<sup>9</sup> One setting in which Mary gained traction was within monastic movements. Monks emphasized perpetual virginity because once the Edict of Milan was passed in 313 and persecution of Christians ceased, monks looked for new ways, such as abstaining from sex and marriage, to identify with Christ's sufferings. This led to adoration of Mary because she led a blessed life as a consecrated virgin.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the monks, some notable writers of the fourth century emerged as well, including Athanasius of Alexandria and Basil of Caesarea in the East and Ambrose of Milan and Jerome in the West. Athanasius often dealt with the term *theotokos*, which is a greek word meaning "mother of God." Much debate existed concerning whether Mary should be called *theotokos* or simply *christotokos*, which means "mother of Christ."<sup>11</sup> Origen was actually the first one to use the term *theotokos*, but Athanasius is the one who popularized the term as a defense against the Arian heresy, which denied the true divinity of Christ.<sup>12</sup> He wrote so much about her status as *theotokos*, not because he wanted to venerate Mary, but because he wanted to prove Christ's divinity.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Gambero, 97.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 98.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Pohle, *Mariology: A Dogmatic Treatise on the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1914), 9.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Benko, *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan and Christian Roots of Mariology* (Boston: Brill, 2004), 250.

<sup>13</sup> Michael O'Carroll, "Athanasius of Alexandria, St." in *Theotokos: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Blessed Vlrigin Mary* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1982), 61. Google Books.

Athanasius also wrote concerning Mary's perpetual virginity, which Basil of Caesarea addressed as well. In his *De virginitate*, he states that Mary remained a virgin until she died so that she could serve as an example for all who would come after her.<sup>14</sup> Basil of Caesarea, one of the Cappadocian church fathers, also defended Mary's perpetual virginity. In his work *On the Holy Generation of Christ*, Basil declares that if anyone loves Christ, he will never say that Mary ceased to be a virgin after He was born.<sup>15</sup> For Basil, however, it was not merely about abstaining from physical sex. Mary also represented the ideal model of openness to the Holy Spirit in one's life.<sup>16</sup>

Athanasius and Basil were writing in the East, but in the West, Ambrose of Milan was dealing with many of the same considerations in Mariology. Like Athanasius and Basil, Ambrose wrote much concerning Mary's perpetual virginity, writing that Mary was a virgin both in body and in mind.<sup>17</sup> Ambrose asserts that Mary's virginity also means that she is free from sin. He believed that at the Assumption, Mary was pure spiritually as well as physically.<sup>18</sup> However, Ambrose's main contribution to Mariology is his comparison of Mary to the church as a whole. He was the first Christian author to draw a parallel between Mary and the church, giving her a

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<sup>14</sup> Gambero, 104.

<sup>15</sup> Pohle, 102.

<sup>16</sup> Gambero, 146.

<sup>17</sup> St. Ambrose, *On Holy Virginity* (Oxford: JH Parker, 1843), 29. Google Books.

<sup>18</sup> Angleo Nicolaidis, "The Philosophical Conception of Mariology and the Notion of Theotokos in the Teachings of Saint Ambrose," *Phronimon* [online] vol. 15, n. 2 (2014): pp.18-37. [http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S1561-40182014000200002&lng=en&nrm=iso](http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1561-40182014000200002&lng=en&nrm=iso).

place in humanity's redemption. Because she gave birth to Christ, giving Him her human nature, she played a part in the salvation of humanity.<sup>19</sup>

Also in the West, Jerome contributed significantly to the development of Mariology. Like his other contemporaries, Jerome's work focused primarily on Mary's virginity. He asserted that in marriage, Mary's relationship to Joseph was spiritual and affectionate, but not physical, meaning that Joseph also remained a virgin after they were married.<sup>20</sup> Jerome gives Mary the title "Mother of the Lord," and he encourages all Christians to imitate her devotion, especially in her virginity.<sup>21</sup>

Mary's perpetual virginity remains an important facet of modern Catholic doctrine today. Dwight Longenecker, a Catholic priest at Our Lady of the Rosary church in South Carolina, describes the doctrine in this way: "Now this [virginity] did not just disappear. By God's grace, Mary matured and grew...So her essential virginity became a mature kind of purity. She went from being an innocent young girl or a virgin to being a venerable, pure, and holy matron."<sup>22</sup> In Catholic doctrine, Mary followed in her son Jesus' footsteps and remained a virgin even after her marriage to Joseph so that she, just as Athanasius wrote, could set an example for all of those who would pursue celibacy after her and to identify with Jesus Himself.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Gambero, 195.

<sup>20</sup> St. Jerome, "The Perpetual Virginity of Blessed Mary," New Advent, accessed Oct. 18, 2021, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3007.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> Gambero, 213.

<sup>22</sup> Dwight Longenecker and David Gistafson, *Mary: A Catholic-Evangelical Debate* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 63-64.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 76-77.

The fifth century marked a significant period concerning the veneration of Mary. Two of the important writers of this century were Augustine of Hippo and Cyril of Alexandria.

Augustine of Hippo was one of the most influential men in Western theology at the time, and his writings concerning Mary were no exception.<sup>24</sup> Much of his writing aligns with that of Ambrose, especially regarding Mary's sinlessness. Augustine taught that Mary was free of both personal and original sin because God preserved her with His grace.<sup>25</sup> Because of Mary's sinlessness, Augustine presents her as a supreme example of faith, encouraging all Christians to give themselves to the will of God as Mary did.<sup>26</sup>

After Augustine's death, the Council of Ephesus gave great importance to the doctrine of Mary in the church. The events leading up to the council involved two men: Nestorius and Cyril of Alexandria. After hearing Proclus of Constantinople deliver a homily honoring Mary and calling her *theotokos*, Nestorius attacked the title *theotokos* for Mary and preferred to use *christotokos*.<sup>27</sup> He argued that because Mary could only give birth to the human nature of Christ, she could not be called *theotokos*.<sup>28</sup> This caused Cyril of Alexandria to defend the *theotokos* during the council, delivering his own homily in which he exalted Mary. He proclaimed, "We hail you, O Mary Mother of God, venerable treasure of the entire world, inextinguishable lamp, crown of virginity, scepter of orthodoxy, imperishable lamp, container of Him Who cannot be contained, Mother and Virgin, through whom it is said in the holy Gospels: "Blessed is He Who

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<sup>24</sup> Gambero, 216.

<sup>25</sup> Pohle, 53.

<sup>26</sup> Augustine of Hippo, "Of Holy Virginitly," New Advent, accessed Oct. 18, 2021, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1310.htm>.

<sup>27</sup>Rex Butler, "From Constantinople to Chalcedon" (Class lecture, HIST5300, NOBTS)

<sup>28</sup> Gambero, 235.



comes in the name of the Lord.”<sup>29</sup> Cyril was clearly devoted to Mary’s role in the incarnation, but he went even further in his homily 11, claiming that it was “through Mary that God accomplished everything concerning human salvation.”<sup>30</sup>

Cyril’s devotion to Mary and Nestorius’ rejection of her as *theotokos* set the stage for the Council of Ephesus. In this council, the title of *theotokos* was officially bestowed upon Mary and accepted by the church because this emphasized the dual nature of Christ. In the words of Cyril, “If anyone does not confess that Emmanuel is God in truth, and therefore that the holy virgin is the mother of God [*theotokos*], let him be anathema.”<sup>31</sup> Right after this council, the Pope Sixtus III built the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, which is “the most important shrine to Mary in the West.”<sup>32</sup>

After the Council of Ephesus during the rest of the fifth century, Marian doctrine began to develop more in the practical life of the church. In the year 451, the Council of Chalcedon further confirmed the Marian doctrines that the Council of Ephesus declared. The council decided that Mary was truly the virgin mother of Christ, giving more proof for His dual nature.<sup>33</sup> Beginning in the East, people began to see Mariology as a vital part of Christianity, bringing

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<sup>29</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Homily IV*, Classical Christianity, added April 7, 2012, <https://classicalchristianity.com/2012/04/07/st-cyril-on-the-mother-of-god/>

<sup>30</sup>Gambero, 244.

<sup>31</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries: Her Place in History and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 56.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Rex Butler, “From Constantinople to Chalcedon” (Class lecture, HIST5300, NOBTS)

Mary into liturgies and celebrating feasts in her honor.<sup>34</sup> Two important figures during this time were Proclus of Constantinople in the East and Peter Chrysologus in the West.

Proclus of Constantinople played a part in the Council of Ephesus as the one who inspired Nestorius to debate the title *theotokos*. However, he also contributed to the development of Marian doctrine after the council as well. He wrote that the miracle that occurred in Mary's womb has no human comparison, and Mary deserves reverence because of her superiority.<sup>35</sup> Proclus also proclaimed Mary to be the bridge between God and man because of how the Holy Spirit, like a weaver of a garment, put together Christ in the flesh of Adam within Mary's womb.<sup>36</sup>

In the West, Peter Chrysologus witnessed many important developments in the Marian doctrine including the introduction of the Mass of the Annunciation and the insertion of "a commemoration of the Blessed Virgin into the Roman Canon."<sup>37</sup> Like Proclus, Peter focused on the miraculous aspect of the virgin birth, noting that even Mary's husband Joseph marveled at the idea of her giving birth as a virgin.<sup>38</sup> Peter Chrysologus was also the first Latin Father to give Mary the label of "God's spouse" in his 140th sermon.<sup>39</sup> He believed that one could not fully understand God if they did not also consider Mary.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Gambero, 249.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 251.

<sup>36</sup> Pohle, 23.

<sup>37</sup>Gambero, 282.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Chrysologus, "Sermon 145," in *Saint Peter Chrysologus Selected Sermons and Saint Valerian Homilies*, ed. Hermigild Dressler (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1953), 232. Google Books.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid, "Sermon 140," 227.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

In the sixth century, the Second Council of Constantinople (553) further reiterated the sentiments of Cyril in the Council of Ephesus concerning Mary. The council used the phrase “ever virgin” in reference to Mary, reiterating the belief that she remained a virgin even after giving birth to Christ.<sup>41</sup> In addition to the council, writers emerged such as Romanos the Melodist and Gregory of Tours who left important impacts on Marian doctrine and devotion in the church.

Romanos the Melodist was a hymnist who wrote many songs of the Eastern church.<sup>42</sup> The subject of many of his songs was the Virgin Mary, and he even made a shrine in her honor near his house.<sup>43</sup> He wrote hymns about the events of Christmas, the Annunciation, and Mary’s birth in addition to many others. In his hymn, “On the Annunciation,” which is located within the lost Gospel of Mary, Romanos calls Mary a “light-bearing beacon” who guides all to “divine knowledge,” which suggests that he may have had some gnostic leanings in his doctrine.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, Romanos’ songs impacted the Eastern Mariology in the sixth century and beyond.

While Romanos was writing songs in the East, Gregory of Tours was documenting the Assumption of Mary in the West. His is the earliest testimony of Mary’s Assumption, writing that after her death, God brought her body to heaven to be reunited with her soul for eternal blessedness, and this is why there is no evidence of Mary’s burial or gravesite.<sup>45</sup> Gregory also wrote *Libri Miraculorum*, in which he listed various miracles where Mary intervened. He uses

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<sup>41</sup>Elliot Miller and Kenneth R. Samples, *The Cult of the Virgin: Catholic Mariology and the Apparitions of Mary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1992), 24.

<sup>42</sup> Gambero, 325.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid, 326.

<sup>44</sup> Frederica Matthewes-Green, “The Akathist [Annunciation] Hymn of St. Romanos,” Frederica.com, published March 10, 2008, <https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/frederica/>.

<sup>45</sup>Pohle, 116.

these stories to illustrate the motherly care that Mary offers to all Christians, showing that she is able to bestow blessings upon people.<sup>46</sup>

Both Mary's assumption and her ability to bestow gifts are important doctrines of the Catholic church today. Regarding Mary's assumption, the doctrine of the immaculate conception has informed the belief in the Catholic church that, if Mary was born without sin, she needed not face death.<sup>47</sup> Pope Pius XII in 1950 declared that the dogma of the Assumption should be accepted by the church even though evidence in both Scripture and tradition lacked to prove this.<sup>48</sup> Mary's ability to bestow gifts is why she is called the "Dispensatrix of all graces."<sup>49</sup> Pope Leo XIII described this doctrine to mean that God has given Mary the ability to distribute blessings and good things so that people may have hope, grace, and salvation through her.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, the doctrines which took root with Gregory of Tours still are in play in the Catholic faith today.

In the eighth century, the Second Council of Nicaea, the last of the seven Ecumenical Councils, marked the end of the Patristic Period of the early church. This council also determined how the church viewed icons and relics in worship, which directly involved the Marian doctrine of the church as well because Mary was and continues to be the subject of many icons of the church. The council determined that there would be three degrees of devotion which Christians should practice: latria (worship given to God alone), dulia (veneration directed to the

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<sup>46</sup> Gambero, 357.

<sup>47</sup> Miller and Samples, 36.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>49</sup> Benko, 222.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 225.

saints), and hyperdulia (like dulia, but only offered specially to Mary).<sup>51</sup> The council determined that, though God was solely worthy of worship, the church should also pay reverence and respect to other saints in addition to Mary herself.

The apostolic fathers refrained from writing much about Mary for fear of deifying her, but by the time of the Second Council of Nicaea, the church had uplifted Mary as someone who played a major part in the salvation of the world. The Marian doctrine of the Patristic period shifted from its use of proving Christ's dual nature with Athanasius and developed into the belief that Mary herself was sinless and superior to all others. As this paper has demonstrated, modern Catholic beliefs still rely heavily on Mary, and the Virgin also plays an important role within other Christian denominations as well, specifically within the Eastern Orthodox beliefs. The *theotokos* may only have a few verses within the scope of Scripture, but as history and the theology of the early church has shown, she cannot be ignored or forgotten.

### **Application Point**

As I demonstrated in this paper, Catholic doctrine today has developed heavily from that of the Patristic fathers. I grew up in Latin America, which is heavily Catholic, so this subject fascinated me even as a child. As I researched, I connected the dots between some of the teachings of the Latin American church concerning the Virgin and how they may have developed from history. I heard many stories as a child from people who would go to church and pray to Mary, believing she would convince Jesus to listen to them. I now have more insight into how this belief developed whereas before, I simply grieved the ignorance of my dear friends in Latin America. This research helped me understand my friends better and if I return, I know this new knowledge will help me witness to them about the truth found in Christ.

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<sup>51</sup>Miller and Samples, 70.

Not only will this help me if I return to Latin America, but it will help me in my daily life in ministry today. I attend church in Norco, LA, which is a heavily Catholic area. Every week, I encounter people of all ages who identify as Catholic, and the research I conducted for this paper will help me have more effective conversations with them about their beliefs and the gospel. Having gained more insight into their beliefs, specifically concerning Mary, I am better prepared to share the gospel to them in a way that they can understand. I can show them that we can pray to Jesus Himself without having to go through another mediator such as Mary.

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