

Homily: Feast of Mary, Mother of God, January 1, 2007

Last week, on December 25, we celebrated the feast of Christmas; the feast of the Birth of our Lord, Jesus Christ:

God the Son, second person of the Most Holy Trinity became man;
was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary,
and nine months later was born of her for our Redemption.

Today, through this feast we are invited to reflect on the unique status of the Virgin Mary – her Divine Motherhood.

Is Mary the mother of God?
Is it proper to refer to her so?
We do it often.

Every time we pray the Hail Mary we say; “Holy Mary, *Mother of God*, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death”.

However, it was not always so.

It was not universally or readily accepted that Mary should be referred to as ‘Mother of God’.

It is not so today.

Some deny that she is the mother of God;
some ignore her;
some avoid facing the question of whether she is, or is not, Mother of God.

When it comes to determining the status of Mary, the mother of Jesus, the foundational question is: who is Christ? Is He God incarnate or is He not?

Circa 320 A.D., just seven years after the liberation of Christianity by the emperor Constantine (Edict of Milan, 313 a.d.) the conflict between Arius and his bishop - Alexander of Alexandria (north Africa; largest Greek speaking city of the world) - broke into the open.

Arius, deacon of Alexandria, was tall and lean, of distinguished appearance and polished address. Women doted on him, charmed by his beautiful manners, touched by his appearance of asceticism; men were impressed by his aura of intellectual superiority. Neither this world nor the next held mysteries for Arius; the nature of the Godhead was as clear to him as noonday. He attacked in his preaching the traditional Trinitarian doctrine (One God; three distinct persons in one God).

He said: “.....God has not always been Father;
there was a moment when He was alone, and was not yet Father:
later he became so.
The Son is not from eternity; he came from nothing.”

Alexander, the gentle and kindly Archbishop of Alexandria, patiently tried to get Arius and his followers to abandon their new and unorthodox views and return to a profession of the traditional faith. When they refused he excommunicated them.

At the Council of Nicea (325 a.d.)- about 300 bishops present - the teaching of Arius was condemned and the divinity of Christ defined.

As we recite in the Creed which gets its name from this council - the Nicene Creed- we profess: "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, one in being with the Father. Through him all things were made."

About 100 years after the Council of Nicea (which condemned the heresy of Arius and definitively confirmed the divinity of Christ) another theological heresy was inaugurated by the preaching of Nestorius against the title *Theotokos* , or *Mother of God*, given to the Virgin Mary.

On Christmas Day, 428 a.d., Nestorius, himself a zealous opponent of Arianism, the brash, impetuous and new archbishop of Constantinople stepped into the pulpit of his cathedral to deliver a sermon against Mary's maternity of the Incarnate God.

He claimed that Mary ought not to be called *Mother of God* but rather mother of Christ. He said;

"They ask whether Mary may be called God-bearer (*Theotokos*).
But has God, then, a mother? Mary did not bear God
the creature did not bear the Creator, but the man, who is the instrument
of the Godhead.

The Holy Spirit did not place the Word in the womb of the Virgin Mary,
but He provided for Him, from the blessed Virgin, a temple which He might
inhabit....

He who was formed in the womb of Mary was not God Himself, but God
assumed him."

The congregation listened intently - some perhaps approving, many bewildered, some shocked and angry.

Then a member of the congregation, Eusebius, a layman and a lawyer, challenged his bishop.

He said; "The eternal Word begotten before the ages had submitted to be born a second time".

Nestorius continued to develop his theme of attack on the Divine motherhood of Mary in a series of sermons.

On the feast of the Annunciation, March 25, 429, Bishop Proclus of Cyzicus , in the cathedral of Constantinople, answered Nestorius face to face.

He said; "The Self-same was in the Father's bosom and in the womb of his mother.

He lay in a mother's arms, while He walked upon the wings of the wind.

He was adored by angels, while He sat at meat with publicans.

The cherubim dared not behold Him, while Pilate condemned Him.

The servant smote Him, and creation shuddered.

He hung upon the Cross, but He was not absent from the throne of glory;

and while He lay in the tomb, He was spreading out the heavens like a curtain.

Oh! what a mystery! I see the miracles, and I proclaim the Godhead.

I behold the sufferings, and I deny not the manhood.

What clearer proof could I want that Mary is mother of God.”
The congregation broke into thunderous applause.
But bishop Nestorius was not diverted from his course. He began a series of sermons against Proclus, running through Easter, reiterating his earlier themes:
The Eternal God cannot be born, suffer, and die; therefore Christ’s humanity is merely “a garment” which God puts on, and Mary conceived and bore only that fleshly garment.

In that Easter season, bishop Cyril of Alexandria (north Africa) entered the debate on the side of the Divine Motherhood of Mary.

In a letter to his monks he wrote:

“I am astonished that the question should ever have been raised as to whether the Holy Virgin should be called Mother of God, for it really amounts to asking, Is her Son God, or is He not?”

Pope Celestine wrote to Cyril asking for more information on what was happening. Cyril and Nestorius exchanged sharp letters.
In the spring of 430 Cyril sent the Pope a detailed report on the history and nature of the controversy, with full documentation.
Nestorius wrote several letters to the Pope explaining his teaching on Mary as Christotokos (Christ -bearer) rather than Theotokos (God-bearer).

In August 430 Pope Celestine assembled a synod at Rome to review all the material received.

He and the synod pronounced Nestorius’ views as heretical and demanded his recantation within ten days of receiving the Papal message, on pain of excommunication. Nestorius refused to recant.

The Eastern Emperor, Theodosius II, intervened and suggested an ecumenical council to resolve the dispute. All parties to the dispute accepted.

On May 15, 431 Pope Celestine sanctioned a council to be held at Ephesus the following month. A special invitation to participate was sent to Augustine, bishop of Hippo (north Africa), the Church’s greatest theologian, but Augustine had died August 28 of the previous year while the Vandals were besieging Hippo.

On June 22, 431 Cyril of Alexandria, in the name of the Pope, convened the council in the city of Ephesus in the church dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. About 200 bishops participated. The church’s foundations may still be seen in the ruins of Ephesus, displaying its great size. Tradition holds that the Virgin Mary, after the ascension of our Lord, resided at Ephesus in the care of the Apostle John. It was probably in Ephesus, shortly before the convening of the council, that Nestorius delivered a sermon in which he declared he could never bring himself to call the Christ-Child God.

The council concluded its business in a single day.

Mary was formally proclaimed Mother of God.

Nestorius (who refused to attend the session) was excommunicated and deposed as Bishop of Constantinople.

The people who waited outside the church to hear the decision, on hearing it broke into joyous shouts of "Mother of God!, Mother of God!" They formed a torch-light procession to escort the bishops to their lodgings. Soon afterward, Cyril described Mary to the people of Ephesus as "the Mother of God, the holy ornament of all the universe, the unquenchable lamp, the crown of virginity, the sceptre, the container of the uncontainable, mother and virgin."

Some days later Pope Celestine's legates arrived in Ephesus, bearing a letter from the Pope explicitly asserting his primacy over the Church on the basis of Christ's commission to Peter, and reiterating his condemnation of the error taught by Nestorius, As the Pope Celestine's legates they confirmed the actions of the Council.

Nestorius was exiled to Petra in Arabia and then to the Great Oasis in Libya, where he died c. 451.

After the Council of Ephesus devotion to Mary grew and spread until it was found wherever the Catholic Church was. Love for Christ and love for Mary intertwined in the hearts of the faithful with no thought of contradiction. For Christ had given Mary to the Church as the mother of all the faithful - and her motherhood of the God-Man, divine and human, inseparable, had been confirmed for all time.

It is her feast we celebrate today - the feast that acknowledges that she is indeed Mother of God.

(Source: Warren H. Carroll, The Building of Christendom, A History of Christendom, Vol. 2)