



Further Implications of Saying That Mary Is the Mother of God

After reading these nine fine articles on various aspects of the theme “Mary, Mother of God,” I was left to consider what, if anything, could be added to the conversation in this editorial. Indeed, these nine excellent authors had covered the subject very thoroughly and completely, and it seemed to me that anything that might be added would be repetitious or superfluous. Certainly, every aspect of the life of Mary, as well as her relation to the biblical traditions and the sweep of Christian piety and theology, has been covered as much as it could be. We actually have very few biblical passages that give us information about Mary, and we do not want to fall into the trap of adding more unsubstantiated legends about her; this has been done quite frequently through Christian history. And yet, the figure of Mary is endlessly fascinating, which leaves us wanting to know more and say more.

As I was left to mull over the theme “Mary, Mother of God” again and again, another angle eventually occurred to me that might be considered. So much of what we have had to say revolves around Mary’s influence on us, especially as a role model of faith, an exemplar of motherhood, and an engaging biblical woman. These things all are true and do make Mary a fascinating and important person. While we wish we knew more about her, what we do know is a crucial portrait of our common humanity. But in thinking about Mary as *theotokos*

(mother of God), another way of considering this is to ask: What is the effect on *God* that Mary was the mother of Jesus?

At first blush, this idea that Mary as mother had an effect on God seems theologically dangerous. I went through a brief phase in my younger life of being attracted to process theology, but quickly came to realize the problems involved in saying that God is affected and changed by interactions with humanity. So, when considering that Mary might have had an effect on God, I am not suggesting some sort of process thought. Rather, I am considering this idea along incarnational lines. We Christians hold that Jesus the Christ was God taking human form, and that in this incarnation (the putting on of human flesh) God came to be one with us (Emmanuel). In Jesus, God came to be one of us and was a human being in every sense of the word. Jesus came to live among us and to know in a visceral way what it means to be human and what our lives are all about.

So, if this is the case (as we confess), then one of the human experiences Jesus had—perhaps one of the primal experiences that he had—was that he had a mother. This is not an insignificant idea. One of the earliest and deepest relations that we humans have is to be mothered—to be cared for from our earliest life in an immediate and intense way. Human infants are absolutely helpless, and we are fundamentally molded by our earliest interactions with those who mother us. As humans grow and develop, the bonds between child and mother are some of the deepest ones that form. Since Jesus was human in all the essential ways, the mothering he received from Mary must have been extremely formative. I can only marvel at the love and care Mary must have had for her son, and through these bonds, God came to know mothering love in an incarnational sense. Jesus grew to know in a visceral way what it means to have a mother.

As is the way with good mothers, the picture we see of Mary is that she loved her son. I can imagine there were many times that she did not fully understand him, starting from the extraordinary events surrounding his birth and stretching through the events of his life, to the intense events of his death and resurrection. But who among us fully understand our children—and it is a terribly vulnerable thing to love them as intensely as we do. How Mary wondered, and suffered, as the mother of Jesus! And for her love and care of Jesus, the rest of us owe her a debt of gratitude.

Now this is only a wondering on my part. Perhaps my systematic theologian colleagues will point out the errors of my wandering into their discipline—I am, after all, just a simple church historian, and many of these things are above my pay grade. But I cannot help but wonder if this line of thinking might help us to more fully consider the title for Mary of *theotokos*, the mother of God.

A Note:

Well, change comes to everything, even *Word & World*. As you can see, after 43 years we have slightly changed the size of our publication, from the familiar 6.75 x 10 inches, to a more industry standard 6 x 9 inches. This change will save us quite a bit of money, and equally important, means much less paper wasted in production. I assure you that you will still get the same content as before, although there will probably be a few more pages. Thanks for your continued support of our publishing efforts, and if you have any comments, please let me know.

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