

YOUTH UPDATE

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ON Mary

Truths and Connections

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Picture a friend of yours. She has always been active in the Church, has a nice family and is great to be around.

She has recently gotten engaged to a really nice guy you know and they plan to get married soon. They are the perfect couple and you know they'll be quite happy.

Then the news spreads that she is pregnant. The story is that she had a vision of an angel from God who came to her and told her that she was to become

pregnant—not by a man, but through the Holy Spirit—and this child she carried was to be God's son.

This seems like some complicated cover-up for the fact that she and her fiancé couldn't wait. But then you find out that her fiancé is in disbelief. It is not his baby. Wow, a huge cover-up.

by Lara Schmitt

Now picture that it's against the law in your state to be

pregnant without a husband. Her family is disgraced, her fiancé is astonished and you are not allowed to be seen with her because of the embarrassment to you and your family—she is alone.

As a college student myself, I have had friends who were young, pregnant and unmarried, but I never connected their troubles with the experience of the Blessed Virgin. Mary was both this pregnant, unwed teenager and the most

perfect human being God ever created: the mother of Jesus. (Jesus was not only completely human but also completely divine, so he's in a unique category by himself.)

Few people imagine Mary as a vulnerable, isolated teenager. In fact, many young people have come to see Mary as an "ideal woman," according to research done by the International Marian Research Institute at the University of Dayton.

Father Johann Roten, its director, surveyed 6,000 students between the ages of 15 and 24 in 12 countries and his findings show that though many young people are attracted to Mary, they have limited knowledge of her. Loving someone without knowing that individual sounds more like a crush. Infatuations can't become real love and affection unless you really get to know a person—and still like that person!

One way to meet the real Mary is through Church dogma, official teachings. All that theology can get a bit heavy so this *Youth Update* offers a micro-summary of the four basic pillars of Church teaching on Mary: She is Mother of God, ever a virgin, conceived without Original Sin and assumed into heaven body and soul. I've attempted to connect those teachings with my life and yours.

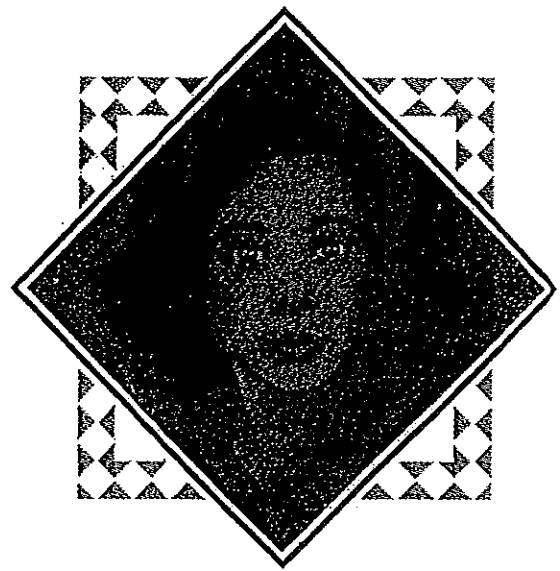
Mary, God-Bearer

We all know that Mary is the mother of Jesus (who is God), but what are the

special "perks" of this position? We believe in one God in three divine persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The second person of the Trinity became flesh in Mary's womb. He was named Jesus. Therefore, as the mother of Jesus, Mary is the mother of God. Because she gave birth to God, her title in the Church is *Theotokos* or God-bearer.

Mary has a special function in being the *Mother of God*. She is the mother of the head of the Church, Jesus, and she is also honored as mother by its members—we who are the present-day family of Jesus.

Besides this "family connection," we also base this belief on a passage from John's Gospel. From the cross, Jesus told his disciple John, "Behold your mother," telling him to care for Mary. To Mary, he said, "Woman, behold your son" (John 19:26-27). Jesus was concluding his life's work and making his final arrangements. The Church has long thought that those words to John included us as well. We also are to be the sons and daughters of Mary.



According to Father Roten's study, over 83 percent of young people in fact see Mary as a mother who cares about them. They see Mary as someone who has an answer to some of their needs. Father Roten speculates that those needs include "affection, acceptance, security and love." Others felt more admiration than affection. A third group revered Mary as a model of faith and other religious attitudes.

All of these attitudes are expressed in the Hail Mary, one of the best-known and loved prayers in Catholic tradition. That prayer reminds me of my own family experience. When I wanted something from my parents, sometimes I'd ask Mom first. She would talk to Dad and

"soften him up" before I asked him myself. This would really help, especially on those rare occasions when I got into trouble.

In the Hail Mary we ask the Mother of God to "pray for us sinners now." This is not bypassing God. This is asking for help in communicating with God directly. A little extra help from Mary couldn't hurt. She watches over all of us and worries about us when we make choices that separate us from her Son and from the family of God.

Free From All Sin

For us to be good parents in the future, it's important to care for our physical health now and not to expose ourselves knowingly to chemicals, medications or other dangers that would disable our children. Our health affects not only us but also the next generation to be born. It's not hard to see that our values, our moral beliefs, our faith will also affect the following generation.

God's plan warranted some special attention to the woman who would choose to accept the motherhood of Jesus. To be

q. With all these holy days, it almost seems as though the Church worships Mary, even though we say we simply honor her. What's the difference between the two? a. Many people often confuse the two and the dictionary is no help. Honor is given to Mary and the saints because they are so holy and close to God. Mary gets more attention than the other saints because she, more than any other human, is the exemplary Christian. She based her life on her faith and trust in God and it was through her that God chose to carry out the divine plan to redeem us. We honor her above all humans for her Yes to God. God deserves worship, which is for the divine alone. All who are honored with sainthood merit it because of something God has done, the way in which they have been able to express the gifts of God in their lives.

worthy to bear God's son, Mary had to be perfect—so God created her that way. When Mary was conceived by Joachim and Anne, she was already free of Original Sin—a freedom we gain a bit later when we are baptized.

This belief in Mary's sinlessness is called the doctrine of the *Immaculate Conception*. Mary could be conceived without sin because Christ was coming to save everyone; Mary—as Mother of God—simply had access to that saving grace sooner. The Immaculate Conception is not about Jesus' conception but about Mary's.

God's immunization of Mary from Original Sin, her holiness from the beginning, does not mean that she did not have free will to choose whether or not to sin. She did. In fact, she also had the freedom to say No to the angel Gabriel when that messenger appeared to Mary, asking her to be the mother of "the most high." Luckily for us, she chose to say Yes.

Father Roten sees Mary's free will as an important part of her sinlessness. He explains that there are two different aspects of freedom. One is freedom from things like addictions and personal concerns. The other is freedom to do something or choose a course of action. Therefore, "Mary was free to say No to whatever might have been an obstacle for her [and] at the same time, free to say—positively—Yes to God." She was not just a "passive instrument of God's will," Father Roten explains. Over 75 percent of the youth surveyed saw Mary as actively and freely choosing to do God's will: She said Yes to God and No to sin.

Though we are born with Original Sin, we have the same free will Mary did. We also can say Yes to God and No to sin. It's the strength of God's grace, Mary's Yes and our own freedom

that makes us able to be without sin now—if not from the first moment of our existence.

Always a Virgin

Though there are those who argue this point, the Church teaches that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life, even in childbirth. She was *ever a virgin*: This was her choice. Why?

Father Roten is able to give some insight: Mary made a decision when she was very young to dedicate her life to God. She gave her heart and she also gave her body when God asked her to be the mother of Jesus. Mary loved Joseph, but he and she both understood that she was to mother but one child: Jesus. This is more mysterious than ever in an age which sometimes mocks virginity and jokes about it rather than prizing it in men or women.

Speaking from his priestly experience, Father Roten says: "At one moment in our lives, we decide that the person who counts most in our lives is God. To the extent that you make God the ultimate object of your love, the object of your dedication and commitment, you are in the true sense of the word, a virgin—somebody who channels all your life energy into one direction—and that direction is God." This is what Mary did—channeled all her energy toward God. Joseph did the same.

This may be hard to imagine. So many different concerns—and distractions—command our attention; our energies are stretched in so many ways. It is difficult to be focused and strong in this complex world. Mary's virginity can teach us to be single-minded, whether we are called to lives of virginity or of marriage. In *The Dictionary of Mary* (1985), the author writes that some believe that both the

parents of Jesus focused themselves on their child's mission as it emerged.

For Mary, the importance of her choice was her confidence in God's plan. You and I have an important role as well. We can focus on learning the divine will for ourselves and then walk in that way just as Mary did. I think her prayer in the Bible, which we call the *Magnificat*, is a good one

allow her flesh to decay like ours is going to do.

"The Immaculate Conception and the Assumption are related," says Father Roten. "The Immaculate Conception [was] the beginning of life, the promise, and the Assumption [was] the end, the realization of that promise." God took the same care of Mary's body at the end of her life as was taken at the tin

- **q.** You report that many teens see Mary as their mother. I don't want another mother, but a friend—which is different. Why would anyone want two Moms? **a.** Believe it or not, it is not impossible for a mother to be a friend. But those of you who find it hard to put the two on the same level shouldn't worry about Mary as mother but think of her as friend. Mary won't lecture you, yell at you or ground you for a year. She will listen and try to help you—as a friend would. Mary wants to protect you—as do even the mothers who seem especially strict—but she "mothers" from a distance. She will never stop being your mother, but she will never stop being your friend first and foremost.

for us as we learn to focus ourselves: "The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name" (Luke 1:49).

Ultimate Honor

Because of Mary's complete faith in God and her perfect sinlessness, Mary was taken into heaven—body and soul—when her life on earth was over. This is the doctrine of the *Assumption*. Not only was her body holy because it bore God's son, she also was so pure in spirit that God would not

of her conception.

The Assumption has great importance for the Church and for us. For many years, Father Roten explains, body and soul were seen as opposing forces for us humans. It appeared that to be a truly good Christian, the body should be the less important of the two. This sounds sensible because it is our soul that lives on while our body dies. But God created our bodies as well and they, too, are holy, for they are the way we praise God and do God's will, as Mary did.

For this reason, Father Roten insists that body and soul "should not be separated and especially not be opposed."

While my body is not targeted for an early assumption, at least one body has gone ahead to prepare a place for all of us at the general resurrection of the body. It puts physical bodies literally on a high plane and also honors the body for cooperating in harmony with the will of God on earth. All bodies are in training for this marathon Olympic event. For us, the mystery will be Resumption, not Assumption.

Too Good to Be True?

I've already made some connections between the mysteries of Mary's life and our own. Despite all the honor that comes Mary's way, her life doesn't seem enviable to me. Blessings are not synonymous with ease, that's for sure. When she said Yes to the angel Gabriel and agreed to carry God's son, she became—for the moment—a unwed mother. In Mary's this was cause to be thrown out of town and stoned to death. Joseph did not want to be the father of an illegitimate child and wanted to "divorce her quietly" (Matthew 1:19).

Mary had her share of worries—as you and I all do. While she was better than we may ever be, she had more troubles than we'll probably ever know. There's a down side to all this honor. The prophet Simeon told Mary that "you yourself a sword will pierce" (Luke 2:33). So much for being May Queen!

For some, the perfection she experienced can feel like a put-off or barrier. Most of us can't slam-dunk like Shaquille O'Neal,

speedskate like Dan Jansen and Bonnie Blair or capture a Nobel prize in chemistry, physics or literature. Yet that doesn't keep us from spending hours following Olympic events on television, rooting for sports stars in every season and preparing for our own careers with serious study just as Nobel prizewinners have done before us. We aspire to achievement in other areas and need a spiritual ideal to inspire us as well.

"We all want to identify with people we like and admire," acknowledges Father Roten, "but in order for us to grow, we need more than only identification. We need ideals that challenge us to be somebody

better.... Mary is the blueprint of what human beings should be, or at least are invited to become," he says.

This is a helpful perspective for us who are still interpreting the blueprint of a life under construction. Affection for Mary, admiration of her and imitation as well: These will shape a life like that of Mary's son Jesus. That's good enough for me. **YU**

Lara Schmitt will be graduating this month from Xavier University with a bachelor's degree in English. After an August wedding, she and her husband will live in Muncie, Indiana. She is pursuing a career as a desktop publisher and editor. She is grateful to the Rev. Johann Roten for his assistance with this Update.

Violence at Home?

By Lynn Klammer

- **q.** Mary appears a lot in the world, it seems.
- Why does she do this?
- Should we hope for apparitions? **a.** Mary often appears on earth to warn us about our sins and to advise us how to change our ways and get back on track. She also has appeared to instruct us how to pray to her and to tell us how much she cares about us. As for apparitions, be clear about your hopes and expectations. While it is wonderful to have Mary appear on earth, there have been many false stories of apparitions. We must take care not to let our hope for apparitions distract us from the only reason they ever occur—to lead us to God. People can get so caught up in visions of Mary that they lose sight of the vision of Christ. I have been told that it is better to be open to apparitions than to hope for them.

WHEN WE HONOR MARY

Below are the more widely celebrated feasts of Mary in the Church. Can you match the date with the feast?

Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God	March 25
Annunciation	August 15
Visitation	January 1
Assumption	May 31
Immaculate Conception	September 8
Nativity of Mary (Mary's birthday)	December 8

And for the bonus question, which three feasts are Holy Day of Obligation?

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