

PRAYER TO THE VIRGIN MARY

BACKGROUND READING



God sent His Son into the world to save us from our sins. In order for Jesus to be born a human being like us in all things except for sin, He needed to be born of a human woman. Because God has given each and every human person free will, He needed to find a woman who would willingly cooperate with His Divine Plan. Humankind had already said no to God when it had rejected Him in Adam and Eve's sin. God found in Mary the woman who would say yes to His plan for the Savior to be born. Through her yes, Mary becomes for us the perfect example of cooperation with God's will through the life of prayer.

The Mother of God

Because God is outside of time, He knew that Mary would be the woman to cooperate with His Divine plan to bring the Savior into the world so that He might redeem all people from their sins. Therefore, God gave Mary a special and unique grace that preserved her from the stain of Original Sin. This does not mean that Mary, as a human person, did not need the Redemption that her Son would accomplish for the world. Like all of us, she needed to be redeemed; however, God applied

to her the Redemption that would be won by her Son's Death and Resurrection before the moment of her conception. In this way Mary was conceived in her mother's womb free of Original Sin. We call this truth, held from the early teachings of the Church Fathers and proclaimed a dogma of our Faith, the Immaculate Conception.

This special and unique grace was given to Mary because she was to become the Mother of God. Mary also, by the grace of God, remained free from every personal sin throughout her life. These graces prepared Mary to say yes to the angel when he came to her as God's messenger. When the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary, he acknowledged her privileged place in God's plan as he greeted her with the words, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!" (Luke 1:28, RSV). In order to be full of grace as the angel declared, Mary needed to be free from sin. It was right and fitting that the woman who would carry God in her womb for nine months should be full of grace.

The Handmaid of the Lord

The Archangel Gabriel's announcement to Mary that she was to become the Mother of God is

called the Annunciation. Mary responded to the angel's news with wonder: "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" (Luke 1:34). She heard the words, but could not understand their meaning. Gabriel told her that the child would be conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and that her barren cousin Elizabeth was also with child: "For nothing will be impossible for God" (Luke 1:37). How strange and frightening this must have all been to the young woman—yet Mary replied with the complete submission of her will, saying, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

Mary's yes to the Father's plan is called her *fiat*. This is the first Christian prayer, and is the prayer of all Christians. Mary shows us that to belong to Christ is to trust ourselves totally to Him. Mary models for us the grace of faith—trusting God because we believe in who He is.

In this first Christian prayer, Mary calls herself the "handmaid" of the Lord. Mary is telling God that she is completely at His disposal, ready to do whatever He asks of her. In some versions of this Gospel the word "handmaid" is translated as "servant." Mary models for us the grace of total submission to the will of the Father. To be God's servant we must be willing to do whatever He asks of us. We must respond, each and every day of our lives, to God with our "Yes, be it done according to your word, O Lord." Prayer is one of the ways that we can discover what God is asking of us. By pursuing a relationship with Him, we become ready to respond to His call.

Our Mediatrix and Mother

If Mary had not said yes to the Father, then Jesus would not have been born. Because of this, Mary assumes a unique role in how God's grace

comes into the world. The Church calls Mary our mediatrix because she, in a very special way, brings our prayers before her Son. Another word that is similar in meaning is "intercessor," as we saw when we discussed the prophet Moses in a previous lesson. We see an example of Mary's intercession at the Wedding Feast at Cana. Mary asked Jesus to meet the needs of the bride and groom at the wedding when the wine ran out. Although Jesus' response was that His time has not yet come, He answered the request that Mary set before Him.

Jesus makes His mother, Mary, who is standing at the foot of the Cross, the Mother of the Church. The Gospel of John recounts this event: "When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold, your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his home" (John 19:26–27). Since its earliest traditions, the Church has held that in this encounter John represents all of redeemed humankind. Thus it can truly be said that Mary is the Mother of the Church and we can say that Mary is our mother.

Jesus invites us through the events at the wedding feast at Cana and at His Cross to bring our needs to Him through His mother. Although He does not need Mary to dispense His gifts to us, it is His will that we should ask Mary to pray for us. Therefore, we pray in the Hail Mary, "Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death."

Devotion to Mary

When the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary, he told her that her cousin Elizabeth, who was beyond childbearing years, was also with child, because nothing is impossible for God.

Mary's visit with Elizabeth, which is called the Visitation, is described in Luke 1:39–56. When Mary greets her cousin, Elizabeth exclaims, "Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Elizabeth explains that when Mary's voice reached her ears, the child in her womb leapt for joy. Mary responds with the beautiful prayer that we call the Magnificat. She proclaims that her soul magnifies the Lord, and that "from now on will all ages call me blessed." From the ancient Church to the present, Mary has been

honored with a unique devotion that is above that of all the angels and the saints. We do not adore Mary as we do God, but we do honor her, as her Son honored her, for her special and unique role in His plan of salvation. The liturgical feasts dedicated to Mary and the beautiful prayers, such as the Hail Mary, the Rosary, the Magnificat, and others, express this devotion to the Mother of God, who is our mother also. The Church encourages us to ask Mary to intercede for us, and to fly to her protection when we are in need or in danger.