

**MARY OUR MOTHER**  
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**Devotion to Mary**

Saint Paul says: “There is one Mediator, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”. (1 Tim 2:5)

What then is the place of Mary in the Universal Church, in the Maronite Church and in our lives? Is devotion to Mary simply a sentiment that can be put aside without hurting our faith or is she an essential part of the life of the Church and our Creed?

God has linked Mary to all of the Mystery of the Incarnation: the Redemption, the Eucharist, the distribution of graces, intercession and mediation. The Church of Christ is linked to all these mysteries and so too is Mary, Mother of the Church. To remove her would erase the Mystery of the Incarnation itself and go against the will of God and Christ Himself, who not only associated Mary with His plan of salvation but made her the proto-type of the redeemed Christian and an example for the whole Church, of which she is mother. Through her role representing humanity God took flesh and became man, like one of us.

To put Mary aside is anti-theological and anti-historical. By giving God flesh from her flesh, and bone from her bone, she made the Divinity appear and shine to mankind: “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that nursed you.” (Lk 11:27) But more blessed is she, because in an eminent way she “heard the Word of God and kept it.” (Lk 11:28) The sympathy of God toward mankind is incomplete without the

incomparable figure of Mary “who like Jesus is a dwelling place of the divine revelation.” (Louis Bouyer – *Le Throne de la Sagesse*.)

Mary gave birth to Jesus our Savior and was proclaimed at the Council of Ephesus (431) *Theotokos* (God bearer). However, sometimes we do not look deep enough to see that the Lord associated her, by the fact of her maternity, and in His great wisdom and mercy, to be a participant in an eminent way in His life, passion, death, resurrection and in the distribution of all graces.

### **Mother of the Redeemer**

Mary’s association with Christ the Redeemer is not only as mother of the baby of Bethlehem. The Encyclical of Pope John Paul II on Mary begins not with the words “Mother of Jesus,” or “Mother of God,” but *Mother of the Redeemer*, to show her role in the redemption, as an associate of her Son. In fact, Mary stood beneath the Cross. (Jn 19:25) “She suffered deeply with her only begotten Son and joined herself with her maternal spirit to His sacrifice, lovingly consenting to the immolation of the Victim to whom she had given birth.” (n.18)

The example of Abraham accepting to have his son Isaac sacrificed, is a figure of Mary. The Book of Genesis relates the dramatic story of the son whom God sent to Abraham and Sarah in their old age: in this son, Isaac, “all nations will be blessed.” (Gen 22:18) However, Abraham heard a voice asking that he give up his only son. Even when

Abraham is preparing to sacrifice his child out of obedience, he still believes that somehow God's promise will be fulfilled. (Gen 22: 1-19)

It was the same with Mary, except that her Son was not spared; yet, it is precisely in her Son's sacrifice that the promises of God are fulfilled! Abraham's faith constitutes the beginning of the old covenant; but Mary's faith at the Annunciation inaugurates the new. Catholic Tradition sees Mary's role in the redemption as two-fold. She is the *co-redemptrix* in that she cooperates indirectly and subordinately with her Son in the redemption, willingly devoting her whole life to the service of her Son, and suffering and sacrificing with Him beneath the Cross. She is also *mediatrix* of all graces because of her cooperation in subjective redemption, using her maternal intercession in the application of redemption's graces.

Jesus Christ is the only Mediator, but depending on Jesus, Mary can help us understand and reach the mediation of Her Son. Mary leads us to God. She is not the mediator that God has placed between Himself and mankind. On the contrary, Mary is the means He took so that the human race, through Jesus, can reach God directly.

There is only one mediator, Jesus Christ, and this mediator does not need to be completed by anyone. However, there is an essential element of the mediation of Christ, and that is Mary, who is "full of grace."

The mediation of Mary is intimately connected with the mediation of Christ because Mary is the mother of Christ and the spiritual mother of all people. Thanks to Our Lady, the mediation of Jesus is perfect from the human side. “The maternal duty of Mary toward men in no way obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power. All the saving influences of the Blessed Virgin on men originate, from the divine pleasure. They flow forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rest on His mediation, depend entirely on it and draw all their power from it. In no way do they impede the immediate union of the faithful with Christ.” (The Second Vatican Council decree on *The Church* no. 60)

No creature could ever be considered equal to the Incarnate Word and Redeemer, but just as the priesthood of Christ is shared in various ways both by sacred ministers and by the faithful, and the one goodness of God is in reality communicated diversely to His creatures, so too, the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude, but rather gives rise among creatures to a manifold cooperation which is but a sharing in this unique mediation. The Church does not hesitate to profess this subordinate role of Mary. She experiences it continuously and commends it to the hearts of the faithful, so that encouraged by this maternal help they may more closely adhere to “the Mediator and Redeemer.” (*The Church* n. 62)

At the Wedding of Cana in Galilee, Mary contributed to the beginning of Jesus’ miracles before His time had come. There she asked her Son to apply publicly the fruits of the Redemption, and she revealed Him to the world as Messiah, the Son of God. This miracle

pre-figured the Eucharist: a mysterious transformation. Water was changed to wine and the words of Mary echo for all eternity in the churches: “Do whatever He tells you.” (Jn 2) Mary also prefigures our Lord’s words “Do this in memory of me until I come again.”(*Anaphora* of the Twelve Apostles)

The Gospel’s description of the miracle at Cana outlines what is actually a “new kind of motherhood”, even before Jesus gives her to us at the Cross in the presence of John, a motherhood according to the spirit and not just according to the flesh. This new motherhood is Mary’s solicitude for mankind. “The maternity of Mary is like a ‘relation’ of inclusion of the Son in humanity, a ‘relation’ which contains in itself the possibility of our inclusion also in the Son.” (*Mother of the Redeemer*, n. 45) Mary is, therefore, in the plan of salvation and in human history, the one who accomplished a ‘recapitulation’ of Eve who brought shame. Mary in turn brought glory. This redemptive work is proper to the Holy Spirit in the plan of the Trinity. Thus, there is a special assimilation of Mary to the Holy Spirit.

The gesture at Cana has a symbolic value as well: her coming to the aid of people in need, yet at the same time bringing those needs within the radius of Christ’s messianic mission and salvific power. This is true mediation, for “Mary places herself between her Son and mankind in the reality of their wants, needs and sufferings --in the middle, that is to say, she acts as mediatrix not an outsider, in her position as Mother.” (*Mother of the Redeemer* n. 46)

Saint John of Damascus says of Mary: “You lived not for yourself, for you were not born for your own sake. You lived for God, for whose sake you came into this life so that you might serve the salvation of the whole world, that God’s will may be fulfilled, and that the Word might become flesh so that we might become divinized.”

### **Mary, the New Eve, Mother of the Living**

The Fathers of the Church often compared Adam and Eve to Jesus and Mary. As we know, Eve became the occasion of death for mankind, and through her, death came into the world. Mary on the other hand, became the occasion of life through whom Life Himself was born for us. Homage to Mary’s holiness took wings in the second century with the conviction of her role as the “new Eve” associated with Christ the “new Adam”. (Saints Justin and Irenaeus) Close to the new Adam, Mary is the new Eve, “It is not good for man to live alone, I will make a suitable companion to help him”. (Gen. 2:18) By her participation in the sufferings of Christ, Mary endured once again the pain of giving birth, but this time to a renewed and redeemed humanity, the fruit of the mystery of the Cross. (Rev 12: 2, Jn 9: 25-27) She suffered at the Cross because she sacrificed her Son to become our mother!

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel.” (Gen 3:15) This passage is fulfilled in Mary as we see in the Book of Revelation 12: 1-6 “she gave birth to a son destined to rule all the nations.” In many statues of Mary, she is often shown with a serpent at her

feet, symbol that she has defeated evil. In God's words to Eve and to the serpent, we find the opposite to be true with Mary.

### **Mary in our Maronite Church**

Our Syriac Aramaic Fathers speak openly of the seduction of Eve with its consequent ruin and destruction, and Mary's victory over sin, as she crushes the serpent and destroys death by bringing us the Author of Life. With her Son, Mary helps clothe our nakedness, and restores her ancestors and the whole human race with dignity.

The protagonists on one side are Eve (the Virgin) and Satan (an angel of darkness and a talking serpent), and on the other side, Mary (the Virgin) and Gabriel (an Angel of light, announcing divinity to Mary). The imprudence of Eve, meets the prudence of Mary. Eve, the Virgin, is deceived, and through her appears death and slavery. Mary, the Virgin, is chosen, and accepts her calling with her famous "let it be done to me according to Your word". (Lk 1) Through Mary comes life and freedom. She gives birth to Christ and His Mystical Body, the Church, for she is also Mother of the Church. Mary is all that Eve was not. She is Mother of the Redeemer.

No sound ecumenism can ignore the place of Mary in Redemption. Marian truths cannot be pushed to one side; they are not isolated Christian truths which concern Mary alone! She never stands alone, separated from Christ, just look at the Scriptures, Ephesus, or in the liturgy as it has been celebrated throughout the ages in the Eastern and Western Rites.

Christ is at the center of our faith, but He did not come among us without the “*Theotokos*”. God first requested her consent, and His Son came into this world thanks to her. Likewise, even now in glory, Jesus is not without His Mother, the Theotokos, who continues her motherhood for all who seek her intercession. (*Mother of the Redeemer*, n. 41)

This is the position of Mary in the Church in conformity with the divine plan of salvation. Maronites have built their devotion to Mary around the Syriac Aramaic Fathers such as Saint Ephrem – known as one of the best among the Fathers in his devotion to Mary, and on Saint James of Sarug and others who wrote abundantly concerning her role.

Devotion to Mary and the recourse of our Maronite people to her is found in the tradition of our forefathers and in the popular devotion of the faithful as well. Saint Ephrem said that he did not write anything except what he found in the tradition of the people, nothing from himself, yet he is the one who wrote most eloquently about Mary.

“For us Maronites, Mary is an inherited instinct, a glorious heritage of which we are so proud, part of our daily lives. She has been and is our Patroness, our Protection, our Consolation, our Queen and our beloved Mother.” I wrote these words after I read the book of Jesuit Fathers Goudard and Jalabert, *The Land and the Lady*, where it appears that there is no village nor home in Lebanon where you will not find her image. Even on the roadside you will see shrines to her honor.

We come to know the richness and beauty of our liturgical tradition when we celebrate her feasts and pray the liturgy in her honor. The oldest Anaphora, *Sharar*, which is used by Maronites and Chaldeans, has the invocation of Mary between the Consecration and the Epiclesis, precisely because she is so linked to the divine plan of salvation and to the Eucharist, the renewal of the Incarnation. The hymn *Ya Um Allah* (O Mother of God) was adopted by other Eastern Churches of the Middle East. It was even proposed to be the National Hymn of Lebanon when looking for a national anthem at the time of the Independence.

We have many morning and evening prayers devoted to Mary. Likewise, we cannot overlook the Rosary, which was introduced by the Maronites to the East and which has become part of our treasure. Moreover, we must not forget that most of the feasts of Mary began in the East and were brought to the West by monks. The many votives and offerings in our churches and shrines show the many graces that the Mother of God has granted.

### **Mary's Virtues**

Therese of Lisieux said: "it is good to speak about the prerogatives of Mary, but to help her be loved, we must show her as accessible, similar to us. Let us look in her life for the ordinary things which will attract us to her." Saint Augustine said if we want to obtain more graces from the saints, we must imitate them. There is a Latin proverb which says: "love finds equals or makes them equal."

The Lord who descended from heaven and died to redeem us had to give a perfect example of his complete victory by raising for us a model, a redeemed person of purity and holiness, showing us that His redemption is able to bring complete holiness and perfection of virtues. For that, He chose Mary, for while the other redeemed saints do not find this total perfection of virtues and/or complete holiness, “among all believers, she is like a ‘mirror’ in which are reflected, in the most profound and limpid way, the mighty works of God.” (*Mother of the Redeemer*, n. 25)

An example of the “fullness” of virtues is found in the one whom the angel greeted as “full of grace”. In her, we have been brought back to the purest state of Adam and Eve immediately after creation. In the Book of Proverbs we read “Wisdom fashioned herself a house.” (Chapter 9) These words were fulfilled when God in His Wisdom fashioned Mary as a marvelous example for mankind and creation. The Fathers speak of the virtues of Mary and they mention, before everything, her theological virtues of faith, hope and love. Then they add humility, chastity, poverty, obedience, patience and her spirit of prayer. We shall look below at each virtue individually.

### **Humility**

Saint Alphonse begins with her humility because humility is the foundation, the basis of every virtue. If we do not realize that we are empty, we will never feel the need to be filled by grace. What we have, we have by grace. We were naked and have been clothed.

“Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart,” Jesus said. (Mt 11:29) Mary is the point of encounter between the humility of God and man. In the presence of the angel Mary declared herself the handmaid, the servant of the Lord. When Elizabeth tries to praise her, she simply says that the Lord is the One who has gratified her: “my soul magnifies the Lord.” (Lk 1:46)

She did not tell Joseph she was to be the Mother of God, rather she left with haste to serve Elizabeth. In the public life of Jesus, when Mary came to see Him she stood outside. She did not consider that being His mother she had the right to enter. At the Cross she embraced the feet of Her Son condemned as a criminal. She claims her motherhood at the Cross, not Palm Sunday!

### **Charity**

The more a heart is pure and empties itself, the more it loves. Mary, with Jesus in hand, has been called by Saint Ephrem “fire, carrying Fire.” She has been compared to an eagle flying toward the sun (without being burnt) whose eyes are bathed in the light of the sun. Her days and nights were consumed for God and for her Son who was the Son of God. After the Resurrection she longed to meet Him again.

She loved the Father as a Daughter, the Son as a Mother and the Holy Spirit as a Bride. She is the Mother of Divine Love. In the mystery of Christ, she is present even before the creation of the world as the one whom the Father has chosen as Mother of His Son. And

what is more, together with the Father, the Son has chosen her, entrusting her eternally to the Spirit of Holiness. In an entirely special and exceptional way, Mary is united to Christ, and similarly she is eternally loved in this beloved Son, this Son who is one in being with the Father, in whom is concentrated all the glory of grace. (*Mother of the Redeemer*, n. 8)

### **Love for Neighbor**

One day Saint Catherine of Genova said, “O Lord you ask me to love my neighbor, but I do not want to love anyone but you.” The Lord answered: “the one who loves me has to love everyone I love.” Mary used to help others, even if she was not asked, for example, at Cana and also at the Visitation. However, her great love for us appeared most vividly when she accepted Jesus crucified for us. There, she became Mother of all believers.

Therese of Lisieux said “I will spend my heaven doing good on earth.” How much more has Mary repeated this and shows this in reality. It is through her that the Father gave us Jesus. Did she not stand between Jesus and the spouses of Cana to obtain for them material graces? How much more will she mediate for us to obtain our salvation? Through her example let us show mercy for all those who need our help.

### **Faith**

Faith is a gift from God but it is also a virtue, because it needs to be practiced. The harm Eve did with her refusal to believe, Mary repaired by faith. Elizabeth declared: “Blest is

she who believed that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled." (Lk 1:45) "Mary has become really present in the mystery of Christ precisely because she has believed". (*Mother of the Redeemer*, n. 25) This is the obedience of faith (Rom 1:5, Rom 16:26, 2 Cor 10: 5-6) which must be given to God who reveals. Mary uttered her *fiat* in faith when she entrusted herself to God without reservation and devoted herself as the handmaid of the Lord to the person and the work of the Son.

Mary's faith can also be compared to that of Abraham whom Saint Paul calls "our father in faith". (Rom 4:12) In the economy of salvation, Abraham's faith constitutes the beginning of the old covenant. Mary's faith at the Annunciation inaugurates the new. Just as Abraham "believed against hope" that he should become "the father of many nations", (Rom 4:18) so too Mary at the Annunciation believed that through the power of the Most High, and by the grace of the Holy Spirit, she would become the Mother of God's Son, and through Him to all generations. (Lk 1:35)

At the Annunciation Mary began her pilgrimage of faith. (*Mother of the Redeemer*, n. 28) Despite everything, she believed. From her voyage to Bethlehem, where Christ was born in a manger, to her flight to Egypt, her return to Nazareth and the great silence of the hidden life there, the words of Simeon echoed in her heart, "and a sword will pierce your own soul too." (Lk 2:35) From His crucifixion to His death, when He was placed in her arms after taken down from the Cross, she believed. She trusted the Word of God, like Abraham, and more than him, she obeyed in silence and with great hope, a mysterious

and sorrowful mother. She hoped against hope. “Through the mystery of the Son, the mystery of the mother is also made clear”. (*Mother of the Redeemer*, n. 39)

Faith calls for obedience and begets hope. Mary’s hope and trust through all her tribulations corresponded to her silent and steady faith. Even when she was pregnant and saw Joseph in doubt, she trusted God. At Cana she asked her Son for wine and then waited. Her obedience called her to see and accept all in her life as the will of God, trials as well! Mary is a woman of unshakeable faith, unwavering hope and uncommon love.

### **Chastity**

Mary preferred virginity to the dignity of motherhood, and it is only when she was reassured by the angel, that she accepted to be both virgin and mother. There are three ways to stay pure: fasting, prayer and fleeing from the near occasions of sin. Mary kept herself from all the opportunities that others had to be distracted from her chosen life of holiness and chastity. She left the house of Elizabeth before her elder cousin gave birth because she didn’t want to stay for all the following festivities. Her presence was no longer needed. Her desire was God and to do His will.

### **Poverty**

Her Son was born in poverty, He lived in poverty. When they had presented Jesus at the Temple, Mary and Joseph offered two turtle doves, the gift of the poor. (Lk 2:24) She married a carpenter! They were working people – the “working poor”. Poverty in itself is not a virtue, the real virtue is the love of poverty, that is, detachment. When she said, “My spirit rejoices in God my Savior,” there in God is her heart, her Lord and her all. Mary, although poor in this world, is rich in God.

### **Patience**

How much she waited for the fulfillment of the words of the prophet, that the Messiah “will reign over the House of Israel.” (Lk 1:33) For this she had waited all her life. She saw the beginnings of this reign in the Resurrection and at Pentecost, but she also witnessed the persecution of the nascent Church. Certainly she must have remembered the slaughter of the holy innocents all over again. (Mt 2:16-18) She knew and lived through the time when Stephen was martyred and the followers of Christ were persecuted. At the head of the persecution was Paul, whom she certainly had to later forgive. Her participation in the sufferings of her Son and His witnesses made her a martyr of patience. When she was standing at the foot of the Cross she consoled those afflicted. After His death, she lived with the Church through everything and then waited patiently for Her Son to call her, waiting for Him in this “valley of tears” until her own dormition and assumption into heaven, body and soul as the first fruits of her Son’s Resurrection.

### **Her Life of Prayer**

Jesus said to pray and never cease. (Lk 18:1) We are sure Mary prayed this way. Since the time she was a little girl she entered the Temple to serve, learn and pray. The Church applies to her the words of the Song of Songs: “Who is coming up from the desert?” (Song of Songs 8:5) The “desert” means silence and solitude, in which Mary spent her days meditating on the words of the angel, of Simeon the Prophet and of Anna, when she took her child into the temple to offer thanks. She also reflected on the words of Jesus in the Temple at the age of twelve. “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house.” (Lk 2:49) After this, the Evangelist Luke says: “He went down with them, and was obedient to them. His mother meanwhile kept all these things in her heart.” (Lk 2: 51) Mary was praying with the Apostles at Pentecost when the Spirit came upon the Church. According to tradition, Mary lived with John in Ephesus – can you imagine Mary at the Eucharistic table with John? She who gave us the Son in the flesh was with the Apostle as her Son became flesh once more in Eucharist. Mary’s was a life of reflection and prayer, doing “whatever he tells you.” (Jn 2)

### **Mary and the Eucharist**

The year 2005 was consecrated by Pope John Paul II, to the Eucharist, and the theme for the Maronite Annual Convention of that year was “Mary Mother of Life”. We know that in our Liturgy, the title, Mary the Mother of Light, dates to the first centuries. She is the dawn announcing and giving us the radiance of the Sun, to enlighten the darkness of our days and lives, and to guide us to salvation.

The term, Mother of Life, is also a title celebrated very early on by our Syriac Fathers, especially the great St. Ephrem. Every day during the Divine Liturgy, at the transfer of the offerings, the priest and people sing, “I am the Bread of Life says our Lord; from on high I came to earth so all might live in Me. Pure word without flesh I was sent from the Father. Mary’s womb received Me like good earth the grain of wheat”. Ephrem tells us that Eve gave us the bread of weariness, whereas the second Eve, Mary, the Bread of Refreshment.

Since the fourth century, the Syriac Churches celebrated three agricultural feasts in memory of Mary asking her to protect the seeds, bless the ears of wheat, and watch over the grapes, symbols of the Sacrament of Life. Today, more than ever, while we invoke her to protect the seeds we must also ask her to protect the unborn child in the womb of the mother.

In the three feasts for Mary, the Church prays that a heavenly dew would spread over the region where John wrote the book on the Virgin (Ephesus). The manna that God gives is called in the Holy Scripture, the “dew from above,” “the angels food.” Prayer was and is always highly Eucharistic and Marian.

The Eucharist is the extension of the Incarnation. Mary is the first redeemed. After the Ascension of the Lord she teaches us how to prepare ourselves, how to adore Christ in Holy Eucharist, how to receive Him, and how to thank God for this great gift. She used to

do this when she participated in the Eucharistic celebration of Saint John, who at the foot of the Cross became her adopted son.

Mary, Mother of Light, and Mother of Life watch over, protect and obtain for all gathered under your protection, the Eucharistic Manna, which nourishes and strengthens us on our way to the Promised Land!

### **Conclusion**

We have reflected on Mary in the Church, in our Maronite Rite, in our lives and in the Eucharist. We have been exhorted by the Fathers to imitate her. The more we respect the Mystery of the Incarnation, the Redemption, and the Church, the more we will honor the role that Mary plays in each of them, and in our lives as her faithful, yet sinful, servants.

Those who keep Mary outside their devotion to God must understand that she carries within her the Source of the Sacraments of the Church, the Sacraments of Salvation. Mary, the most perfect of human beings, carries God, as Scripture says: “Wisdom has built herself a house.” (Proverbs 9:1) Mary gave birth to the Son of God and lived intimately, like a loving mother with Him for thirty years, doing everything for His service. In the evenings alone what was their conversation? Carpentry? Good weather? Did she not know Jesus on a most intimate level?

Love for Him opened the eyes of John the Beloved when he entered the empty tomb and believed. How much more is this true for Mary, who saw the angel at the Annunciation, the shepherds, the three kings, heard the elders who spoke of Jesus in the temple, and at Cana, even though it was not yet His time and even though He told her “what is this you woman?” and she still went back and told the servers go to Him and “do whatever he tells you!”

In this valley of tears where we are in dire need, we invoke Mary, crying and shouting “Mary”, her response is always: “Jesus, Jesus”. At the end of the road Mary is standing, elevating and presenting her child, the Light of the World and the Life of all Creation!

The Servant of God, Bishop Fulton Sheen once said:

“Mary is the window through which our humanity first catches a glimpse of divinity on earth. Perhaps she is more like a magnifying glass that intensifies our love of Her Son and makes our prayer more bright and burning. He is the Sun, she is the moon. On dark nights we are grateful for the moon, when we see it shining we know there must be a Sun. So in this dark night of the world, when men turn their backs on Him, who is the Light of the World, we look to Mary to guide our feet, while we await the Sunrise!”

In Mary, Christ has applied all His merits and accomplished in her His promise for she is fully alive after her dormition. Let us then follow the advice of the Book of Proverbs: “Do not spurn your mother’s teaching. Bind them ever to your heart, tie them around

your neck, when you walk these guide you, when you lie down watch over you, when you wake, talk with you, for this principle is a lamp, this teaching a light...and a way of life". (Prov. 6: 20-23)

Mary, our Mother, pray for us now and at the hour of our death! Amen.