

The Essential Mary Handbook

**A SUMMARY OF BELIEFS,
PRACTICES, AND PRAYERS**

With a Glossary of Key Terms and
Cross-Referenced to the
Catechism of the Catholic Church

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SECTION ONE

Mary Today



The glories of Mary have been enshrined in the heart of the Church for two thousand years. She is part of the Scriptures and the liturgy, and a focus of the prayers of her earthly children. She has been honored in art, in poetry, and in song. She has been the subject of the writings of the ancient Fathers of the Church, and the teachings of the popes and the councils.

Mary also holds a secure place in the hearts of the faithful. She is the greatest of all the saints, the closest to Christ, the sinless and virginal Mother born without original sin and, indeed, free from sin her entire life. Mary serves as an outstanding example of virtue—of faith, hope, and love for God and for others.

Having conceived Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, she nurtured the son of God to adulthood and stood beside him throughout his ministry and his fulfillment of the plan of salvation. She sorrowed at the foot of the cross as her son died, she joyfully received the fact of his Resurrection, and she awaited with the rest of the disciples the inspiring flame of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

At the end of her life, Mary was taken up into heaven, body and soul, where she continues to intercede for her children on earth as our spiritual mother and as a model for us the highest level of human sanctity.

The Church, at the Second Vatican Council, reminds us that we ought to revere the memory of Mary because it was through her that the Son of God came into our history, and it urged that all devotion to Mary lead to Christ: “Let them rightly illustrate the duties and privileges of the Blessed Virgin which always refer to Christ, the source of all truth, sanctity, and devotion” (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, §67).

Because Mary should first and always lead us to Christ, the following sections discuss the Blessed Virgin Mary in her relationship to the Trinity—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

1. Mary and the Trinity

All human beings are made in the image and likeness of God (CCC §355–361). Mary is also a being of God’s creation (DCC §§53, 55, 56), but by virtue of her destiny as the Mother of the Son of God, she is the daughter of the Father, and the temple of the Holy Spirit.

The chapter on the Blessed Virgin contained in the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* begins by recalling that the mystery of salvation was planned and realized by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (DCC §52). In *Redemptoris Mater*, Pope John Paul II says: “In the salvific design of the Most Holy Trinity, the mystery of the Incarnation constitutes the superabundant *fulfillment of the promise* made by God to man *after original sin*, after that first sin whose effects oppress the whole history of man (*Redemptoris Mater* §11.1).

This same *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* chapter on the Blessed Virgin already mentioned concludes with the hope that the faithful will pray to Our Blessed Mother so “she, who aided the beginnings of the Church by her prayers, may...intercede before her Son in the fellowship of all the saints, until all families of people... may be happily gathered together in peace and harmony into one People of God, for the glory of the Most Holy and Undivided Trinity” (DCC §69).

Because of Mary’s essential involvement with the plan of salvation, any understanding of the Virgin Mary should be clearly linked to the activity of the Trinity. Our salvation unfolds within the framework of the Blessed Trinity because it was brought about by the God who created the covenant with the people of Israel, who sent his Son as savior in the fullness of time, and who through this Messiah redeemed us and distributed to us the adoptive fire of the Holy Spirit.

Despite Mary’s essential role as the mother of God, she herself is not a divine person. She is the mother of the divine person of the Son alone; she is not the mother of the whole Trinity. That very same divine being is at once the Son of God as to his divinity and the son of Mary as to his humanity.

Nevertheless, Mary is intimately involved in union with God in the Trinity. She achieved this union and involvement with God in the Trinity because of her steadfast faith, her resolute hope, and her deepest love. All human beings, as well, long for this same goal— union with the Trinity; this is what we call “heaven” where we experience communion with the Trinity and the Virgin Mary, the angels, and all the saints (CCC §1024).

2. Mary and God, the Creator-Father

In the New Testament, the Father is the architect of the plan of salvation. Christ referred every one of his works and actions back to him. God the Creator-Father is also the architect of Mary’s role in salvation. She is not outside the salvation plan of God the Father, but rather she owes her role in this great mystery to her Creator, to a free choice on his part, which Mary did not earn by merit or by any other means.

It is the Father who decided on Mary’s mission and the events of her life as they relate to our salvation. Mary was present in the mind of God from the very beginning. As the first reading for the feast of the Presentation of Mary says: “The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth” (Prov 8:22–23). The *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* puts it this way: “The Father of mercies *willed* that the Incarnation should be preceded by assent on the part of the predestined mother...” (DCC §56).

As well, Mary’s motherhood of Christ and of us can be seen as an expression of the motherly care of God, who in Isaiah is seen as both Father and Mother (Isa 49:15, 66:13). This maternal relationship with God resulted for Mary in an incomparable grant of sanctifying grace, which she received at the time of her Immaculate Conception in the womb of her own mother. And because of the grace of her divine motherhood, she is also the divinely adopted daughter of God. The Church in her Liturgy of the Hours for August 15 calls her the “Mother of her Creator” and Dante, in his *Divine Comedy*, appropriately has Saint Bernard call her “Daughter of your Son.”