

Class 8: Mary and the Saints: Witnesses of the Spirit

Overview:

What is the role of Mary and the saints for Roman Catholics? In ancient times, Mary was identified as the first faithful disciple of Jesus, and as the Mother of God. She was often called simply “the Virgin.” Later, she received titles like Our Mother of Consolation and Our Lady of Guadalupe. Mary has often been portrayed only as a submissive woman and rarely as the prophet described in *Luke* 1.46-55. Like a prophet who brings the word of God to the people, she is the one who carried Jesus in her womb and brought the Savior to the world. Christians are invited to carry the Word in their hearts and to give birth to Jesus’ presence.

We recognize as our heroes and heroines of the past the saints that the Church has canonized. The saints are vivid expressions of living the Gospel. Their lives provide an inspiration for contemporary Christians to be living witnesses of Christ. We ask these questions: How am I being called to be a saint for today? Who is a saint for me in my life? Who are the unrecognized saints in our midst? We recognize that all are called to holiness (“Universal Call to Holiness” can be found in the documents of Vat. II, *Lumen Gentium* V). Participants are encouraged to read the lives of the saints.

The participants come to an understanding that the veneration (not adoration: one adores God alone) of the saints is a worthwhile practice AS LONG AS the saints inspire us to also live as a disciple of Jesus and the Gospel message. The saints reveal the gospel life of faith, hope and love. A word of caution: it is important to recognize that each saint is a product of his or her time and culture. What was thought of as appropriate in their time and culture might not be suitable today. The kinds of discipleship we find in the saints are ALWAYS culturally and historically CONDITIONED. Veneration of the saints is not an end in itself, but a means toward holiness (*Lumen Gentium*, 39-42).

Vatican II. *Lumen Gentium* 52-69.

“Mary” in NDCS, 635-645.

“Saints” in NDCS, 846-850.

Butler’s *Lives of the Saints*.

Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints. Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for our Time*. NY: Crossroad, 1997.

CCC, #484-511. 954-962.

Core Content:

1. Define the difference between ADORATION and VENERATION. “Adoration is a total and absolute submission of one’s entire being. This is offered to God alone. Even images of Christ are venerated, not adored. This is true of all sacred images; they are venerated, not adored. (Chupungco, *What then is liturgy?* 225). Fundamentalist groups use Exodus 20.4-5 to attack the Catholic practices of veneration of statues.
2. Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and the saints are models of DISCIPLESHIP. Mary is the first disciple because she said “Yes” to the plan of God (Lk. 1.38). She carried Jesus in her womb, just as we should carry the Word of God in our hearts (or womb). (We nurture the Word and the Word nurtures us. We must give “birth” to the Word.)

3. The image of Mary is culturally conditioned by her titles or places of apparition: (titles): Mother of God, Immaculate Conception; (places): Our Lady of Guadalupe, Our Lady of Fatima, Our Lady of Lourdes, Nuestra Señora de Cobre. Culture defined. The role of culture in religious expressions.
4. Describe the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption: she was conceived without sin and was assumed body and soul into heaven. She is first and foremost the Mother of God, but she is also the mother of Jesus.
5. A great anxiety people have today is being forgotten after death. The communion of saints “in heaven” embraces the “living memory” of the deceased of all time. Since God is the foundation of all existence, God holds the memory of human life in divine consciousness. Every time we celebrate the Eucharist, the communion of saints celebrates also with us.
6. Local customs in the celebration of the saints. The liturgy of the Eucharist is always primary (summit and source of the Christian life) and devotions to the saints are always secondary. Need for proper perspective (SC 13 and 111). Sacred images direct attention to the Eucharist on the table, the baptismal font, and the community assembled for worship. (Chupuncgo, 224).
7. Use of sacred images of saints. Burning incense and candles are signs of veneration. These signs help us “to lift up our hearts.”

Core Content Development

Mary, a Model for the Church, a Source of Hope and Inspiration for Our Time (*Lumen Gentium* 52-69.)

The stories of Mary in both Matthew and Luke point to God’s mighty and loving action in history: the promise of a Messiah is being fulfilled, and God takes on human flesh. It is a kind of second Genesis, or creation story, that we find in the “God made human.” This is the main purpose of their writing about Mary. Mary’s images call us to two principle teachings of the faith: 1) the human nature of Jesus and 2) the nature of the Church.

Mary is a courageous woman of radical trust in God and who cooperated with God to bring about liberation (that is, salvation). Mary is a prophet: she is called by God to convey God’s Word to the world—not just in words, but in the Word made flesh through the power of the Holy Spirit. Mary is the “first disciple.” She took the Word in her heart and mind and it transformed her life. Mary is a model for us in her openness and trusting response to God’s call. God needed Mary’s consent to carry out God’s plan. Mary gave her consent in the face of great danger to herself.

What happens to Mary is a sign of what can happen to us-

At the Immaculate Conception:	We are filled with grace at Baptism
As Prophet & the First Disciple:	We listen to & radically trust God
As Mother:	We incarnate the Word in our daily lives
At the Assumption:	We are taken into the fullness of life with God

Mary's life shows us that God is on the side of the poor and oppressed. She alerts us to be surprised by God--who often chooses the nobodies, the "least" to be agents of the divine plan.

"To pray the Magnificat is to align ourselves with God's desire that the lowly be lifted up."

The Communion of Saints: We have Great Friends on our Way to Holiness

The communion of saints refers first of all to the graced living of those who are alive today. That's us!

The communion of saints stretches backwards and forwards in time crosses boundaries of language, culture, race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion and all other human differences, stretching into eternity.

The communion of saints is a "communion" because we are joined together by the Holy Spirit through "the bonds of love".

The whole community is working and moving toward the eschatological (end-time) fullness yet to come when Christ will be all in all. Together we are working to build up and complete the Body of Christ, to build the Kingdom, the Reign of God. When we say the "Our Father," we commit ourselves to be co-creators in the building of the Kingdom.

Vatican II renews "the call of the whole church to holiness" (*Lumen Gentium*).

The Eucharist is the center of the Church's public life. No devotion can substitute for it! Devotions are meant to be means to grow in greater faith, hope and love manifested in our daily lives.

Some Questions On Mary

What is the historical understanding of the virgin birth of Jesus?

The question of the virgin birth cannot be answered on historical grounds alone.

Faith here enters in. "Faith has to do with a different kind of knowledge, and awareness of God's gracious saving intent and action in the world, along with trust that this is the ultimate meaning of the universe and of our lives" (Elizabeth Johnson).

What do the accounts in the gospels of Matthew and Luke intend to say by means of the virgin birth and how the Church's tradition understands it?

"With the birth of Jesus God has made an entirely new beginning, completely independent of the laws of the world, establishing new hope in a situation in which humanity could no longer find a way out on its own."

"The Fathers of the Church interpret the "'*natus ex Maria virgine*' [born of the Virgin Mary] by using the phrase '*conceptus ex auditu*.'" [conceived by hearing]. This means that 'because Mary listened totally and with undivided attention to the Word of God and entrusted herself completely to it, this Word was able, through the Holy Spirit, to take on flesh in her. As one totally listening to the Word and accepting it in its totality, Mary received God's eternal Word in her womb' (Cardinal Walter Kasper).

What exactly is meant by Mary's perpetual virginity?

The Church teaches that Mary remained a virgin before, during and after the birth of Jesus.

Mary's physical, bodily, biological dimension is placed within the totality of her personhood, including her faith. This holistic understanding prohibits us from trying to fix in detail the physiological aspects of Mary's virginity at Christ's birth. It is not subject matter for the Church's faith (Cardinal Walter Kasper).

What do the Documents of the Second Vatican Council say about Mary?

In *Lumen Gentium* emphasis is placed on her maternity through which the Redeemer entered the world, and on her faith that led her to creatively respond to the call of God. Mary's pilgrimage of faith led from the invitation of the announcement of Christ's birth, to the cross on Calvary, to upper room at Pentecost. The reality of her life is intertwined with the great events of the coming of salvation.

What place do Mary and the Saints have in the Church's public worship?

Vatican II placed the Eucharist at the center of the Church's public life and Mary and the saints as part of the praying community. Mary and the saints intercede for us on our journey of faith and love.

What are the meanings of the Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption?

The *Immaculate Conception* witnesses to the grace of God freely offered without merit to every human being who comes into the world, a grace that is always more powerful than sin (we can call this "original grace," as opposed to "original sin"). Mary was uniquely blessed at the onset with the gift of grace. In German, "Mary's be-gracing" (US Bishops, "Behold Your Mother" #102).

The Church teaches that Mary was assumed, body and soul into heaven. The *Assumption* is a figure of the Church as perfected through union with Christ. Mary's assumption is a preview of our own (*Catholic Catechism*, 966).

Questions:

- Why does the image of Guadalupe grab the imagination so much?
- Is it possible to apply the Mary's Song, the Magnificat, (Lk. 1. 46-56) to our border reality?
- Who is your favorite saint? Why? Do an Internet research, with pictures, of your favorite saint.
- Who are some of the saints of our time? (Dorothy Day? Archbishop Romero? Cesar Chavez?)
- Who are the saints in your life and in your time? (Grandmother? Neighbor? Friend? Teacher? Co-worker?)

Bibliography

Catechism of the Catholic Church, # 484-411; 954-962

Elizabeth Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003.

Mary Ann Zimmer, ND, *Mary 101: Tradition and Influence*. Ligouri Press, 2010

The Magnificat

My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
For he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
According to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

The New Oxford Annotated Bible: NRSV. Fourth Ed.