



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

MARY, MOTHER OF GOD- January 1st 2022

Readings: Numbers 6: 22-27, Psalm 66, Galatians 4: 4-7, Luke 2: 16-21

Since we are technically still in the feast day, I am taking the liberty of preaching on the title - Mary Mother of God. It is good to be reminded once a year of this extraordinary title of Our Lady, one that rolls off the tongue as often as we recite the invocatory prayer of the Hail Mary. But it is worth reminding ourselves, briefly, both of its importance and its tumultuous history.

What those who have chosen to live outside the fold of Catholic Orthodoxy usually are unaware of is the fact that all definitions of Mary are in place, not primarily to glorify her but to assure the Church of the central claims of Jesus Christ, Son of God, Second Person of the Trinity made Man.

In 431 the third great Ecumenical Council of the Church met in Ephesus to discern this title. At the summons of the Emperor Theodosius II, the bishops of the Universal Church gathered to hear the case put by the well - meaning Patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius, that Mary should not be designated 'Theotokos' – God Bearer/Mater Dei/Mother of God – but rather Christotokos, the Christ bearer/Mother of Christ.

Nestorius arrived thinking that his position was a slam-dunk, no-brainer. After all no-one would deny that Mary was the mother of the Christ,

Jesus, whereas to call her God-Bearer/Mater Dei was an absurdity because it implied that she was the origin of the divine. Enter Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria, who fiercely pointed out that if you went down that road you were artificially dividing Christ into His two natures of Human and Divine so that they effectively operated separately in denial of the hypostatic union. Though Cyril did not say so, the long end of the position of Nestorius was to transform the Incarnation from God becoming Man into a sort of ‘Ghost in the Machine’ theology, the divine not truly participating in the humanity but operating as a dispassionate puppet master. Such a decision would have voided the possibility of salvation in Christ.

If He is not fully human He cannot represent us.

If He is not fully divine He cannot save us.

Two natures – *One* person.

So, on an apparent technicality over language, hangs the fate of Christendom.

Nestorius, who had originally come up with the title ‘Christ bearer’ as a compromise between the Theotokos lobby and the refuseniks who wouldn’t use the title, was outraged to find his solution condemned. As if that were not enough, he was given the option of graciously ceding to the declared orthodoxy of Theotokos or losing his job. He held to his view and was duly sacked and excommunicated and condemned as an heretic.

Why does all this matter? Well, in spite of the modern obsession with seeing doctrine and dogma as somehow negative, it is of course what ensures our coherence and the central truths of the Faith and the credal formulae. (No-one would think of arbitrarily changing chemical formulae or mathematical formulae without expecting severe consequences).

Nestorius just didn't get it which, of itself, would not have mattered overmuch. But the problem with *Nestorianism* is that, sadly, it did not go away.

At this time, the Church of the East was not involved in this controversy. It was a theological dispute within the Roman Empire.. It was several years later and even after the death of Nestorius in 451 A.D. that the Christians of the Persian Empire heard about the controversy. They decreed that the stand taken by Nestorius was in agreement with the view always maintained by the Church of the East. Furthermore, as a result of the persecution of the followers of Nestorius, many had to flee from the now Christian Roman Empire and found refuge among the followers of the Eastern Church. The headquarters of this Church, Ctesiphon, the capital of Persian, Parthian and Sassanian empires for 800 years was at a strategic place on both banks of the River Tigris, the centre of travel between Europe and Asia. By the middle of the sixth century, the Nestorian Church had spread into Egypt, Syria, Arabia, Mesopotamia, Persia, India, Ceylon, China, and Mongolia. By the end of the eleventh century, this Church was the single largest Christian denomination at that time and is said to have outnumbered the Greek and Roman Churches combined.

As if this were not enough damage to the unity of Christendom a more destructive power was thence to be unleashed by the legacy of the recalcitrance of the heretic Nestorius.

Travelling with his merchant uncle along the trades routes dominated by this divinity –lite 'Christianity' was a young boy whose rewrite of Hebrew Scripture and redesignation of Jesus as merely a human prophet would light the fuse of war and conquest for the ages to come. For the founder of Islam heard and imbibed the Nestorian version and was therefore astonished, disappointed and angered when his reworking of the ancient themes of Jewish and Christian teaching (marinated in Arab

nationalism) was overwhelmingly rejected by the orthodox of both faiths. Had Nestorius accepted his humiliation and the judgement of the Church who knows what history might have been spared.

Orthodoxy can be measured by that simple phrase, so often on the lips of the faithful, 'Hail Mary full of grace, blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, *Mother of God*, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.'