

The Four Marian Dogmas

Doctrine vs. Dogma

In general, doctrine is all Church teaching in matters of faith and morals. Dogma is more narrowly defined as that part of doctrine which has been divinely revealed and which the Church has formally defined and declared to be believed as revealed.

The term “doctrine” can be used generally to refer to all of the Church’s teachings. In addition, we can say that dogma is a subset of doctrine — all dogmas are doctrines, but not all doctrines are dogmas. A doctrine is a teaching of the universal Church proposed as necessary for belief by the faithful. Dogmas, properly speaking, are such teachings that are set forth to be believed as divinely revealed (Catechism, no. 88; cf. 891-892). When differentiating from dogma, we use the term “doctrine” to signify teachings that are either definitively proposed or those that are proposed as true, but not in a definitive manner (cf. Catechism, nos. 88, 891-92).

Can. 749 §3. No doctrine is understood as defined infallibly unless this is manifestly evident. This indicates a wider use of the term “doctrine,” because all dogmas are infallibly defined. Yet here it is indicated that there are doctrines which are not to be regarded as infallibly defined.

The Church’s magisterium exercises the authority it holds from Christ to the fullest extent when it defines dogmas, that is, when it proposes, in a form obliging the Christian people to an irrevocable adherence of faith, truths contained in divine Revelation or also when it proposes, in a definitive way, truths having a necessary connection with these. (CCC 88)

For instance, the Church’s teaching that Mary is the Mediatrix of All Graces, while this doctrine has been divinely revealed, it has not yet been—although could be—elevated to dogma. In *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, Dr. Ludwig Ott explains, “The doctrine of Mary’s Universal Mediation of Grace based on her co-operation in the Incarnation is so definitely manifest in the sources of the faith, that nothing stands in the way of a dogmatic definition” (215).

For Catholics, there is an important difference between the teachings that we must believe, which are infallible and unchangeable (doctrine), and the rules that we must obey but which are changeable (disciplines). Finally, there are areas where we are free to believe or not believe without offending against faith (theological opinions).

The magisterium can, in addressing the changing needs of the Church, change or modify a discipline or Church law which no longer seems to address a specific need, i.e., veils for women in Church or the 24-hour fast before Communion. The magisterium cannot change dogma or doctrinal truth which originates from the teachings of our founder, Jesus Christ, e.g., divorce, (Mt 5: 32) or homosexual activity (Rom 1:18-32 and 1 Tm 1:10).

No formally defined dogma or formally taught doctrine has ever been reversed or contradicted by any later teaching. Indeed, truth cannot contradict truth. Doctrines and dogmas never proclaim anything “new” about the faith. Over time and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church comes to an ever-deeper and fuller understanding and expression of the same essential truths (Catechism, no. 66).

The Four Marian Dogmas

The Four Marian Dogmas

There are four dogmas stating Mary's personal relationship with God and her role in human salvation.

1) Divine Motherhood

Mary's divine motherhood was proclaimed at the Council of Ephesus in 431.

Various names are used to describe Mary's role as mother of Jesus. She is called "Mother of God" which translates the more accurately stated greek term "Theotokos" or "Birthgiver of God."

The Council of Ephesus (431) attributed to Mary the title, Mother of God. This needs to be read against the Council's declaration that in Christ there are two natures, one divine and one human, but only one person. Indeed, according to the Council the holy virgin is the Mother of God since she begot according to the flesh the Word of God made flesh. This decision was further explained by the Council of Chalcedon (451) which says with regard to Mary's divine motherhood:

"...begotten from the Father before the ages as regards his godhead, and in the last days, the same, because of us and because of our salvation begotten from the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, as regards his manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten..."

Mary's Divine Motherhood was not the object of an independent or exclusive dogmatic declaration. The statement is embedded in texts defining the person and natures of Jesus Christ. Thus, the dogma of Divine Motherhood becomes an integral part of the christological dogma. This does not diminish its definitive and binding character. The dogma of Divine Motherhood is generally accepted by all Christian denominations.

The Four Marian Dogmas

2) Perpetual Virginité

The expression perpetual virginity, ever-virgin, or simply "Mary the Virgin" refers primarily to the conception and birth of Jesus. From the first formulations of faith, especially in baptismal formulas or professions of faith, the Church professed that Jesus Christ was conceived without human seed by the power of the Holy Spirit only. Here lies the decisive meaning of expressions such as "conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary," "Mary's virginal conception," or "virgin birth." The early baptismal formula (since the 3rd century) state Mary's virginity without further explaining it, but there is no doubt about its physical meaning. Later statements are more explicit. Mary conceived "without any detriment to her virginity, which remained inviolate even after his birth" (Council of the Lateran, 649).

Although never explicated in detail, the Catholic Church holds as dogma that Mary was and is Virgin before, in and after Christ's birth. It stresses thus the radical novelty of the Incarnation and Mary's no less radical and exclusive dedication to her mission as mother of her Son, Jesus Christ. Vatican II reiterated the teaching about Mary, the Ever-Virgin, by stating that Christ's birth did not diminish Mary's virginal integrity but sanctified it. The Catechism of the Catholic Church ponders the deeper meaning of the virgin bride and perpetual virginity (499-507). It also maintains that Jesus Christ was Mary's only child. The so-called "brothers and sisters" are close relations.

The Four Marian Dogmas

3) Immaculate Conception

The solemn definition of Mary's Immaculate Conception is like Divine Motherhood and Perpetual Virginity part of the christological doctrine, but it was proclaimed as an independent dogma by Pope Pius IX in his Apostolic Constitution "Ineffabilis Deus" (December 8, 1854). Though highlighting a privilege of Mary it in fact stresses the dignity and holiness required to become "Mother of God." The privilege of the Immaculate Conception is the source and basis for Mary's all-holiness as Mother of God.

More specifically, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception states "that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege from Almighty God and in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, was kept free of every stain of original sin."

This dogma has both a "negative" and a "positive" meaning which complement each other. The "negative" meaning stresses Mary's freedom from original sin thanks to the anticipated or retroactive (here called preventive) grace of Christ's redemptive act. By the same token, the dogma suggests Mary's all-holiness. This "positive" meaning is the consequence of the absence of original sin. Mary's life is permanently and intimately related to God, and thus she is the all-holy.

Although difficult to explain, original sin provokes disorderliness in thought and behavior, especially with regard to the primacy of God's presence in our life. Consequently, in declaring Mary immaculately conceived, the Church sees in Mary one who never denied God the least sign of love. Thus, the dogma declares that from her beginning Mary was exceptionally holy and in constant union with the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit.

The Four Marian Dogmas

4) The Assumption

This marian dogma was proclaimed by Pope Pius XII on November 1, 1950 on his Encyclical *Munificentissimus Deus*.

A distinction needs to be made between Ascension and Assumption. Jesus Christ, Son of God and Risen Lord, ascended into heaven, a sign of divine power. Mary, on the contrary, was elevated or assumed into heaven by the power and grace of God.

The dogma states that "Mary, Immaculate Mother of God ever Virgin, after finishing the course of her life on earth, was taken up in body and soul to heavenly glory." This definition as well as that of the Immaculate Conception makes not only reference to the universal, certain and firm consent of the Magisterium but makes allusion to the concordant belief of the faithful. The Assumption had been a part of the Church's spiritual and doctrinal patrimony for centuries. It had been part of theological reflection but also of the liturgy and was part of the sense of the faithful.

This dogma has no direct basis in scripture. It was nonetheless declared "divinely revealed," meaning that it is contained implicitly in divine Revelation. It may be understood as the logical conclusion of Mary's vocation on earth, and the way she lived her life in union with God and her mission. The assumption may be seen as a consequence of Divine Motherhood. Being through, with, and for her Son on earth, it would seem fitting for Mary to be through, with, and for her Son in heaven, too. She was on earth the generous associate of her Son. The Assumption tells us that this association continues in heaven. Mary is indissolubly linked to her Son on earth and in heaven.

In heaven, Mary's active involvement in salvation history continues: "Taken up to heaven, she did not lay aside her salvific duty... By her maternal love she cares for the brothers and sisters of her Son who still journey on earth" (LG). Mary is the "eschatological icon of the Church" (CCC 972), meaning the Church contemplates in Mary her own end of times.

The definition of the dogma does not say how the transition from Mary's earthly state to her heavenly state happened. Did Mary die? Was she assumed to heaven without prior separation of soul and body? The question remains open for discussion. However, the opinion that Mary passed through death as her Son did, has the stronger support in tradition.

Glorified in body and soul, Mary is already in the state that will be ours after the resurrection of the dead.