

CLIFF NOTES

by Fr. Clifford Smith

Virgin Mary: Theotokos, Mater Dei, Mother of God?

The title **Mother of God** comes from the Latin **Mater Dei**, which in turn comes from the Greek **Theotokos**. In Catholic theology **Virgin Mary** is the mother of Jesus Christ, the Son and divine Logos (*Word*) of God. She conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and gave birth to Jesus Christ. The above titles for Mary stem from the Third Ecumenical Council held in Ephesus in 431 AD. Patriarch Nestorius taught that the Virgin Mary gave birth to a man, Jesus Christ, not God the Logos, the Second Person of the Trinity. The Logos only dwelt in Christ, as in a Temple, and Christ, therefore, was **Theophoros**: the "*Bearer or Carrier of God.*" By extension, the Virgin Mary should only be called **Christotokos** ("*Birth Giver of Christ.*") The Council denounced Nestorius' teaching as erroneous, and approved the title **Theotokos** ("*Carrier or Birth-giver of God.*") for Mary. The title **Theotokos** was not given to honor Mary but to protect the identity of Christ as both fully divine and fully human from the moment of His conception. Ultimately even Nestorius accepted this as Church doctrine.

From the Council of Ephesus:

"We confess, then, our lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God perfect God and perfect man of a rational soul and a body, begotten before all ages from the Father in his godhead, the same in the last days, for us and for our salvation, born of Mary the virgin, according to his humanity, one and the same consubstantial with the Father in godhead and consubstantial with us in humanity, for a union of two natures took place. Therefore we confess one Christ, one Son, one Lord. According to this understanding of the unconfused union, we confess the holy virgin to be the Mother of God because God the Word took flesh and became man and from his very conception united to himself the temple he took from her" (Formula of Union [A.D. 431]).

Even Martin Luther wrote, "*She is rightly called not only the mother of the man, but also the Mother of God. . . . It is certain that Mary is the Mother of the real and true God.*"

The difficulty is that the Latin **Mater Dei** and the English **Mother of God** are imprecise translations of the Greek **Theotokos**, in that *mother* or *motherhood* has a wider range of meanings than *God-bearer* or *God Carrier*, and has consequently can lead to misunderstanding.

Calling Mary the *Theotokos* or the *Mother of God* (**Μητηρ Θεου**, or **meter theou**, in Greek) was never meant to suggest that Mary was coeternal with God, or that she in any way existed before Jesus Christ or God existed, nor is she the mother of the Trinity, of God the Father, or the Holy Spirit.

From **Pope Benedict XVI** Wednesday, 2 January 2008:

Theotokos ... This title highlights the fact that Christ is God and truly was born of Mary as a man: in this way his unity as true God and true man is preserved. ... Desiring to safeguard the full humanity of Jesus, several Fathers suggested a weaker term: instead of the title Theotokos, they suggested Christotokos, "Mother of Christ"; however, this was rightly seen as a threat to the doctrine of the full unity of Christ's divinity with his humanity. On the one hand, therefore, after lengthy discussion at the Council of Ephesus in 431, as I said, the unity of the two natures - the divine and the human - in the Person of the Son of God was solemnly confirmed and, on the other, the legitimacy of the attribution of the title Theotokos, Mother of God, to the Virgin.

Mary as Mother of God is celebrated by the Church Universal on January first every year as a Holy Day of Obligation.