

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

CATHOLIC APOLOGETICS 101

Mary, the Mother of God

Many people mistakenly think that Catholics deify Mary because of the Church's title for her, "Mother of God." In reality, this title has very little to do with Mary and a lot to do with Jesus' divinity.

One of the great tasks for Christian leaders in the first few centuries of the Church was to safeguard the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. In the fourth century, a priest named Arius began teaching that Jesus was not equal to God, but the highest creature that God had ever created. As others began believing Arius, the Emperor Constantine called for a Church council to settle the issue. Bishops from around the world met in Nicaea (in Turkey) in 325 A.D. to concretize the teaching about the nature of Jesus Christ. Seeing that Arius was wrong, the bishops included a new word in the creed to better explain Jesus' relationship to the Father. The word was *homoousios*—"of the same substance" or "one in being." They declared that Jesus was not a "creature" of God, but "begotten, not made, one in being with the Father."

Despite the Church's declaration, some of the bishops who supported Arius swayed the opinions of following Emperors, who made life very difficult for the bishops and priests who believed that Jesus was One with the Father. The tireless work of many people helped to keep the Church on track. Eventually, in 381 A.D., the Council of Constantinople reaffirmed the earlier teaching that Jesus is fully human and fully divine—one with the Father.

At nearly the same time, a discussion began in the Church as to whether or not Christians could legitimately call Mary *Theotokos*, or "God-bearer." Some of the leaders of the Church did not want people to become confused about Mary's humanity by essentially calling her the "Mother of God," while others thought that the title would safeguard the unity of Jesus' human and divine nature. The discussion came to an end at the Council of Ephesus, in 431 A.D., when the Church declared that Mary could rightly be called the "Mother of God," not because she contributed to the divine nature of Jesus, but because she is the mother of his human nature.

By calling Mary the "Mother of God," the Church sought to safeguard the divinity of Christ amidst those who were challenging whether or not He was equal to God. Today, we continue to use the title, "Mother of God," to explain Mary's role in salvation history as she bore Jesus Christ, Who is God. The title is not intended to confuse people about Mary's nature, but rather, reaffirm Sacred Scripture:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.