

# Mary, Full of Grace: Dogmas, Devotions and Implications

***Jomin Joseph Nirappell***

Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune 411014, India

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The title ‘full of grace’ was the starting point of defining Marian dogmas and other titles attributed to Mary. The Marian Dogmas are given to us by the Church to help us better understand our relationship with our Creator. It is important to remember that these teachings about Mary’s Immaculate Conception, her Perpetual Virginity, her Divine Motherhood, and her Assumption, must always be interpreted within the context of the more fundamental teachings of the Church about God.

## 2.1 Marian Dogmas

When discussing the dogma of Immaculate Conception, an implicit reference may be found in the angel’s greeting to Mary. The angel Gabriel said, “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you” (Lk 1,28). Mary must have been in a state of sanctifying grace from the first moment of her existence in order to be called full of grace. In *Ineffabilis Deus*, the bull in which Pope Pius IX proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, “full of grace” read in the Tradition, as the surest foundation in favour of the dogma itself. This Marian dogma does not say the angelic greeting is a proof for proclaiming it. The dogma clearly says that

Mary was preserved from sin ‘in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, our Saviour’. This is just what the dogma of the Immaculate Conception holds: “that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin.” The biblical understanding of grace is that it takes away sin (Eph 1,6-7). Mary had been fully graced means that she was in a state of perfect sanctity by divine grace for her divine and virginal maternity.

The second part of the angelic salutation, ‘the Lord is with you’ is a formula found many times in the Old Testament. Often this formula is used in the issuance of a command that is difficult to accomplish if left to oneself (Ex 3,12; Josh 1,9; Judges 6,12).<sup>1</sup> Why the vocation to maternity is a difficult mission here? Mary has to conceive and bring forth virginally the Son of the Most High.<sup>2</sup> For this it is indispensable that the Lord is with her.

By reciting daily *Hail Mary*, we may not think of the profound significance of the new name with which Mary is greeted by angel Gabriel. It is important to note that no one in salvation history has ever been addressed with this unique title. With this unique name, God prepares Mary for her unique role and mission any woman ever embraced in history viz., to be the mother of His Son in the plan of salvation. The Dogma of Mary’s Divine Motherhood was officially proclaimed by the Church at the Council of Ephesus in 431. In this doctrine, she is called “Mother of God” which is a translation of the Greek term Theotokos, which literally means “God-Bearer.” The title, *full of grace* is apt for the woman who is destined to become the Mother of God. “‘The fullness of grace’ indicates all the supernatu-

ral munificence from which Mary benefits by being chosen and destined to be the Mother of Christ” (The Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 9). *Lumen Gentium* appropriately recalls this when it affirms: “The Virgin of Nazareth is hailed by the heralding angel, by divine command, as ‘full of grace’” (LG, n. 56). God granted her the perfect and lasting grace for her vocation as the Mother of God.

The very wording of the dogma of Assumption has in it the other Marian dogmas.<sup>3</sup> The dogma states that Mary is assumed, body and soul, into heavenly glory. Grace means a participation in the nature and life of God. Here in Mary we can see the divine perspective on what human life is destined to be. Surely Mary is our sure sign and hope in a grace-filled life.

## 2.2 Marian Devotions

The purpose of all Marian devotions is to help us love God more. Therefore, we are encouraged to ask Mary to pray for us as we continue our spiritual journey through this life in hope that we too will remain open to God’s grace and be more conformed to His will.

We have to avoid extremes in our veneration of Mary. In the words of Jacob Parappally, “The images of Mary that have emerged in the last twenty centuries oscillate between extremes. On the one extreme we find an apotheosis of Mary, making her a goddess with divine attributes challenging the traditionally communicated male image of God who supports patriarchal and hierarchal systems with their pervasive and dehumanising elements which would not let women to unfold themselves as humans...On the other extreme there is another image of Mary, who was just an instrument of God so that God could enter into history as a

human. It could have been anybody else. Mary happened to be that medium. Nothing more and nothing less!”<sup>4</sup> Mary is not a mother Goddess.<sup>5</sup> She is the mother of God as clearly stated by the council of Ephesus in 431. She is not equal to Jesus. The tendency to make her equal to Jesus and praise her more loving and compassionate than God is clearly an aberration of true Marian devotions. Fathers of the Church and the ecclesiastical tradition were very careful in avoiding this kind of exaggerated and disproportionate devotion to Mary. She has to be given the right place in our devotion as the one who is uniquely called by God as ‘full of grace’. Mary, full of grace, is an icon of belonging to God alone and participating in divine life which is a gratuitous gift from God and to which all humans are called to.

Neither an exaggerated devotion to Mary nor the rejection of the due honour to Mary as Mother of God, full of grace and pre-eminent member of the Church<sup>6</sup> can be accepted. Pope Paul VI in his apostolic exhortation *Marialis Cultus* (1974) gives the following guidelines for a proper and balanced Marian devotion<sup>7</sup> with the title “Four Guidelines for Devotion to the Blessed Virgin: Biblical, Liturgical, Ecumenical and Anthropological”: a) Devotion to Mary must be rooted in the Scripture and reflect the basic Christian message. b) It should not replace the liturgy but must be harmonized with it. c) It must be ecumenically sensitive in the sense that it should avoid extreme and disproportionate devotions. d) The negative images of Mary (her passive role and submissiveness) are not to be focused too much but her positive and inspiring images must be highlighted.

The image of Mary, full of grace is the source of all other NT images of Mary. This image made her the Mother of God in God’s plan, the most perfect disciple of Jesus, an active co-worker in the mission of Jesus, the pre-eminent

member and model for the Church. She, being full of grace, symbolizes the life and destiny of every human person who is disposed and open to God's grace.

### 3. Theological and Anthropological Implications

Mary, Mother of God and our celestial mother, who experienced the plenitude of grace, is a model for us to experience and respond to God's grace in our day today life in many ways:

- **Become a gift for others:** Mary is grace-filled not due to any merit in her but by the gratuitousness of God. Likewise, who we are and what we possess are gifts freely given by God, our loving Father. Like Mary we are called to share the gifts with others.
- **Enable the grace.** Mary's reception of grace was not passive. She responded to the grace of God with her *Fiat* (Lk 1,38) and cooperated actively in the unfolding of divine plan with complete dedication. We have to imitate Mary in her active cooperation to the divine plan and mission of Jesus in conformity to the will of God.
- **By the grace of God I am what I am:** In Mary, full of grace, God has given humanity a model of what it means to be human in the eyes of God. St. Paul rightly affirms, "By the grace of God I am what I am" (2 Cor 12,9). Mary's story is a story of grace and faith as narrated in the episode of annunciation (Lk 1,26-38). Her story begins with the word *grace*, with the divine greeting 'full of grace'. This does not of course downplay the outstanding personal value of the Blessed Virgin. Rather, Luke wishes to present Mary as the pure fruit of God's goodwill. We are pure fruits of God's graciousness. For every human being there is grace, the free

election of God from the beginning of one's existence. Grace is the first principle of human existence itself. Luke clearly says that everything in Mary derives from God's grace. God's free and gratuitous choice and gift makes Mary what she is. Mary is 'full of grace' not because of her merit or human claims but because of God's benevolence and sovereign grace.

- **Like Mary, Church is our grace-filled mother.** Mary is identified with daughter Zion, with the people of God. Everything said about the *ecclesia* in the Bible is true of her, and vice versa. The Church learns concretely what she is and is meant to be by looking at Mary like a mirror. As from Mary, full of grace, Jesus was born; from grace-filled parents graceful children are born. A right attitude towards church and family life. The more we become a fitting habitation for God, daughter Zion, the more we are the Church, a grace-filled mother.
- **Mary full of grace is model of personal holiness.** Living a grace filled life means to experience the unmerited divine assistance of God so that we can live a life free from sin. This is the reason why St. Paul in his letters mentions several times that the discovery of grace implies conversion (Rom 6,1-2,15; Rom 2,4; 2 Cor 6,1). A real participation in the nature and life of God requires from our part an active response to God's grace, a holy life. In S. Jayard's words, "When we realize that God wanted Mary to be totally sinless to bring forth Jesus into the world, we must remind ourselves that the same God like us also to be equally sinless, as we receive the same Jesus in the Eucharist."<sup>8</sup>
- **Devotion and imitation of Mary.** She is the model whom God gave to the humanity revealing his uncon-

ditional love for us and inviting us to participate in His own life. She is challenging and inspiring us to respond to this divine call as she did with free will and openness. This inspiring God-given image of Mary from the NT should challenge us positively from appealing to images of Mary which may satisfy only our emotional needs. The Church invites us to imitate Our Lady's virtues, so that, after her example and through her intercession, we may persevere in the grace of God.

- **Acknowledge that all is grace.** In the modern industrial and technological society we witness a culture which tends to eliminate the idea of God's grace from human life. To acknowledge that all is grace will increase our respect for human life and God's entire creation. We will stand for the dignity of life and protection of creation. It is the absence of grace-filled lives that promote sterilization, promiscuity and abortion, the rejection of the beautiful vocation of marriage and motherhood, violence against children and women in our contemporary society.
- **Gratitude must follow God's grace.** St. Paul rightly teaches us that we have to thank God for His grace: "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus..." (1 Cor 1,4). This is a fundamental religious attitude to acknowledge before God that we are dependent on God, for our being and having and to accept its gratuity. Mary, full of grace is our model in doing so in her famous *Magnificat* (Lk 1,46-55). She attributed to God's grace the great things that God was doing in her and took no merit for herself. Mary represents all humanity

in her attitude of total surrender, acceptance and gratitude before God's graciousness.

- **Rejoice!** God's grace was the source of joy which Mary expressed in her *Magnificat*. By participating in the divine life we cannot but be joyful.
- **Foster relationships.** Grace is a relational term. God's grace is essentially his unconditional love and relationship with us. If we are in the state of grace all our human relationships (family and marriage relationships, the relationship between students and teachers, the relationship among persons who lead a community life, our relationship with other religions etc.) will become mutually enriching and fruitful. This will foster our interconnectedness and rootedness in the divine.
- **Live gracefully.** We are invited to learn from Mary the lessons that mark a grace-filled life. Mary is presented in the Gospels as a model for faith (Lk 1,45), service (Lk 1,56; Jn 2,1-11), humility (Lk 1,48), obedience to God's will (Lk 1,38), and prayer life Lk 1,46-55; 2,51).  
Conclusion

Mary, *full of grace* from biblical, philological and theological perspectives can mean the following: a) Mary is processed and inserted by God into the unique state of grace to fulfil the promises to David. b) The messianic joy that was announced by the prophets to the people of Israel - the daughter of Zion - is now focused on one person, Mary *full of grace*, who in a way represents the desires and hopes of Israel. She is not addressed as a single individual but as the representative of God's people. c) God-given names are significant in Bible. *Full of grace* is a God-given singular status that Mary has in the salvation history. Mary is fash-



ioned by grace and is the recipient of grace to the point that she can be called full of grace. d) From a philological point of view the perfect passive participle would mean having been graced with a nuance of fullness. e) In relation to the noun *charis* in (Lk 1,30) the title indicates both the divine act and the intention of the divine act (i.e., to be the Mother of God) for which Mary has been graced. f) From a theological point of view grace is a relational term. So full of grace would mean that Mary lives her life freely and openly in total relation to God.

‘Full of grace’ is the matchless divine greeting directly addressed to Mary that encloses in itself like a seed the whole life and mission of Mary and indirectly addressed to the Church who mirrors mother Mary in discovering God’s grace. The truest identity of both Mary and the Church is in grace. As Mary needed to ponder over the meaning of this address the church also needs to reflect on and live out its identity as ‘full of grace’. Church’s reflection on Mary led to different Marian dogmas and devotions which could be understood and lived in relation to God, following the teachings of the Church. Both Mary and Church are living manifestations of God’s grace. So, it is a mistake to insist more on Mary’s grace than God’s grace. God is the giver of grace and Mary is the receiver of grace. So like St. Paul, each one of us can say ‘By the grace of God I am what I am’ (1Cor 15,10).

## Notes

- 1 Cf. IGNACE DE LA POTTERIE, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*, B. BUBY (Trans.), New York 1992, 21.
- 2 The Dogma of the Perpetual Virginity of Mary was defined at the Lateran Council in 649: Mary conceived our Lord “without any detriment to her virginity, which remained inviolate even after his birth.”

- 3 In 1950 Pope Pius XII issued the dogma on Mary's Assumption: "The Immaculate Mother of God, Mary Ever-Virgin, after her life on earth, was assumed, body and soul, into heavenly glory." Mary's Assumption has been described as "a singular participation in her Son's Resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians" (CCC No. 966).
- 4 J. PARAPPALLY, "Marian Images and Devotions through the Ages (A Historical-Contextual Survey)", in *Mary in Our Search for Fullness of Life*, R.K. SAMY (ed.), Bangalore 2006, P.37.
- 5 CCC No. 971: "The Church's devotion to the Blessed Virgin is intrinsic to Christian worship. The Church rightly honors 'the Blessed Virgin with special devotion. From the most ancient time the Blessed Virgin has been honored with the title 'Mother of God,' to whose special protection the faithful fly in all their dangers and needs. This very special devotion [hyperdulia]. . . differs essentially from the adoration which is given to the Incarnate Word and equally to the Father and the Holy Spirit and greatly fosters this adoration."
- 6 Mary is "hailed as a pre-eminent and altogether singular member of the Church" (LG 53) because of the gifts of grace which adorn her and because of the place she occupies in the mystical Body.
- 7 PAUL VI, *Marialis Cultus*, Nos. 29-39.
- 8 S. JAYARD, *Mary for Modern Times*, Pune 2014.

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# The Apostolate of Being

**Noel Dias**

Sri Lanka

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**W**hen we think of the apostolate we think of action, of going and of doing. But the first, the last and perhaps the most effective apostolate we will ever do is the APOSTOLATE OF BEING, OF BEING ME, OF BEING HAPPY TO BE ME.<sup>1</sup>

I had absolutely nothing to do with my existence, I did not choose to be. I did not choose to be me. How could I choose when I wasn't? My parents didn't choose me either. They may have wanted a child but they did not know who I would be. But God knew exactly who I would be. And God wanted me, "You have not chosen me; I have chosen you". God chose me out of an infinite number of possible beings. The only logical conclusion from these facts of life is that the will of God for me, my mission, my apostolate is

TO BE ME, TO BE HAPPY TO BE ME.

BEING ME means first of all to accept the gift of existence, to accept life from the womb to the tomb. This is not easy as we grow old.

BEING ME also means to accept my human condition,

To accept that I am dependent on a higher being,

To accept that, on account of original sin, I do not have the gift of integrity;

I do not have perfect control over all of my faculties