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Doctrines

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perpetual virginity of Mary — that Mary remained a virgin her entire life — did not become clear until the fourth century when it became accepted, Father Carroll observed.

"It was something that the church arrived at," Father Carroll noted. "When the church began to reflect upon it, it became clearer that this was true of Mary."

However, the doctrine was not an attempt to denigrate marital life or sexuality, Father Carroll cautioned. Despite popular misconceptions among some people today, the church actually held these in high regard in the fourth century, as it does today. Rather, the teachings about Mary's perpetual virginity developed in light of conditions several centuries after the birth of Jesus.

"After the persecutions stopped after Constantine, Christians freely accepted virginity," he explained. "It took the place of martyrdom."

"It was the church's reflection that someone who was uniquely dedicated to God would not have other children," observed Father Frederick M. Jelly, OP, author of the 1986 book, *Madonna: Mary in the Catholic Tradition*, and a professor of systematic theology at Mt. St. Mary's seminary in Emmitsburg, Md., in an interview with the *Catholic Courier*. "With Mary, it seems the decision to consecrate her life to virginity was for the sake of her son and the church."

In a similar vein, the bishops noted in their 1973 letter, that "In Mary's virginal dedication to her son's saving work, the church sees delineated her own mission to bear witness to values that go beyond the secular city to the city of redeemed man, the kingdom of God, in its present reality as well as its future completion."

Thus, the bishops noted, Mary is closely identified with the church in terms of her willingness to sacrifice and in her dedication to Jesus' mission.

This identification, Father Jelly remarked, was one of the key contributions

of the Second Vatican Council to Marian teachings.

Rather than create a separate Marian document, Father Jelly explained, the council incorporated the Marian teachings into the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, and made its intention clear by calling chapter eight, devoted to Mary, "The role of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church."

"It puts her in perspective in proper relationship to Christ and his church — getting away from any devotion to Mary that tends to splinter away from the church," Father Jelly observed. "She is seen as a perfect archetype of the church" in her total participation in the mission of Christ.

Father Thomas Thompson, SM, director of the Marian Library, observed that beyond such symbolic linkages, Mary is intended to set an example of how to devote oneself to Christ's mission.

"Vatican II declared that she is a model for the church, what the church is meant to be," Father Thompson said. "She was the vehicle (through which) God's grace came to people."

Moreover, Father Carroll said, the conciliar documents gave Catholics "a much stronger sense of Our Lady in the church. It's much more she's one of us, without taking away any of her special character. That was a significant shift."

No significant shifts were needed when it came to the doctrine of the assumption of Mary, belief in which can be traced back to the early church.

That doctrine, as defined by Pope Pius XII in 1950, is that "The Immaculate Mother of God, Mary ever-virgin, after her life on earth, was assumed, body and soul, into heavenly glory."

The bishops noted in their pastoral letter that as early as the fifth century, Christians observed a "Memorial of



Mary," often celebrated on Aug. 15, that evolved into "dormition" or falling asleep of Mary. As early as the sixth century, they reported, homilies on the Assumption began to appear.

The doctrine has broader implications for the Christian faithful, Father Carroll explained.

"The Assumption," he remarked, is linked to "the belief of the resurrection of the body."

The bishops of the Second Vatican Council similarly noted that "the Mother of Jesus in the glory which she possesses in body and soul in heaven is the image and beginning of the Church as it is perfected in the world to come." She serves, they added, as "a sign of certain hope and comfort to the pilgrim People of God."

But while the teachings concerning the Assumption are fairly understandable to most people, that of the Immaculate Conception is far less so, Father Thompson acknowledged.

Father Thompson said that people often confuse the virginal conception of Jesus with the Immaculate Conception. The Immaculate Conception refers to Mary's purity since her own conception.

"It had nothing to do with the birth of Jesus," Father Thompson said. "The holiness of Mary, that's really what it is."

The bishops in their 1973 letter explained that "The grace which others receive in Baptism, God gave to Mary even before her birth, through the foreseen merits of Christ, to prepare her to be the Mother of the redeemer."

The doctrine, the bishops continued, is Christ-centered.

"It makes clear, first of all, that no one is saved apart from Christ," they wrote. "This is true of all men who have ever lived, even though they were born many centuries before Christ."

"Secondly," they continued, "the

preservative redemption of Mary is totally and splendidly God's gift to her because she was to be the Mother of Christ."

However, although accepted doctrine today, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception actually had a rockier path to assent than the Assumption, Father Jelly observed.

"That was the one thing that was most difficult and longest to mature in the church," Father Jelly said of the Immaculate Conception. Nevertheless, he added, "Even those who had difficulty, such as Thomas Aquinas, were all agreed any favors visited on Mary were for the sake of the Christ."

The fact that Mary was filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment of her own conception did not limit her ability to choose whether to be the Mother of God, Father Jelly contended.

"Mary was within the power of her freedom to dissent, but she didn't do it," he said. "Grace made that possible, but that in no way detracts from her freedom."

"One of the distinctive features of Catholicism," Father Thompson remarked, "is the belief that God chooses people, God invites people to cooperate in his work. Mary is a symbol of that."

Moreover, previous to their defining so the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, both Pope Pius IX and Pope Pius XII, respectively, conducted surveys of bishops worldwide and found overwhelming acceptance of the doctrines, Father Carroll reported. This support extended to Catholics in general.

"The reason the church defined (these doctrines) was probably a groundswell among the people," Father Carroll speculated. "It was in response to the piety of the people that the church proclaimed these dogmas."

Father Carroll, for one, does not see any new developments in Marian teachings in the near future.

"I don't think the church plans to attempt to define anything more," Father Carroll predicted. "Most beliefs that Catholics have, have been defined. They don't become any more true by being defined."

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