

From: “Ask The Clergy,” St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Fairfield, Connecticut

Question: Why doesn’t the Virgin Mary seem to have much of a role in the Episcopal Church?

Answer. The short answer to the question is that Mary in fact does have a role in the Anglican / Episcopal Church. Her role or place in our church is characteristic of Anglicanism historically as a “middle way” between Roman Catholic and Protestant expressions of Christianity.

For Anglicans, Mary is honored as the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ and venerated as first among the Saints of the church.

Roman Catholics created a “cult of the Virgin Mary,” as historians have called it, beginning in the twelfth century and culminating in the promulgation of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. This dogma asserts that Mary was conceived in her mother’s womb without the stain of original sin through the anticipated merits of her son Jesus. It became an official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church in 1854. Completing this theological trend, the Roman Catholic Church in 1950 defined as dogma the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which asserts that at her death Mary was taken bodily up into heaven.

The Roman Catholic Church has historically held that Mary’s virginity was absolute throughout her life. This means that the “brothers and sisters” of Jesus about whom the New Testament speaks must be understood as Jesus’ half-brothers and sisters, children of Joseph and another unnamed woman. Most Roman Catholic churches will have a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary and votive candles representing prayers made through her around it. Faithful Roman Catholics also pray the Rosary, a prayer of special devotion to Mary that repeats the “Hail Mary” (“Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”). This prayer echoes the dialogue of Mary with the angel Gabriel, when she consented to become the mother of Jesus, and with her cousin Elizabeth during her pregnancy (Luke 1:26-36).

Protestants from the time of the Reformation onward rejected the cult status of Mary as part of the superstitious excess of the medieval church, and in reaction systematically removed from their worship and daily piety any special emphasis on Mary, focusing attention instead on the redemptive sacrifice of her Son. Anglicans share the Protestant caution about affording Mary the worship due to God alone. So we say that we venerate Mary, along with all the other Saints, but worship God.

So it is that in the Anglican / Episcopalian middle way some churches, especially those in monastic communities, will have statues of the Blessed Virgin, but most will not. Many, but probably not most, Anglicans and Episcopalians pray the rosary and find themselves especially attracted to Mary as foremost among the Saints. Anglican and Episcopalian churches have Mary as their patron, just as they are named for other New Testament Saints and Mysteries such as the Transfiguration

In our Episcopal calendar, Mary as the foremost Saint is accorded three major feast days. One commemorates the Annunciation (March 25), another (May 31) her Visitation to Elizabeth her cousin and mother of John the Baptist; and the other (August

15) is her own general feast. Like other “red-letter” days of the calendar—days commemorating the Saints and Mysteries of the New Testament—these feast days have their own special collects (p. 240 and p. 243 in the Book of Common Prayer), and Holy Eucharist is properly celebrated in honor of them. It is significant that all three collects celebrate Mary but put primary focus on her divine Son and on the example of her willingness to follow God’s will in becoming, as she was called from ancient times, “the mother of God.”

This is the collect for the Feast of the Visitation:

Father in heaven, by your grace the virgin mother of your incarnate Son was blessed in bearing him, but still more blessed in keeping your word: Grant us who honor the exaltation of her lowliness to follow the example of her devotion to your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever, Amen.

At St. Paul’s, the chapel to the right of the pulpit is dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. This is the case in many Episcopal churches, when the main chapel of a church is so dedicated and called “the Mary chapel.” In it at St. Paul’s you will find icons of the Greek Orthodox tradition representing Mary, along with the Reserved Sacrament, that is the elements of Holy Communion consecrated at a previous service and kept in a special repository called a Tabernacle.

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