



Opening Question:

Have you ever had a brief moment that changed your life?

Just a moment in time...

Many people experience life changing events. A minute of conversion, a conversation that shifts one's life, a simple insight that steers one in a new direction. A young woman had such a moment, such a conversation, such an insight. It would change her world and the greater world for millennia to come.

The Annunciation

Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with you.

Luke 1:28

This greeting began an exchange between the angel Gabriel and Mary. She was a young woman from the backwater hamlet in Galilee. The angel came to announce the arrival of the Christ and Mary's part in God's plan. Despite the fact she was an unmarried virgin, the Holy Spirit would overshadow her. She would conceive and bear a son named Jesus. He would be great and would be called the Son of God. She said yes to God's will. This encounter only covers twelve verses in Luke's gospel. But it changed the life of Mary and of many who would come after her.

The Incarnation

What did Mary agree to? She said yes to more than a virgin birth. She agreed to conceiving God in the flesh. This is called the Incarnation. So, she would not just be the mother of Jesus. She would be the Mother of God. Through her pregnancy and delivery, she would bear God into the world in the most tangible way possible.



The Immaculate Conception

Why would she agree to the Incarnation? Of all the people born into the world, Mary always intuited God's will. And she agreed to it throughout her life. Even from the moment she was conceived in her mother's womb. We call her constant faithfulness the Immaculate Conception. Yes, she was human. Yes, she had free will. But she always chose to do the right thing.

Ever Virgin

Tradition and Church teaching tell us not only did Mary conceive and bear her son as a virgin. They teach us she remained a virgin throughout her life. That is why we call her the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The Assumption

At the end of her life, the Church teaches Mary was assumed body and soul into heaven. This belief is not unlike the scene when the prophet Elijah was taken up:

Elijah and Elisha were walking along and talking, when suddenly there appeared between them a flaming chariot pulled by fiery horses. At once, a strong wind took Elijah up into heaven.

2 Kings 2:11

In a sense, Mary came from God and returned to God.

Mother of the Church

Let's step back for a moment and consider the place of Mary in the Church. She was the first Christian. She heard the Good News about the birth of the Christ and accepted it. As the first, she became the model of all those to follow. She received the Spirit not only at the Annunciation but implicitly at Pentecost. In the book of Acts,

The apostles often met together and prayed with a single purpose in mind. The women and Mary, the mother of Jesus, would meet with them...

Acts 1:14abc

When Pentecost arrived, everyone gathered together in one place. Suddenly, a noise came from heaven that sounded like a violent wind. The noise filled the house where they sat. Then fiery tongues spread out and sat on each person there. Everyone was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2:1-4a

She is an image of the Church. And, because she said yes to God, she not only became the Mother of God, she became the Mother of the Church. For, from the moment she conceived and gave birth to the Christ, history completely changed on a scale greater than anyone imagined. Consider a symbolic scene from the book of Revelation:

Something important appeared in the sky. It was a woman whose clothes were the sun. The moon was under her feet, and a crown made of twelve stars was on her head. She was about to give birth, and she was crying because of the great pain. The woman gave birth to a son who would rule all nations with an iron rod.

Revelation 12:1-2, 5a

Many equate Mary with the apocalyptic figure who acted on such a cosmic scale. They saw her as the heavenly woman who gave birth to her royal son. And she also gave birth to the mission of her son.

The Hail Mary

Because of her actions and image we honor Mary with prayer that dates back over a thousand years.

It's called the Hail Mary. It begins with two verses from Luke's gospel. The first was Gabriel's greeting at the Annunciation.

Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with you.

Luke 1:28

The first word "Hail" is from the Latin translation. But the word in the original Greek text is "rejoice." Both were simply their cultural ways of saying "Hello." The term "full of grace" actually had a more dynamic sense. It meant Mary had God's active approval. She enjoyed his divine favor.

The second greeting came from Mary's visit to her pregnant cousin Elizabeth. Filled with the Spirit, the elder cousin proclaimed blessing on Mary.

Blessed are you among women. And blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

Luke 1:42

The term "blessed" inferred a higher status. Mary enjoyed God's favor more than any other woman. And her son would be greater than any other man.

The rest of the prayer recognizes her status, then asks for prayers at the present moment and at the end of life.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

Catholics honor Mary not simply because she accepted God's will. We honor her in relation to her Son. Her "yes" to Gabriel was really a "Yes" to her son. When she conceived by the power of the Spirit, she foreshadowed the Spirit-fueled ministry of her Son. When we call her the "Mother of God," we're really pointing to the mystery of the Incarnation, God becoming flesh. When we proclaim the Immaculate Conception, we implicitly see the promise of salvation her Son achieved.

She was what we will become. When we profess the Assumption of Mary into heaven, we look forward to our place in the Kingdom under her Son. All this happens, simply because a young woman two thousand years ago had a brief, but life changing moment. A short conversation with a heavenly messenger. An insight that, with God, all things are possible.

Closing Question:

What part of Mary's life inspires you? Do you pray the Hail Mary?

Reference to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paragraphs 484-511, 2673-2682.

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