

*The Virgin Mary and the Roman Missal*  
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At this time of the Church year, we find many occasions to reflect upon the Blessed Virgin Mary and her role in our salvation. Observing the Immaculate Conception (December 8), Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12), Mary, Mother of God (January 1), and the Nativity of Christ can make us ask why is it that the Church has honored Mary with such great veneration throughout the ages. Mary's place in salvation history can also teach us about receiving the *Roman Missal*, now less than a year away.

Why is Mary so honored? The short answer is that Mary listens perfectly to the Word of God, receiving it with an undivided heart, and as a result gives birth to the Word of God. "To listen" is in Latin *audire*, which is the root of the English "obedience" (from *ob-adiure*), to hear or listen to.

In the tradition of the Church, this single truth is made clearer by comparing the obedient "yes" of Mary to the disobedient "no" of Eve.

St. Justin Martyr, writing around 155, says that "Eve, a virgin and undefiled, conceived the word of the serpent, and bore disobedience and death." Not so, the Virgin Mary: she conceives God's Word and our life by her obedience.

Still in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, we hear St. Irenaeus saying something similar: "Mary the Virgin is found to be obedient, saying: 'Behold, O Lord, your handmaid; be it done to me according to your word.' Eve, however, was disobedient; and when yet a virgin, she did not obey. Having become disobedient, she was made the cause of death for herself and for the whole human race."

Tertullian puts it like this: "For it was while Eve was still a virgin that the word of the devil crept in to erect an edifice of death. Likewise, through a Virgin, the Word of God was introduced to set up a structure of life.... Eve had believed the serpent; Mary believed Gabriel. That which the one destroyed by believing, the other, by believing, set straight."

The Syrian Deacon and Doctor of the Church, St. Ephraim, has it thus: "Just as from the small womb of Eve's ear / Death entered in and was poured out, / So through a new ear, that was Mary's, / Life entered and was poured out."

Medieval Christians saw the reversal from Eve's disobedience and death to Mary's submission and salvation in the palindrome of EVA and AVE: "Eva," the Latin rendering of Eve, is turned around and becomes "Ave," the first word spoken by Gabriel to Mary. A famous Marian hymn dating from the 8<sup>th</sup> Century, the *Ave Maris Stella*, has as its second verse: "Receiving that 'Ave,' / From the mouth of Gabriel / Establish us in peace / Transforming the name of Eva."

Only weeks ago, in an exhortation called *Verbum Domini* ("The Word of the Lord"), Pope Benedict continues this same thread of thought about the "Listening Virgin" (n.79). "The Virgin Mary," he says, "who by her 'yes' to the word of the covenant and her mission, perfectly fulfills the divine vocation of humanity" (n. 27). Mary is a "Virgin ever attentive to God's word," and "she lives completely attuned to that word" (ibid.).

For the Church and her members, Mary is a supreme example of the acceptance of God's Word: she is "the image of the Church in attentive hearing of the word of God, which took flesh in her" (n.27). "For every member of the faithful Mary is the model of docile acceptance of God's word, for she 'kept all these things, pondering them in her heart'" (n.87).

What does Mary's example mean for us and our prayer with the *Roman Missal*? It means that, like Mary, we are—or should be—attentive, for in the words of the Church at prayer is *the* Word, Jesus Christ. This will be true for the edition of the *Roman Missal* we will use next year, and it is also true for the Missal that we use today and will use throughout the coming year. Jesus, the Word of God, speaks today in his Mystical Body, the Church, and this Mystical Body speaks most clearly at the Mass. Like Mary, let us listen with receptive and attentive ears and respond with open and undivided hearts. Then, similar to Mary, may Jesus be conceived in us, born by us, and shown to the world through us.