

Devotion and Honor for Mary and all the Saints

Catholics are sometimes told, much to their surprise, that they “worship Mary” and “pray to statues.” The charge is startling because it is so serious and so very wrong. Our Catholic teaching and belief is clear: To worship Mary would be a serious sin for worship belongs to God alone. Praying to statues, (idolatry), is also a serious sin. It is also not very bright since plaster, marble and wood are not able to hear or make an answer! We *do* ask saints in heaven to pray for us but this is no more wrong than if I were to ask you to pray for me. Nor would it be a denial of the fact that I can talk directly to God on my behalf.

What is the real truth about Catholic reverence and teaching regarding Mary and all the Saints? How can such practices be properly understood and appreciated?

Veneration of Mary is Biblical

The Scriptures themselves describe the honor that will be given Mary. *For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.* (Lk 1:48-49) Thus each time we call to mind the dignity and blessedness of Mary we fulfill this biblical prophecy. And when we do this, we also glorify God for he alone is the source of all that is good and holy. The Blessed Mother is surely His masterwork and she herself acknowledges it.

Biblical Prayer

Perhaps the most common prayer in which we honor Mary and seek her intercession is the *Hail Mary*. The whole first half of this prayer is drawn from scripture. The Angel Gabriel praised Mary, *Hail full of grace the Lord is with you!* (Lk 1:28-29) Elizabeth also praised her: *Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.* (Lk 1:48). Thus, our Catholic traditions about Mary both echo scripture and fulfill its prophecies.



Just like Jesus.

When we consider Mary’s role in salvation history we do well to listen very carefully to what God says in the ways He chooses to act. God could have chosen to enter the human scene in ways other than

He did. Perhaps He could simply have appeared as a full grown man. Yet He did not. When God chose to enter human history He chose to do so through Mary. And Jesus did not only dwell nine months in her womb, He also entrusted himself to her on-going care. She nursed him, sang to him, comforted him, and clothed him. In time she taught him to talk and to walk. He shared a family resemblance to her. They spoke with the same accent and probably shared many mannerisms. Mary was also present during Jesus’ public ministry and had an important influence in the working of his first miracle (see below) and she was at the foot of the cross as Jesus accomplished his greatest work, our redemption. In all of these ways, God instructs us that Mary’s role is far more than ceremonial. A truly biblical view does not downplay or minimize Mary’s role in God’s plan. Instead we seek to learn the rich meanings of what Jesus said and did in regard to Mary by His word as well as His example. Hence when Catholics are asked why they honor Mary a rightful answer may be, “I love Mary, I honor her and entrust myself to her care because Jesus did all these things and I want to be just like Jesus.”

There are other teachings that emerge from the scriptural accounts as well and it is important to learn what they can teach us.

Mary as intercessor.

One of the most frequent refrains directed to Mary occurs at the end

of the Hail Mary, *Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.* Mary's role as an intercessor is especially evident in the first miracle Jesus worked. The event is described in the Gospel of John. *On the third day there was a marriage at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; Jesus also was invited to the marriage, with his disciples. When the wine failed, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."* (Jn 2:1-5) What is notable about this passage is that it is Mary who calls a need to Jesus' attention. We need not assume that Jesus was unaware of the need, but the scripture points to Mary's role in highlighting the need. Jesus seems at first to resist her request but she is clearly able to prevail upon him for he produces nearly one hundred gallons of wine! We do not know exactly what moved Jesus to reconsider his initial resistance to working the miracle. Perhaps Mary gave him a look that only a mother can give a son! Nevertheless, Mary had a quiet confidence that Jesus would handle the whole matter for she said simply to the steward, *Do whatever he tells you.*

Mary and the obedience of Faith

This leads us to another important quality of Mary and all devotion to Mary. It is always Mary's counsel to us, *Do whatever he tells you.* Mary's role never eclipses that of Jesus. As one who prays for us, Mary places her requests before Jesus with the confidence of a

mother and then says to us, *Do whatever he tells you.*

All truly sound Marian devotion sanctioned by the Church always has this hallmark, it should call us to greater devotion to Jesus and to the obedience of faith, that we should do whatever He tells us. Mary lived this quality. When the Angel Gabriel spoke God's will to her she said, *Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word* (Lk 1:38). Mary was first and foremost a woman of faith. Another confirmation of this fact is recalled by this passage also from Luke's Gospel, *A woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!" But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"* (Lk 11:27-28). Mary was blessed indeed to be the Mother of Jesus. But Jesus himself points to her greatest glory: she hears the word of God and keeps it. Mary's faith, her "yes" to God, was the doorway to every other blessing she received from God. Thus Mary is also a model for our own faith, our "yes" to God brings with it every other gift God will provide.

Final reflections.

There are so many other things to say about Mary. For now it is well to close with this thought: Acknowledging Mary's glory, her sanctity and her blessedness does not compete with what we owe Jesus. No indeed, the qualities we honor and observe in her point back to Christ and to the Trinity. Every gift of Mary is a work of God. Mary is God's masterpiece and when we delight in her gifts

we give praise to the God who gave them to her. There are some who claim that the Catholic reverence for Mary somehow diminishes the praise we owe to God. Yet how could this be? Is an artist infuriated when his artwork is praised? Is he or she not rather delighted!

This too puts our veneration of all the saints in proper perspective. Whenever we honor any saint we honor the work of God. In effect we say, "Look at what God can do!" We behold the power of God's grace at work within weak human flesh and we marvel. The saints are also our brothers and sisters. If God can work so wondrously in them, then there is hope for us too. The fact that we have paintings or statues of them in our homes in churches is very much like the pictures and other reminders we carry of our own loved ones. They serve simply to remind us of a beloved friend or hero. That we ask the saints to pray for us is also understood in the same sense that I might ask you to pray for me. God knows all our needs, we can ask him directly but we know that it is helpful and reassuring that others are praying for us too. The saints in heaven are especially close to God, right before the throne! Scripture says they offer up their prayers on our behalf. (Rev 5, 8).

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, (Heb 12:1-2)