

Mistakes About Mary

By D. F. Miller, C.S.S.R.

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Here are the major mistakes that keep evangelical Protestants from honoring the Mother of Christ. Every Catholic should know what they are; every Protestant should learn why they are wrong.

If you are a Catholic, and have had any contact or experience with evangelical Protestants, you have often wondered how it is possible for the latter to hold the position they do on the place of Mary, the Mother of Christ, in the plan of salvation outlined by the Redeemer. That position is so completely contradictory of the Catholic stand, so uncompromising and extreme in its opposition to paying any honor to Mary, that it cries for some kind of an explanation.

If you are an evangelical Protestant, the same consciousness of contradiction between yourself and Catholics on this one point must frequently arouse the curiosity of your mind. You cannot, if you are normal, just ignore the centuries old Catholic position, never wondering why you are so far removed from it. The subject pleads for exploration by your mind.

Both for the Catholic who wonders and the non-Catholic who is mystified by this situation, here is an explanation. It consists of the major arguments that Protestants have used throughout their rather brief history for not paying any attention to the Mother of Christ, and of the statement of those elements in the arguments that are contrary to fact or truth. The arguments are not made up; they are taken from Protestant tracts, pamphlets, sermons and books, and from actual Protestants who have presented them to the writer. Not all of them have been used by all Protestants, but wherever there is opposition to the honoring of Mary, some of these arguments will be found. The point that they are based on untruths or on statements that are contrary to fact, must not be taken as a sign of bad will on the part of those who use the arguments; they have been handed down for so many generations as demonstrated truths that there are many persons alive who have never had a chance to check them against the facts. Here then are the arguments, followed by an explanation of where they are contrary to fact or truth.

1.

Adoration is due only to God. Catholics fail against this basic principle of religion by adoring the Virgin Mary, either in principle or in practice.

One entire Protestant pamphlet before us is dedicated to the task of proving that Catholics adore the Virgin Mary.

Here are the facts: All Catholics agree without reservation that adoration may be given only to God. In fact, by their very definition of adoration they make it impossible or ridiculous to consider giving adoration to anyone but God. They define adoration as an act whereby a creature recognizes and asserts the supreme authority and the infinite perfections of his Creator, and the creature's obligation of submission and obedience to Him. To adore any person or thing other than God alone constitutes the sin of idolatry. Catholics know that the Mother of Christ is a creature, like

themselves brought out of nothing into being by God, and that to adore her in word or in action would be gravely contrary to the first commandment.

2.

Saint Paul states in 1 Timothy, 2:5, that “there is only one mediator between God and men, Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a ransom for them all.” Catholics look upon the Virgin Mary as a mediator between God and men, and say that she can save those who pray to her. This is clearly contrary to the teaching of the Bible.

Here are the facts: Catholics accept the full and exact meaning of the words of Saint Paul, that Jesus Christ is the only mediator who could have redeemed the human race, and that without His sacrifice on the cross, no prayers, sufferings or “mediation” on the part of anyone else could have brought salvation to any human being. Once this is established, it is clearly not wrong to use the word “mediator” in a secondary sense, as signifying anyone who prays for another with full dependence on the merits of Jesus Christ. That God permits such mediation is evident from the fact that He allowed Abraham to plead with Him for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Saint Paul declared himself to be a mediator in this sense when he wrote to the Colossians, 1:9, “we have been praying for you. Our prayer is that you may be filled with that closer knowledge of God’s will which brings all wisdom and all spiritual insight with it.” It is in this sense that Catholics look upon Mary as a mediator, not that she could possibly take the place of Christ in saving anyone, nor even that she could do anything for anyone except through the merits of Christ, but that she can and does pray, like Abraham and Saint Paul, for sinners. She is of course, the highest of all praying mediators because of all creatures she is the closest and dearest to the Son of God.

3.

This command is given in the Bible, Exodus, 20:4: “You shall not make to yourself a graven thing, nor the likeness of anything that is in heaven above or in the earth beneath, nor of those things that are in the waters under the earth.” Devotion to the Mother of Christ among Catholics is always bound up with images, icons, pictures, statues and shrines. The use of all such objects is strictly forbidden by the text above, and therefore devotion to Mary is contrary to God’s command.

The above prohibition in the book of Exodus obviously and clearly refers to graven images made to be served and adored as gods. Indeed, the very next line of Exodus, following the above quotation, explains it: “You shall not adore them nor serve them.” The folly of interpreting the lines to mean that human beings are never to use any images or statues in religion is clear from the fact that in the same book of Exodus the chosen people are commanded to make certain graven images for use in the temple. For example in chapter 25:18, God commands them “to make two cherubims of beaten gold, to be placed one on each side of the oracle in the temple.”

Clearly, then, the ban on images is only on those that are made to be adored as gods. The fact is that Catholics look upon images of Mary as merely reminders of her, and are not permitted to give them the slightest sign of adoration.

4.

Much of the honor paid to Mary by Catholics is based on the fact that they maintain that she was always a virgin. This is contradicted by two texts in the Bible: 1) Luke, 2:17, which says, “she brought forth her firstborn son,” thus indicating that there were other sons later; 2) Matthew, 12:46,

in which the statement is made that “his (Jesus’) mother and brethren stood without, seeking to speak to him,” thus proving that Mary had other children besides Jesus.

It is true that the perpetual virginity of Mary is one of the prerogatives that inspire Catholics to honor her. Neither of the two texts quoted above casts the least shadow of doubt on that perpetual virginity.

Saint Luke uses the phrase “first-born son” in his Gospel, because the Jewish law required special ceremonies to be carried out in respect to a first-born son, so that every such son was specifically called “first-born” whether the mother ever had another son or not.

The phrase “brethren of Jesus,” as used in the Aramaic of Saint Matthew, (and the original Aramaic of Our Lord’s ministry) has the force of “relatives,” not of blood brothers, a fact that can be proved by other uses of the same word in the Old Testament and by the identification of some of the “brethren” spoken of as cousins of Jesus.

5.

Superstition is the belief that certain meaningless and foolish actions will bring down the favor of heaven. Now, many of the actions used by Catholics in connection with devotion to the Virgin Mary, such as wearing medals, using rosaries, burning candles before shrines, etc., are meaningless and foolish. Therefore, devotion to the Mother of Christ is superstitious.

Catholics agree that meaningless and foolish actions, to which a person would attribute a divine and magical power to help him, would indeed be superstitious.

The fact is, however, that the wearing of medals, the use of rosaries and the adorning of shrines do not fulfill that definition. Catholics in no wise attribute to these things a magical or mysterious power; they use them as material reminders of the invisible persons of Jesus and Mary, and therefore as helpful in recalling often to mind the importance of prayer. It is no more meaningless and superstitious to wear a medal in honor of the Mother of Christ, or to erect a beautiful shrine for her picture, than it is for any man to carry a photo of his mother or sweetheart in his billfold, wallet or watch, or for a nation to commemorate its heroes in statues or on stamps.

6.

In the early days of Christianity, nobody ever thought of practicing devotion to Mary. It was an abuse that crept in long after primitive Christianity.

This statement is completely erroneous in point of fact. In the catacomb of Saint Priscilla beneath the city of Rome, which was one of the earliest of the catacombs and was most probably used by Saints Peter and Paul, there is a picture of the Madonna painted on the wall. In fact, more than sixty images of the Virgin Mary, some of them representing her alone and some of them showing her with the Child Jesus, have been uncovered in just a few of the catacombs, proving that the same fond devotion to Mary that may be found among Catholics today flourished among the Christians of the first three centuries.

7.

Only those religious practices are licit which are authorized in the Bible. Nowhere in the Bible is there the slightest suggestion of approval for the practice of praying to the saints or to the Mother of Christ. Therefore, this practice is contrary to the wishes of Christ and the commands of God.

Catholics believe that since the New Testament of the Bible was not even written until after Christ had ascended into heaven and was not completed till more than two generations later, (around 100 A.D.) it could not have been meant to be the sole rule of life for Christians; what Christ said to the Apostles and what they handed down was certainly more important for the generations of Christians who lived before the Bible was completed and known.

However, the fact is that even in the Bible there is plenty of authorization for honoring Mary and asking for her intercession. It was an angel from heaven who said to Mary (Luke, 1:28):

“Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you . . .”

Surely, the example of one of God’s angels may be followed by men. It was Christ Himself who showed the world how He would honor Mary’s prayers by granting her request for wine on behalf of the young bride and groom at Cana. Above all, however, it is the very fact of Mary’s closeness to Christ as presented in the Bible, her being chosen by God to bring Him forth, to be with Him throughout His childhood and youth, and to share His terrible passion, that gives complete foundation for the doctrine that Christians should honor her who was so honored by God, and beg for her intercession because she was and still is so close to God.

As to the practice of praying to saints in heaven in general, both the Old Testament of the Bible, with its many stories of how angels are permitted to help men, and the Apocalypse in the New Testament, with its many references to the voices of the saints in heaven, give ample Scriptural background for its goodness and power.

8.

It is a fact that intense devotion to the Mother of Christ flourishes especially among the illiterate, e.g., in Italy, in Mexico, and among the least cultured and educated in America. This is at least a good sign that it does not belong in the religion of an educated person.

It is simply untrue that devotion to the Mother of Christ is confined to illiterate people, or even to the not very well educated. There have been, and are, leaders in every field of human knowledge and achievement who have practiced a truly childlike, typically Catholic devotion to the Mother of God. And to despise something that the illiterate do because they are illiterate is to insult Christ Himself, who did most of His work for the illiterate and even chose such for His apostles.

9.

It is a very common sight to see great sinners kneeling before statues and shrines of the Virgin Mary and praying for favors. It is obvious that the reason for this is that Catholics believe that it doesn’t matter how much they sin, or what kind of lives they lead; so long as they pray to the Virgin Mary, they believe they will be saved.

It would be blasphemous for any Catholic to assert that the Virgin Mary could help him in any way without an intention on his part to give up sin and to love God with all his heart and soul. Sinners are urged to pray to her for the grace of repentance and reform; if they pray to her for any material favor without being willing to give up sin, they are spiritually illiterate, superstitious and un-Catholic. As to salvation, Catholics believe that this depends on the merits of Jesus Christ, the faith of the individual, the fulfillment of Christ’s commandments, and the use of the means of grace. When a Catholic prays to the Blessed Virgin, he is asking her for help and grace to fulfill the requirements for salvation; he does not expect to be enabled to circumvent them in any way.

10.

God is all-powerful, and has clearly manifested His desire to grant us the graces necessary for salvation and even other favors on condition that we ask Him for these things in prayer. Therefore, there is no reason for addressing our prayers to anybody except God.

The same all-powerful God, Who needs no one to help Him accomplish anything, of His own divine will chose to make Mary His helper in becoming man and preparing Himself for His public ministry and His death on the cross. Because of that, He chose to love her with a very special love, and to permit her to ask and receive extraordinary favors from Him on behalf of those whom she loved. This is clear from the miracle at the wedding feast in Cana, when at His Mother's request the Son of God changed water into wine to save her friends from embarrassment. In the same manner, God approves of our asking His Mother to speak to Him in our behalf, so long as we remember that it is always God's grace and God's power that actually answer our prayers. In a real sense, therefore, prayers for Mary's intercession are prayers that are intended to reach God through her.

11.

The only requirement for salvation is faith in Jesus Christ. Nothing else is necessary or profitable to attain that end. Therefore the final and clinching argument against devotion to the Mother of Christ is that it is contrary to the basic principle of Protestant Christianity, namely, that the one and only thing a man can do and must do for the salvation of his soul is to believe firmly in Jesus Christ.

To one who is content to rest on this "basic principle of Protestant Christianity," in the face of all the clear commands of the Bible that one must keep the commandments, pray without ceasing, make use of the sacraments, besides believing in Christ, there is little to be said.

To anyone who will take the Bible as a whole, who will accept, not only Christ's command that he believe in Him, but also His other commandments and instructions, it can be made amply clear that He chose a Mother, endowed her with all beauty and fullness of grace, and permitted her to cooperate with Him in effecting the redemption of mankind, in order that men might beg for her intercession in behalf of the graces they would need to save their souls. Basically, then, the contradiction is between those who take a part of the Bible for guidance on the way to salvation, and those who take all of the Bible.

On which side are you?

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