

Questions About Devotion to Mary and to the Saints

Questions addressed to a Catholic Priest. From “Radio Replies”.

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Devotion to Mary.

Saint Bonaventure said, "Into your hands, O Lady, I commend my spirit." Thus, he served the creature more than the Creator, to whom alone all such words should be addressed.

Saint Bonaventure did not serve the creature more than the Creator. In commending his soul to Mary, he was not commending it to anyone opposed to God. He did it because of God, who chose Mary as the second Eve. Eve brought us forth to misery and to death; Mary brought us forth to happiness and to life when she brought forth our Savior.

Like the kings from the East, Saint Bonaventure knew that after the long journey through this life, he would also find the child Jesus with Mary His mother and that if he commended his soul to the mother he would necessarily find himself in the presence of the child, even in eternity. Gladly on my own deathbed would I utter the words used by Saint Bonaventure. As Jesus came to us through Mary, so we should go to Him through her, whether we think of it or not.

Mary is no different from your own mother.

As the street-Arab replied to a similar objection, "But there's an immense difference between the sons. My mother is the mother of me. Mary is the mother God."

You speak as if Jesus looks on His mother just as you look on your mother.

As surely as my mother is my mother, He knows that His mother is His mother; and He treats her as such.

Jesus was a good son, but He recognized only one being, the Omnipotent God.

Had He ignored Mary He would not have been a very good son, nor would have had much respect for God who said, "Honor your father and your mother." Christ was a perfect example of virtue in all things. And if He did not recognize Mary, why did He go down to Nazareth and be subject to her? Why did He perform His first miracle at her request? And why did He make such special provision for her at the moment of His death?

When someone praised Mary, Christ paid no attention, but said that only those are blessed who keep the word of God. (Luke 11:28.)

The Gospels are fragmentary accounts, and we do not know all that transpired on that occasion. But even so, the actual text is not opposed in any way to the honor we give to Mary. Someone praised Mary. Christ replied, "Yea rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it." Not for a moment did He intend to deny that Mary had done this. He practically says, "Yes. She is blest in being my mother. But it is a greater blessing to serve God." And, from one point of view, the fidelity with which Mary undoubtedly served God was a greater blessing to her than merely being the mother of Christ. Any idea that Christ, the best of sons, was trying to belittle His mother is absurd. And if you have such faith in Scripture, what do you do as regards the prophecy of Mary in Luke 1:48? "From henceforth," she predicted, "all generations shall call me blessed." Yet blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it! We Catholics call Mary blessed indeed, whilst many Protestants search Scripture in the fond hope of proving something to her discredit!

Christ called her, "Woman," when He said, "Woman, behold your son."

In the language Christ spoke, that word was a term of great respect however harshly it may sound in our modern English language. Our Lord would have been the last to slight His mother, a thing we despise in every man; and above all in His last and most tender words to her. Nor are we likely to please Him by seeking to dishonor her.

Did He not say to her at the marriage feast of Cana, "Woman, what is that to you and to me?"

He did. But most certainly, He intended no reproach to Mary. Her action was one of pure charity to others. Foreseeing the possible distress of others, she asked Him to relieve them; and He would not rebuke so unselfish a thought. Nor would He speak to her with any trace of disrespect. Then, too, had Mary asked a wrong thing, Christ would not have done it, nor would He have sanctioned a request He had to rebuke. And Mary knew that she had not been reprehended, or she would not have told the waiters to do what her Son would tell them. She would have dropped the matter. Why, then, did Christ speak thus? It was His first miracle, the first public sign of His divinity wrought by Himself. And He wanted to bring out publicly the fact that He was doing it, not as the son of an earthly mother and according to His human nature, but calling upon His divine nature as the eternal Son of God. He did it because His mother requested it, but He did not do it by any power derived from His mother. He thus brought out both for the listeners and for us that this beginning of miracles was proof of His divinity, although in appearance He seemed but man.

Why do you call Mary Queen of Heaven?

Because Mary is undoubtedly in heaven, and Jesus is King of heaven. Since Jesus is "King of kings and Lord of lords," it is certain that Mary His mother rejoices in queenly dignity.

Why pray to Mary at all?

Because God wills that we should do so, and because such prayers to her are of the utmost value. God often wills to give certain favors only on condition that we go to some secondary agent. Sodom was to be spared through the intercession of Abraham; Naaman, the leper, was to be cured only through the waters of the Jordan. Now Mary is, and must ever remain, the mother of Christ. She still has a mother's rights and privileges, and is able to obtain for us many graces. But let us view things reasonably. If I desire to pray, I can certainly pray to God directly. Yet would you blame me if, at times, I were to ask my own earthly mother to pray for me also? Such a request is really a prayer to her that she may intercede for me with God. Certainly, if I met the mother of Christ on earth, I

would ask her to pray for me, and she would do so. And in her more perfect state with Christ in heaven, she is not less able to help me.

But a prayer to God directly must be more efficacious than a prayer to Mary.

Not necessarily. It might well be that God intends to honor Our Lady by granting the favor I seek through her intercession in a particular way. In that case, the grace is to be given through her provided I honor her by addressing myself to her. Again, every prayer to Mary is in reality the asking of a favor from God even as the mother of Christ is requested to ask the same favor also. It is often better to ask God for a favor and to have someone else praying to God with one for the same favor. Two prayers are better than one. And above all, when the other one praying is Christ's own mother.

God loves you more than Mary loves you.

That is so. But He loves Mary more than He loves me. And as she is more pleasing to God than I am, He will be more ready to grant her requests.

It is unscriptural to attribute power to Mary.

That is a very unscriptural statement. At His mother's request Jesus changed water into wine at Cana, though He had said, "My time is not yet come." Saint James tells us that "the prayer of a just man avails much." James 5:16. How much more the prayer of Mary!

Does the Bible sanction such prayers to Mary?

Yes. All through the Bible, you will find God conferring favors through the prayers of others. In the Old Testament, we read of the prayers of Abraham, Moses, and of the various prophets. In the New Testament, Saint James tells us to "pray for one another," in the text I have just quoted. If we must always pray directly to God and may not ask the prayers of others, why did Saint Paul write to the Thessalonians, "Pray for us that we may be delivered from importunate and evil men?" 2 Thessalonians 3:2. Why did he not ask that directly of God, instead of asking the prayers of the Thessalonians? Or would you be more scriptural than the New Testament itself?

There is but one mediator; there is no place for Mary.

Christ is the principal mediator in His own right. Mary is a secondary mediatrix, through, with, and in Christ. Without Him, she would have no power, and therefore He is the source of all mediation with God on behalf of men.

How can you blend the mediation of others with that of Christ?

It follows from the doctrine of the Communion of Saints. Remember that, by Baptism, every Christian is incorporated with Christ. Saint Paul says, "Christ is the head; ye are the members." So close is this union that Christ says, "Whoever gives you to drink a cup of water in my name, because you belong to me; amen, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward." Mark 9:40. Every Christian is Christ in a most intimate way. Saint Paul tells us that if a baptized person sins, he takes the members of Christ and makes them the members of iniquity! When that same Saint Paul was persecuting the Christians before his conversion, Christ appeared to him and said, "Saul, Saul, why persecute you Me?" He did not say, "Why persecute you My disciples?" He could equally say, when we pray to Mary or to the saints, "What ask you of Me?" When we honor Our Lady or the Saints,

we honor, not their own merely human and created nature, but we honor Christ in them according to the doctrine of Scripture. The Catholic Church is the only completely scriptural Church.

Do Catholics believe that Mary is omnipotent?

No. God alone is omnipotent. But through Mary, we have access to the omnipotence of God.

How do you know that Mary hears you?

The Catholic Church guarantees that, and she is here to tell us the truth about such things in the name of Christ and with His authority. Reason also assures us that, as she could know our prayers in this life and pray for us in turn, so she can do so in the more perfect state in heaven. Finally, experience proves it, for she has manifested her power in thousands of concrete instances in answer to prayer.

The Rosary.

Attending a Catholic Church one evening, I was disgusted by the rigmarole called the Rosary. What is that Rosary?

The Rosary is a special form of devotion to Mary. One takes a set of beads, divided into five sections, each section consisting of one large bead and ten small ones. Holding the large bead, one says the Our Father, and on each of the small ones, the Hail Mary. Between each section or decade, the Gloria is said. Whilst saying the prayers, one meditates or thinks of the joys, or sorrows, or glories of Christ's life and of that of His Mother. It is a very beautiful form of prayer with which you were disgusted merely because you did not understand it.

The Rosary is a relic of the superstitious Middle Ages, when it was meant for ignorant people.

The use of beads dates from the earliest centuries. The prayers embodied in the Rosary were composed by Christ Himself in the case of the Our Father, and by the Angel Gabriel, Saint Elizabeth, and the Council of Ephesus in the 5th century, in the case of the Hail Mary. We are in very good company with those prayers. As a devotion, with its loving contemplation of the mysteries of the life, death and resurrection of Our Lord it appeals to rich and poor, to learned and ignorant alike, as Christianity itself was meant to do.

When were beads invented, and what do they symbolize?

It is impossible to say when beads were first used. As an aid to memory, the early Christians used to put a number of pebbles in one pocket, transferring them to another as they said each prayer, so that they could be sure of completing such prayers each day as their devotion inspired. Later, berries or pebbles were strung together for the purpose. In the Middle Ages, sections of these beads were adapted to the different meditations which compose the Rosary, the sections being a numerical help to meditate for a given period of time upon each allotted subject. The symbolism is expressed in the word Rosary. A Rosary is a garland of flowers. One rose does not make a Rosary. Prayers are the flowers of the spiritual life, and in offering that group of prayers, known as the Rosary, we lay a garland of spiritual flowers at the feet of God.

Christ did not have a crucifix or Rosary beads.

He made the first crucifix. That He did not use Rosary beads does not affect the question. He never had a copy of the New Testament in His hands, yet you do not reject the New Testament because of that!

Between each Our Father to God, it throws in ten prayers to Mary!

You've got it the wrong way round. Between each ten Hail Marys, an Our Father is said. The Rosary is essentially a devotion to Mary, honoring her whom God Himself so honored. And it honors her particularly in her relation to Christ, whose life is the subject of the meditations. The Our Father abstracts from the incarnation of Christ; the Hail Mary is full of reverence to Our Lord's birth into this world for us.

Would not the Rosary be just as efficient if said with one Our Father, one Hail Mary, and one Gloria?

It would not be the Rosary then, but some other type of devotion. Nor would such a devotion be as efficient, for meditation whilst saying ten Hail Marys is better than meditation whilst saying one. But your trouble seems to be based on the mere question of number. That is quite immaterial.

The question of numbers is not immaterial. Christ said, "Use not vain repetitions as do the heathen, who think in their much speaking to be heard."

Vain repetition in the manner of heathens is forbidden, but not useful repetition, which is not in the manner of heathens. Vain repetition relies mechanically upon the mere number of prayers or formulas uttered. But Catholics do not rely on the mere repetition of prayers, nor upon their multiplication, but on the intrinsic worth of each prayer and upon the fervor and earnestness with which it is said. Two prayers said well, one immediately after the other, are as good as the same two prayers said well with twenty-four hours between them. Time is nothing to God, in whose sight 1000 years are but as a day. He does not mind whether there be two seconds between our prayers or two years; the prayers themselves are just as pleasing to Him. If you take the principle behind your objection, and push it to its full conclusion, you could say the Our Father but once in your life. If you said it once each year, it would be repetition. How often may you say it? Once a month? Once a week? Once a day? If daily, what would be wrong with saying it hourly? If you have just concluded one Our Father, why may you not begin it again at once? Does it suddenly become an evil prayer?

If repetition adds to effectiveness, why stop at ten Hail Marys? Why not more?

It is the nature of this devotion that the Rosary should be composed of decades, or groups of ten. It would not be the Rosary otherwise. Repetition certainly adds to effectiveness, if the prayers are said well. Just before His passion, Christ prayed "the third time, saying the self-same prayer." Matthew 26:44. He thought it good to say the same prayer three times in succession. Why did He limit it to three times? If good to say it three times, why not twenty times? He thought three sufficient for His purpose. So, too, we consider the period taken by the recital of ten Hail Marys sufficient time for the amount of reflection we desire to give to each mystery of the Rosary.

Does not Scripture advise short prayer rather than long Rosaries?

No. Long hypocritical prayers are condemned. Prayer may be prolonged, but it must not be hypocritical, mechanical, or insincere. Christ said, "We ought always to pray, and not to faint." Luke 18:1. Again, "Watch ye therefore, praying at all times." Luke 21:36. He himself "went out into a mountain to pray, and he passed the whole night in prayer to God." Luke 6:12. "We cease not to pray for you," wrote Saint Paul (to the Colossians 1: 9). "Night and day we more abundantly pray for you," he wrote to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 3:10).

Anyway, short mental prayers must be better than long distracted prayers.

Short fervent interior prayers are better than long distracted vocal prayers. But, given equally fervent prayers said with due attention, long ones are better than short ones. It is certainly better to give more time to prayer than less! And if distractions do present themselves, it is better to give up the distractions than to give up the prayers. Mental prayer is good, but vocal prayer is equally good if said well, and sometimes better. Thus, Christ taught the Apostles a vocal prayer called the Our Father. So well did they learn it by heart that they were able to write it down years later word for word.

Why do you omit from that Our Father the words "For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever"?

Because Our Lord did not add those words to the prayer as He taught it. There is nothing wrong with the words in themselves. In fact, they are very beautiful. But they are not Sacred Scripture. Some early Catholic copyists wrote those words in a margin; later copyists mistakenly transcribed them into the text; and the Protestant translators made use of a copy of the New Testament with the words thus included. All scholars to-day admit the words to be an interpolation. We Catholics do not use them.

The Angelus.

Why do Catholic Churches ring bells at daybreak, noon, and sun set?

The ringing of these bells is to remind Catholics to say the Angelus, a short devotion in honor of the incarnation of Christ. Three rings are given three times separately, and then nine rings, according to an ancient custom. The devotion is called the Angelus because the first words of the prayers to be said begin as follows, "The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary." The Angelus, therefore, reminds us of the message of the Angel Gabriel who brought the good news of the birth of Jesus Christ. And Catholics are asked to begin the day by remembering this great benefit; to recollect it again at noon, and at sunset or the close of the day. An old English manuscript, written of course in England's Catholic days before the Reformation, says that the Angelus in the morning should remind us of Christ's resurrection at dawn; at noon of His death on the cross; and at eventide of His birth at midnight in the cave of Bethlehem. In any case, the Angelus is to remind Catholics of the fact that the Son of God came into this world for the redemption of mankind, and that they themselves should never forget it.

What do the three threes, and the nine bells signify?

The origin of the number of bells to be tolled is uncertain. The triple ringing reminds us of the Most Holy Trinity. The final nine bells may have been arranged merely for the sake of harmony and symmetry, although some writers see in that number a reminder of the nine choirs of Angels who invite us to adore God with them.

Devotion to the Saints.

Why pray to Saints? Is it not better to pray to God direct?

Not always. The same answer applies here as in the case of prayers to the Virgin Mary, who after all is the greatest of the Saints. God may wish to give certain favors through the intercession of some given Saint. In such a case, it is better to seek the intercession of that Saint as God wishes. I can decide to give you a gift myself, or to do so through a friend. In the latter case you do me greater

honor by accepting it from my friend than by refusing my way of giving it to you, and insolently demanding it directly from myself in person.

I pray that you may see the futility of praying to Saints who can do nothing for you. Christ is the only mediator.

By your very prayer, you are attempting to mediate between God and myself on my behalf. I do not criticize the principle of praying for others. I believe in that. But I do criticize your praying for me in violation of your own principles.

If the Saints cannot be mediators by praying for me, nor can you. Your prayers would be futile; they could do nothing for me; and you would be wasting your time.

The Lord's Prayer shows that God Himself hears our prayers.

Correct. And He hears the prayers we address to the Saints, and their prayers also on our behalf. And those prayers, added to our own, give us additional claims to be heard by God in a favorable way.

When did God tell anyone to pray to human beings?

When the Catholic Church teaches us that prayer to the Saints is right and useful, it is God teaching us that truth through His Church. But the doctrine is clearly enough indicated in Scripture also. I have mentioned Abraham's prayer for Sodom. The Jews asked Moses to go to speak to God on their behalf. God Himself said to Eliphaz, the Themanite (or Temanite), "My wrath is kindled against you... but my servant Job shall pray for you three. His face I will accept, that folly be not imputed to you." Job 42:8. Earlier in that same book we read, "Call now if there will be any that will answer you, and turn to some of the Saints." Job 5:1. His enemies meant that Job was too wicked to be heard, but they knew that it was lawful to invoke the Saints. Long after the death of Jeremiah, Onias said of that prophet, "This is the lover of his brethren and of the people of Israel. This is he that prays much for the people and for all the holy city; Jeremiah, the prophet of God." 2 Machabees 15:14. Saint James says that "the prayer of a just man avails much." (James 5:16) If his prayer is valuable, it is worth while to ask his prayers. If you say, "Yes. That is all right whilst a man is still in this life and on earth," I ask whether you think he has less power when in heaven with God? In Revelation 8:4, Saint John says that he saw "the prayers of the Saints ascending up before God from the hand of an angel." If I can ask my own mother to pray for me whilst she is still in this life, surely I can do so when she is with God! She does not know less when she rejoices in the Vision of God; she has not less interest in me; and she is not less charitably disposed towards me then. We Catholics believe in the Communion of Saints, and are in communion with them. But for you the doctrine of the Apostles Creed, "I believe in the Communion of Saints," must be a meaningless formula. Christ is not particularly honored by our ignoring those who loved and served Him best, and whom He loves so much. By what authority does the Catholic Church make Saints?

The decree of canonization does not make a Saint. It simply declares infallibly that a given person has lived such a holy life with the help of God's grace that he is a Saint. When someone like a Francis of Assisi, lives such a holy life that all people are compelled to admire it, the Church is often asked to say whether such a person is worthy to be honored publicly as a Saint. The Church then carefully collects all possible information, and, after due consideration, says yes or no. If the Church says yes, the name of the person to be venerated is put into the Canon or catalogue of those who have become Saints by their heroic lives of virtue. The Church has the authority of Christ for

these decisions; for He sent her with His authority to teach all nations in matters of faith and morals, and she could not tell us officially that a given person was a perfect model of Christian virtue if such a person were not. Who has the final say as to whether a soul deserves canonization?

The Pope. Before he defines that a given soul is indeed a Saint, the advocates of the cause must prove that the person in question exercised all Christian virtues in a heroic degree — supreme faith, hope, and charity; perfect prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Also, God's own testimony by proven miracles wrought through the person's intercession is required. The infallibility of the Church in such decisions is, as I have said, but an application of ordinary infallibility in matters of faith and morals, in so far as the Church could not err in proposing a given life as an exemplification of perfect Christian virtue. How does the Church know that those she calls Saints are in heaven?

With the assistance of the Holy Spirit, she can and does know. She knows God, and knows what holiness is. She examines the life of a holy person, and says that such a life certainly could not lead a soul to hell. The Church canonizes only those whose heroic virtue has been proved. And perfect charity before death destroys all sin, and all punishment due to sin. There is no place where such a soul could be save in heaven. Also, miracles wrought by God in honor of such a one are His guarantee. Why does the Church allot different duties to different Saints?

She does not. She asks the special protection and intercession of certain Saints in special circumstances; and this is based upon what we know of their particular interest whilst they were on earth, or upon favors obtained already through their intercession since their death. The worship of relics. Why do Catholics worship relics of Saints?

They do not worship relics as they worship God, by adoration. If you mean worship in the sense of honor or veneration, then Catholics certainly venerate the relics of Saints. The law, "Honor your father and your mother" extends to their persons, body and soul; to their reputations, and to all connected with them. We reverence their remains even after death. And if we are not to venerate the remains and relics of the Saints who have been so entirely consecrated to God, are we to desecrate them? Or are we to be blandly indifferent to them as to the bleached bones of some dead animal lying in the fields? The Catholic doctrine, forbidding adoration, yet commanding respect and veneration, is the only possible Christian conduct. I don't object to that kind of veneration. I object to the expecting of favors through relics.

No real difficulty arises in this matter. No one holds that material relics of themselves possess any innate talismanic value. But God Himself can certainly grant favors even of a temporal nature through the relics of Saints, thus honoring His Saints, and rewarding the faith and piety of some given Catholic. Saint Matthew tells us that the diseased came to Christ. "And they besought Him that they might touch but the hem of His garment. And as many as touched were made whole." Matthew 14:36. Again, we read of a woman who touched the hem of Christ's garment and who was cured. "And Jesus, knowing in Himself the virtue that had proceeded from Him, said: 'Who has touched my garments?' " (Mark 5:30.) You may reply that these incidents concerned Christ, and that, whilst he was still living in this world. But that does not affect the principle that God can grant temporal favors through inanimate things.

And if you look up 2 Kings 13:21, in your own Protestant version of the Bible, you will find that a dead man, who was being buried in the sepulcher of Elisha, was restored to life the moment his body came into contact with the bones of that great prophet of God. In the Acts of the Apostles, too,

we read of a most Catholic, and most un-Protestant procedure. "God wrought by the hand of Paul more than common miracles. So that even there were brought from his body to the sick, handkerchiefs and aprons, and the diseases departed from them." Acts 19:11-12. But you will notice that it was God who wrought these miracles. And we Catholics say that God can quite easily do similar things even in our own days. As a matter of historical fact, He has wrought such things throughout the course of the ages within the Catholic Church.

Are not relics received and venerated without a particle of proof that they are genuine?

No. The Catholic Church is very prudent in this matter, and her law declares that those relics alone may be publicly venerated which have authentic documents accompanying them, and proving them to be genuine. These documents can be given only by one authorized by the Holy See to grant them. If the documents be lost, no relic may be offered for public veneration by the faithful without a special decree from a Bishop who can guarantee the relic as genuine. But even should a Catholic venerate as a relic some object which is not authentic, such veneration is at least well meant, and directed towards the one whom the object is believed to represent.
