

Praying to Mary: Idolatry or the Will of God?

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." Now six stone jars were standing there, for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the steward of the feast." So they took it. When the steward of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, "Every man serves the good wine first; and when men have drunk freely, then the poor wine; but you have kept the good wine until now." This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

~ John 2:1-11

X OF ALL HUMAN PASSIONS, love and its expression is the most likely to be misunderstood. Love for Mary by Catholics is a case in point. Caught up in the contemplation of what God has done for Mary, preachers, poets, artists, architects, and everyday Catholics have given to Mary titles, praises, and prayers that naturally pour out of the human heart and mind when rapt in love. But for all its emphasis on Mary, the Church has always and consistently taught that Mary is a mere human, like us, and is therefore not to be adored, since adoration is due to God alone. Mary is honored and venerated, but not adored. Long ago, St. Ambrose said: "Mary was the temple of God, not the God of the temple."

Many who are not familiar with Catholicism, however, see Catholic veneration of Mary as wor-



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ship. Making the misperception worse is the fact that Catholics pray to Mary, seemingly therefore asking favors from a human even though we profess to believe that Jesus is the “one mediator between God and men” (1 Tm 2:5).

The Church teaches that there is an infinite difference between the human person of Mary and the divine person of her Son, Jesus. When Catholics pray to Mary, they are praying to one who is human like themselves, but who is nearer the Throne of God than any other created being.

All the honor and veneration that is given to Mary has its source in her freely-chosen cooperation with the will and purpose of God in the Incarnation — the conception of her Son, the second person of the

Trinity, in her womb. The Christ-centered dogma of the Mother of God (in Greek, *Theotokos*, or “God-bearer”), declared by the Church at the Council of Ephesus in 431, emphatically highlights the unique and divinely-conceived relationship of Mary with Christ, the Son of God. The God-designed Incarnation clearly reveals the stunning relationship that the Father himself created between the Holy Trinity and this specially-chosen human person — one of our own, but kept free from original sin because of the intended motherhood that God asked of her. In the Incarnation, she most wonderfully became the daughter of the Father, mother of his Son, and spouse of the Holy Spirit (see Lk 1:35).

Because God so honored Mary and brought her into the most intimate possible relationship with the Holy Trinity, faithful Catholics throughout history joyfully — and sometimes exuberantly — responded to the divine example by paying honor to Mary. He specifically chose her and made his request of her to accomplish the salvation of all humanity. Gladly do Catholics request of her, as God himself did, favors and needs dear to our own hearts. In her wholehearted cooperation with the Father’s plan of salvation, from Jesus’ conception to his salvific death on the cross, Mary learned how to accept and grant requests. Therefore, we her other children (see Rv 12:17) approach her with a confidence born of our knowledge that her maternal heart will respond with the same tender compassion as it did at the marriage feast at Cana (see Jn 2:1-5) and that Jesus, in turn, will grant her prayers to him on our behalf as he did at Cana (see Jn 2:6-10).

When Mary was newly pregnant with Jesus, she sang that “*he who is mighty has done great things for me*” (Lk 1:49) and prophesied that “*all generations will call me blessed*” (Lk 1:48). With the little life he had left in him as he hung near death on the cross, Jesus gave Mary to us, in the person of the beloved disciple, as our mother, and gave us to her as her children (see Jn 19:26-27). Given this prophecy and that she was her Son’s dying bequest to us, honoring Mary and going to her in prayer pays heed to God’s *intended* path to approach him who is the source of all grace and goodness. We all are to offer supplications to God for each other (see Mt 5:44; Lk 6:28; Acts 7:60; 2 Cor 13:9; Col 4:3; Jas 5:16), and Jesus offers his Mother preeminently in this role, presenting our requests to her Son. The wine that Mary’s request brought forth from Jesus’ hands at Cana will flow in an endless abundant stream until the end of time.

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