

From the Heart

A series of essays on basic Catholic doctrines and beliefs

Written by Bill Dunn - Published by Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish, Harwinton, Conn.

Vol. 1 No. 4 ©2008

Do Catholics Worship Mary?

One of the most divisive topics in the Christian world is the Virgin Mary. Many people accuse Catholics of worshipping Mary as if she were God, which the Bible clearly calls idolatry. It is often said that Catholics have made Mary the fourth person of the Holy Trinity.

Do Catholics actually worship Mary? The answer is no. Mary is not God. She was created by God, and like all human beings, she needed God's grace. When Mary visited Elizabeth, soon after the Annunciation, she offered a heartfelt prayer of praise to the Lord, called the Magnificat. In that prayer Mary proclaimed, "My spirit rejoices in God my savior" (Luke 1:47). It is clear that Mary is the humble servant of God, not a god herself. It indeed would be idolatry for someone to worship Mary as if she were God.

But Mary certainly is very special. By saying yes to God's request to be the vessel through whom the Incarnation would occur, by saying yes and becoming the mother of the divine Savior, Mary became the most unique woman in history. During the Magnificat, Mary said in humble awe, "Behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:48). For many generations, Catholics have called her just that: the Blessed Virgin Mary.

As the mother of our Lord, Mary's special position makes her deserving of honor and devotion, but not worship. This is exactly what Catholics do: express honor and devotion toward Mary. Unfortunately, this is often interpreted as idolatrous worship.

To better understand the Catholic position regarding Mary, we need to understand the doctrine of the Communion of Saints. But first we must make an important distinction. To many Christians, prayer is synonymous with worship. Whenever someone is praying, that person is worshipping the Lord. But to Catholics, prayer is often defined as spiritual communication. It can contain elements of worship, of course, when we pray directly to the Lord. But it also can be simple communication, for example, asking a saint to pray for us.

The Catholic doctrine of the Communion of Saints can best be understood by looking at three teachings straight from the Bible. (Teachings, by the way, that virtually all Christians agree with.)

1. Those who died in faith are still alive to God. In Mark 12:26-27, Jesus said, "Have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God told him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac,

and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead but of the living. You are greatly misled."

2. Those who died in faith can observe us here on earth. In Hebrews 12:1, immediately following a list of many saints in Heaven, it says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

3. All believers are commanded to pray for one another. In the Bible, St. Paul made the request, "Pray for us," many different times. For example: Colossians 4:3, 1 Thessalonians 5:25, and 2 Thessalonians 3:1. St. James wrote in his epistle, "Pray for each another....The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective" (James 5:16).

We are commanded in Scripture to pray for one another, and many Protestant groups are famous for being "prayer warriors," offering up fervent prayer for those who are sick and in need. In some Christian communities, for example, if a person is hurt in a car accident, a telephone prayer chain is started, and within 20 minutes literally hundreds of people are praying for the injured person. This is very impressive.

Catholics, of course, also pray for those who are sick and in need. But since Scripture is clear that those who have gone before us in faith are definitely among the living, Catholics simply include the saints in Heaven—that great cloud of witnesses—in their prayer requests and "prayer chains."

Who better to ask for intercessory prayer than those who are continually in the Lord's presence? And without a doubt, Mary is the pre-eminent, the most special, of all the saints in Heaven.

Catholics do not worship these saints. But we ask them to pray for us when we forget to pray, or when we're too tired to pray, or when we don't know what to pray for, or when we get too fearful and flustered to pray very well.

Occasionally during Mass we will say the Penitential Rite, which concludes with, "...and I ask the Blessed Mary, ever virgin, all the angels and saints, and you, my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God."

This is a simple and beautiful expression of the Catholic doctrine of the Communion of Saints. Of all the saints in Heaven, no one can pray more fervently and effectively for us than the Blessed Virgin Mary. Being devoted to her and asking for her intercessory prayer is not idolatrous—it is based directly on Scripture.