

Why Do Catholics Worship Mary?



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If you were to visit one of those big old Catholic Churches you might see an old woman kneeling in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary. There might be flowers and a bank of candles flickering. The woman might be clutching what looks like a necklace of beads--her eyes are closed and her lips are moving in prayer. The statue of Mary gazes down on her with a loving expression, and you might conclude that the old woman was worshipping Mary.

It would be easy enough to conclude that, but you would be wrong. The woman is not worshipping Mary and she would be surprised and bewildered to hear that someone thought she was. The necklace is a rosary and the old woman uses it to help focus her prayers. The rosary is a system of meditation on twenty events in the life of Jesus, and by meditating on these Bible stories the woman is drawing closer to the Lord Jesus. In fact, this is one of her ways of having a personal relationship with Jesus.

A non-Catholic might still ask, "Maybe you Catholics don't worship Mary, but why do you pray to her and why do you make such a big deal about her? Jesus is the one. Why do you need Mary?"

To understand why Catholics consider Mary so highly we need to do a bit of theology. A truly Biblical understanding of Jesus Christ is that he is the Son of God--the second person of the Trinity who took

human flesh and became a particular man in a particular place at a particular point in history. As the creed says, he is "God from God, Light from Light, True God, Begotten not made. Of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made." As John puts it, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, full of grace and truth."

The next question is, "How did God do that?" Some people imagine that the Son of God came into the world through Mary as if she were a kind of conduit or channel. If that were the case Jesus would be a kind of alien who used a woman as a mechanism to "beam down" to earth. Others imagine that Mary was like a surrogate mother who carried a God child in her womb, then gave birth and was done.

In his letter to the Galatians Paul says, "In the fullness of time God sent forth his Son, born of a woman." Notice Paul does not say born "through" a

woman or born "by" a woman. He says God's son was born "of" a woman.

From the first centuries of the church Christians have believed the Son of God

If you have questions regarding Catholic beliefs and practices, Father Longenecker will try to answer them in future columns. Please send your questions to olr@charlestondiocese.org.

Fr. Longenecker is the co-author (with David Gustafson) of "Our Lady? A Catholic-Evangelical Debate" This book provides an in depth discussion of Mary's role in God's plan of salvation. If you would like to learn more check out the bookstore on Fr. Longenecker's website: dwightlongenecker.com

took his human flesh from his mother Mary. In other words, Jesus would have looked like Mary. Furthermore, as any mother knows, the bond between a mother and her child is wonderful, deep and mysterious. Part of the child stays with the mother and part of the mother always stays with the child. This is true biologically, psychologically and spiritually. This would have been true with Mary and Jesus too.

This is why we call Mary "the mother of God"--not because God the Father has a mother, but because Mary is the mother of Jesus Christ the Son of God. This title goes back to the third century, and it was established not as a way of honoring Mary, but as a way of affirming the true nature of Jesus her son. Mary was therefore

unique in all of God's creation. No other created being--not even the angels--had such a total and amazing union with God.

Catholics do honor Mary, but in that Catholic Church, did you notice the statue of Mary is off to one side? She is not our central point of worship. Our worship is focussed on the pulpit where Jesus-- the Word and Bread of Life is broken open for us. We are focussed on the altar where Jesus the Bread of Life is made real for us. The central point in our church is the crucifix, reminding us that "we preach Christ and him crucified."

The fact of the matter is, we would never have had Jesus without Mary so we Catholics like to challenge our non Catholic brothers and sisters and say, "Why do you not honor the Virgin Mary? Don't you honor in your church the great heroes of the Bible, the great heroes of the faith? In her total obedience to the Lord, and her great love of Jesus she is surely the greatest hero of all. Is it right that you should neglect her and treat her as just a footnote in salvation history?"

The theologians of the early church have taught that without a proper understanding of Mary one cannot have a proper understanding of the truth about Jesus Christ. Church history shows this to be true. In age after age, when devotion to Mary is reduced, the full understanding of who Jesus Christ really is also suffers. Therefore we honor the Blessed Virgin Mary who said, "The Lord has done great things for me." And in honoring her we give worship and praise to God her savior.

