

# **Why Catholics Honor Mary Without Worshiping Her**

## **1. Why I Needed to Sort This Out**

Mary was one of the parts of Catholicism I knew I could not just brush past. From the outside, the whole thing can look like too much: the Rosary, asking for her prayers, Mother of God, Queen of Heaven, the Immaculate Conception, the Assumption, statues, feast days. If I put all of that in one pile, I understand why someone from a Protestant background hears it and thinks, 'That sounds like worship.' That was the concern I wanted to take seriously instead of answering with a quick Catholic slogan.

What helped me was separating the questions. First: what does the Church actually claim about Mary? Second: does any of it give her something that belongs to God alone? Once I did that, I started noticing that the Marian dogmas are not really four attempts to make Mary bigger. Mother of God is tied to who Jesus is. The Immaculate Conception is about what Christ's grace can do. The Assumption points to resurrection. And Catholic worship still draws a hard line between the Creator and every creature, including Mary.

I also did not want to force every doctrine into the same kind of proof. Some claims show up very early and very plainly. Others take longer to develop and are defined much later. I think the honest way to test them is to read Scripture, look at what the early Christians actually said, and then ask whether the later doctrine grows out of that material or contradicts it. That is the approach I use here.

## **2. Why Mary Was Hard for Me**

Mary was probably the biggest Catholic issue I had to untangle. I had no problem saying she was the mother of Jesus. What bothered me was everything that seemed to come after that: asking for her prayers, calling her Mother of God, saying she stayed a virgin, the Immaculate Conception, the Assumption, titles like Queen of Heaven, statues, rosaries, all of it. From the outside I can see why a Protestant looks at that and thinks Catholics slowly turned Mary into something she was never supposed to be.

So I tried to slow it down and ask two separate questions. What does the Church actually teach about Mary? And then, once I know what it teaches, does any of it amount to worship? That helped a lot. I started seeing that the Marian doctrines aren't really trying to make Mary bigger than Jesus. Most of them are tied directly to who Jesus is, what grace does, and what God accomplished in the Incarnation.

I also don't think every Marian doctrine should be defended the same way. Some are easier to see right away. If Jesus is truly God and Mary really is his mother, then Mother of God follows pretty directly. The Immaculate Conception and Assumption took much longer for the Church to define. I would rather say that honestly than pretend there is one verse that settles

every question. The Catholic case is Scripture read together with the worship, teaching, and memory of the early Church.

### **3. First, Is Any of This Actually Worship?**

This is where I had to start, because if Catholicism actually taught that Mary was divine, I would be done. It doesn't. Mary is a creature. God made her. Christ saved her. She isn't part of the Trinity, she doesn't have divine power by nature, and Catholics don't offer the Mass to her. Whatever honor Catholics give Mary has to stay on the creature side of the Creator-creature line.

Catholic theology has old words for that distinction: latria for the adoration owed to God alone, dulia for the honor given to the saints, and hyperdulia for Mary's unique honor because of her relationship to Christ. The words themselves aren't the important part. The distinction is. Vatican II says Marian devotion 'differs essentially' from the adoration given to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Lumen Gentium 66), and the Catechism says the same thing (CCC 971).

The simplest way I found to think about it was sacrifice. In the Bible, worship in its fullest sense is tied to sacrifice. Catholics offer the Eucharistic sacrifice to God alone. There is no Mass offered to Mary as if she were a goddess. A church can be named after Mary, Peter, Paul, or another saint, but the sacrifice on the altar is still offered to God.

The same thing helped me with asking Mary to pray for us. If I ask another Christian to pray for me, I haven't made that person my savior. Catholicism is saying that death doesn't cut the saints off from Christ's body. They are alive in him, and any prayer they offer is still a prayer to God. Revelation pictures heavenly saints presenting prayers before God (Rev. 5:8; 8:3-4). Once I understood that framework, the practice stopped looking like Catholics were trying to get around Jesus.

### **4. Mary in the New Testament**

#### **Luke Really Does Honor Mary**

Luke gives Mary more attention than I had noticed. Gabriel greets her as one highly favored by God (Luke 1:28). Elizabeth, while filled with the Holy Spirit, calls her 'blessed among women' and calls the child in her womb 'my Lord' (Luke 1:42-43). Mary herself says all generations will call her blessed (Luke 1:48). None of that makes her divine, but it does make it hard for me to say that honoring Mary is automatically unbiblical. Scripture honors her because of what God did in her.

And Mary doesn't keep that praise for herself. Her response is, 'My soul magnifies the Lord.' That matters to me. Healthy Marian devotion should do the same thing. If it stops at Mary, something has gone wrong. Vatican II even warns Catholics against exaggeration and tells teachers to explain Marian privileges in a way that leads people back to Christ (Lumen Gentium 67).

### **Cana Helped Me Understand Intercession**

Cana is one of the scenes I keep coming back to. Mary sees the problem and tells Jesus, 'They have no wine' (John 2:3). She doesn't perform the miracle. Jesus does. And the last thing Mary says is, 'Do whatever he tells you' (John 2:5). That feels very close to what Catholics mean by Marian intercession: she brings a need to Christ and then points people back to him.

### **At the Cross and in the Upper Room**

John also puts Mary at the cross, where Jesus tells the beloved disciple, 'Behold, your mother' (John 19:27). At the very least Jesus is caring for his mother. Catholics also see a deeper meaning there, with the beloved disciple standing for Christ's disciples more broadly. I don't think that deeper reading cancels the literal one. Then in Acts 1:14 Mary is simply there praying with the apostles while the Church waits for Pentecost. She isn't above the Church. She is part of the praying Church.

### **5. Mary as the New Eve**

One thing that surprised me was how early the Eve-Mary comparison shows up. It isn't a medieval idea. Justin Martyr, in the second century, contrasts Eve's disobedience with Mary's faith (Dialogue with Trypho 100). Irenaeus pushes the same idea further and says the knot tied by Eve's unbelief is loosened by Mary's faith and obedience (Against Heresies 3.22.4).

That doesn't make Mary a second savior. Irenaeus is very clear that Christ is the new Adam and the one who saves. His point is that God includes a real human response in the story of redemption. Eve hears the serpent and disobeys; Mary hears the angel and says yes. Christ saves. Mary receives, obeys, and cooperates by grace.

I think that distinction matters because Catholic language can sound much stronger when it gets pulled out of context. Catholics can say Mary 'cooperated' in God's saving plan because Luke really does show her freely saying, 'Let it be to me according to your word' (Luke 1:38). Cooperation isn't equality. God can involve a creature in his work without turning that creature into God.

### **6. Mary and the Ark of the New Covenant**

I completely missed the Ark connection at first. In the Old Testament the Ark is connected with God's covenant presence. Luke's account of Mary visiting Elizabeth sounds a lot like the Ark's journey in 2 Samuel 6. David asks how the Ark of the Lord can come to him; Elizabeth asks why the mother of her Lord should come to her. The Ark stays in the hill country for three months; Mary stays about three months. David leaps before the Ark; John leaps in Elizabeth's womb (2 Sam. 6:9-16; Luke 1:39-56).

Obviously the claim isn't that Mary is literally the Ark. This is typology. The old Ark carried the signs of the covenant; Mary carries the incarnate Son of God. Revelation also places the heavenly Ark immediately before the vision of the woman connected with the Messiah (Rev. 11:19-12:5). I wouldn't build every Marian doctrine on this parallel, but it helped me understand why Christians came to speak so strongly about Mary's holiness.

## **7. Why 'Mother of God' Is Really About Jesus**

'Mother of God' used to sound like too much to me. I heard it as if Catholics were saying Mary came before God or somehow produced the divine nature. That's not what Theotokos means. It means the person Mary gave birth to is God the Son in the flesh.

Elizabeth already calls Mary 'the mother of my Lord' (Luke 1:43). The title became a major issue in the fifth century because Christians were arguing about Christ himself. If Mary is only mother of a separate human person next to the divine Word, then Jesus has effectively been split in two. The Council of Ephesus in 431 defended Theotokos because it was defending the unity of Christ's person. Cyril's first anathema makes the point directly: Emmanuel is truly God, so the Virgin can rightly be called Mother of God.

John of Damascus later puts it about as clearly as I can: Mary didn't give the divine nature its beginning. She gave birth according to the flesh to the one eternal Son who is truly God (On the Orthodox Faith 3.12). Once I understood that, the title stopped looking like an attempt to make Mary divine. It is really a statement about Jesus.

## **8. The Perpetual Virginity of Mary**

The perpetual virginity doctrine says Mary was a virgin before, during, and after Jesus' birth. Matthew and Luke plainly teach the virginal conception. The part Protestants usually push back on is what happened afterward: did Mary and Joseph have a normal marital relationship and other children?

The main objection is the New Testament's reference to Jesus' 'brothers and sisters.' Catholics answer that the biblical language for close relatives is wider than modern English usage, and that the named brothers James and Joseph are connected elsewhere to another Mary (Matt. 13:55; 27:56). Another objection is Matthew 1:25, which says Joseph didn't know Mary 'until' she gave birth. But 'until' doesn't automatically imply the opposite afterward. Scripture can use the word simply to describe what was true up to a point without telling us what happened later.

The history is what made me take this doctrine more seriously. Jerome wrote an entire work against Helvidius around A.D. 383 defending Mary's perpetual virginity. Ambrose treats her virginity as continuing, and Augustine later speaks of it as Catholic belief. The Catechism uses the ancient title *Aeiparthenos*, 'ever-virgin' (CCC 499). So even if someone remains

unconvinced by the biblical arguments, this isn't something Catholics suddenly invented in the late Middle Ages.

I also think this teaching needs to stay in proportion. Catholicism isn't saying marriage or sex is dirty. Marriage is a sacrament. Mary's perpetual virginity is about a unique vocation tied to the Incarnation, not a condemnation of ordinary Christian marriage.

## **9. The Immaculate Conception**

This may be the Marian dogma people misunderstand most. The Immaculate Conception isn't the virgin birth of Jesus. It is about Mary's own conception: from the first moment of her existence, God preserved her from original sin by grace, because of the merits of Christ.

That last part is important. Catholics aren't saying Mary didn't need a Savior. Mary calls God 'my Savior' (Luke 1:47). The claim is that Christ saved her in an unusual way - by preventing the stain of original sin rather than cleansing it later. The old comparison that helped me is someone being saved from a pit before falling into it. The person is still saved; the rescue just happens earlier.

There isn't a verse that says word for word, 'Mary was immaculately conceived.' I don't think pretending otherwise helps. The Catholic case is cumulative: Gabriel's unusual greeting in Luke 1:28, the New Eve and Ark patterns, Mary's role in the Incarnation, and the Church's growing conviction about her holiness. Augustine, while arguing that everyone depends on grace, refuses to include Mary in his discussion of personal sin 'out of honor to the Lord' (On Nature and Grace 42). That isn't the 1854 definition yet, but it shows how unusually Christians were already speaking about her holiness.

This is one place where I think honesty matters. The exact question of Mary's conception took centuries to work out, and medieval theologians really did debate it. When Pius IX defined the doctrine in 1854, he didn't say Mary was outside Christ's redemption. He grounded the whole privilege in the merits of Jesus Christ. The language developed, but the final doctrine still depends completely on Christ.

## **10. The Assumption of Mary**

The Assumption teaches that when Mary finished her earthly life, God brought her body and soul into heavenly glory. The definition doesn't settle whether she died first. Eastern Christians normally speak about her Dormition, or 'falling asleep,' and many Catholics believe she died before being assumed.

There also isn't a New Testament sentence that says, 'Mary was assumed into heaven.' The Catholic case is based on the Church's received tradition and on how Mary fits into the wider biblical pattern. Scripture already gives examples of God taking people in extraordinary

ways, like Enoch and Elijah, so bodily assumption isn't an impossible idea. Revelation 12, along with the New Eve and Ark themes, became part of the Church's reflection too.

The historical evidence here is later than it is for something like the Eucharist or apostolic succession, and I think that should be admitted up front. Dormition and Assumption traditions become especially visible in late antiquity. By John Damascene's time the belief is explicit and tied to established liturgical celebration. Pius XII's 1950 definition in *Munificentissimus Deus* appeals to that long reception.

I wouldn't tell someone that Ignatius of Antioch was already defining the Assumption in A.D. 110, because he wasn't. The Catholic argument here depends a lot more on doctrinal development and on whether Christ really gave the Church authority to guard and clarify the apostolic faith. That larger authority question matters.

### **11. Asking Mary and the Saints to Pray for Us**

The verse I hear most against Marian intercession is 1 Timothy 2:5: Christ is the one mediator between God and man. Catholics agree with that. Jesus alone reconciles us to the Father through his incarnation, death, and resurrection. Asking Mary to pray doesn't compete with that any more than asking my brother to pray for me does. In the same chapter Paul tells Christians to make intercessions for others (1 Tim. 2:1). Any created intercession works because of Christ, not around him.

The next question is whether Christians in heaven can still take part in that intercession. Revelation pictures heavenly figures offering prayers before God (Rev. 5:8; 8:3-4), and Jesus says God is God of the living, not the dead (Luke 20:38). The practice also shows up early in Christian history. Sub Tuum Praesidium asks the Theotokos for protection and intercession. Scholars disagree on the exact date of the surviving papyrus, with proposals from the third to fifth century, so I wouldn't pretend that part is settled. Still, it is ancient evidence, not a medieval invention.

### **12. "Queen of Heaven" and the Jeremiah Objection**

'Queen of Heaven' used to set off alarm bells for me because Jeremiah condemns pagan worship connected with that title. I think that concern is fair. The question is whether Catholics mean the same thing Jeremiah was condemning. They don't. Catholic use comes from the Davidic kingdom, where the king's mother could serve as queen mother. In 1 Kings 2:19 Solomon rises to meet Bathsheba, bows to her, and gives her a throne at his right hand. She also intercedes with the king.

If Jesus is the eternal Davidic King, calling his mother queen fits that royal family pattern. It isn't saying she is a goddess. Revelation 12 also shows a heavenly woman connected with the Messiah and wearing a crown. I still think Catholics need to explain the title carefully

because it is easy to misunderstand, but the Christian meaning is completely different from worshipping a pagan deity.

### **13. What About "Mediatrix" or "Co-redemptrix"?**

These titles need more care than Catholics sometimes give them. 'Mediatrix' has been used to describe Mary's subordinate maternal intercession, but Vatican II immediately says that her role depends entirely on Christ and neither adds to nor takes away from his unique mediation (Lumen Gentium 60-62). 'Co-redemptrix' has appeared in devotional and theological language, but it isn't one of the four Marian dogmas, and in English it can sound like Mary is an equal partner with Jesus even though that isn't what the term is supposed to mean.

For me the safest rule is simple: Jesus Christ alone is the Redeemer in the full and proper sense. Mary was redeemed by him. Anything she does in God's plan is by grace and is infinitely below Christ's saving work. If a Marian title makes her sound like a second Savior, I would rather explain it much better or just not use it.

### **14. The Four Marian Dogmas in One Place**

After going through everything separately, this is the short version I keep in my head:

Mother of God: Mary is mother of the one person Jesus Christ, and that person is truly God. The doctrine protects Christ's identity.

Perpetual Virginity: Mary's virginal motherhood was unique and enduring. The doctrine protects the singular character of the Incarnation and reflects very early Christian belief.

Immaculate Conception: Mary was saved by Christ in a singular preventative way from the first moment of her existence. The doctrine is about the power of Christ's grace.

Assumption: God brought Mary, body and soul, into heavenly glory at the completion of her earthly life. The doctrine points toward the resurrection promised to the whole Church.

### **15. The Early Church Was Hard for Me to Ignore**

The early writers changed the way I looked at all of this. Marian theology didn't begin as a side hobby that pulled attention away from Jesus. Justin and Irenaeus use Mary while explaining Christ as the new Adam and the reversal of the fall. Ignatius emphasizes her virginity while defending the reality of the Incarnation. Ephesus uses Theotokos because the Church is protecting the confession that Jesus is one divine Person. Even the later doctrines keep circling back to grace, incarnation, resurrection, and Christ.

That doesn't mean every Catholic custom or every sentence somebody has ever said about Mary is automatically healthy. Vatican II itself warns against exaggeration and shallow sentimentality. Popular devotion can get out of balance. But an abuse of a doctrine isn't the same

thing as the doctrine. The Church's actual teaching stays clear: Mary is the greatest redeemed creature, and God alone is adored.

## **16. Where I Draw the Line Between Honor and Worship**

This is the line that finally made sense to me. If Catholics taught that Mary was uncreated, all-powerful, part of the Trinity, the source of grace by her own nature, or the one to whom divine sacrifice is offered, I would call that worship too. Catholic teaching denies all of those things.

I also understand why kneeling near a statue or icon looks like worship if you grew up thinking the posture itself decides the issue. But Scripture has people bow before kings, prophets, parents, and others without every act of bowing becoming divine adoration. The meaning of the act matters. Catholic theology still reserves adoration for God.

So I don't think the best question is, 'Do Catholics do things around Mary that look strange to me?' I think the better question is, 'What do they think they are doing, and does that distinction make sense biblically and historically?' After working through it, I think it does.

## **17. Where I Ended Up**

I don't believe Catholic devotion to Mary is worship. I think that accusation usually happens because prayer, honor, kneeling, titles, intercession, and worship all get collapsed into one category. Catholicism doesn't use the words that way, and biblical culture didn't either. God remains absolutely unique as Creator and as the one to whom adoration and sacrifice belong.

The doctrines also make more sense to me when I stop looking at them as random claims about Mary. Mother of God protects who Jesus is. Perpetual virginity points to the uniqueness of the Incarnation. The Immaculate Conception says something about the power of Christ's grace. The Assumption points toward Christ's victory over death. Intercession assumes the body of Christ isn't broken apart by death.

I still think Catholics can make this harder than it needs to be by using bad explanations or overly dramatic language. But when I read Scripture next to Justin, Irenaeus, Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine, Cyril, John Damascene, and the actual Church definitions, I don't see a hidden goddess cult. I see Christians honoring Mary because of Jesus while still drawing a hard line around the worship that belongs to God alone.

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