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IS OUR VENERATION TO OUR LADY "Mariolatry"?

FRANCIS J. CONNELL, C.SS.R.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

The Very Rev. Francis J. Connell, C.SS.R., formerly Dean of the School of Sacred Theology of the Catholic University of America, is perhaps the best known theologian in the United States. Born in Boston in 1888, Father Connell studied at the Boston Latin School, Boston College, and the Angelicum, Rome, from which he received his doctorate in sacred theology in 1927.

After his ordination to the priesthood as a Redemptorist in 1913, Father Connell served as professor at Mt. Alphonsus Seminary, Esopus, New York, and at the Catholic University. Well known for his lecturing and radio addresses, he was also first president of the Catholic Theological Society of America and past president of the seminary section of the National Catholic Educational Association.

Father Connell's first nationally published article was "Our Lady and the Sacraments," printed appropriately enough, in the American Ecclesiastical Review, a periodical to which he has continued to contribute regularly for forty years. Besides articles in many other theological and secular journals, Father Connell has published more than fifty pamphlets, several translations of foreign works, and five of his own volumes: A Modern Apostle (1925), De Sacramentis Ecclesiae (1935), Morals in Politics and Professions (1946), Outlines of Moral Theology (1953), and Sunday Sermon Outlines (1955).

A selected bibliography of Father Connell's writings appears in the June, 1958, issue of the American Ecclesiastical Review, which was devoted exclusively to a study of Father Connell's contribution to Catholic life and teaching.

Previous Marian Reprint, no. 8, featured Father Connell's "Mary, conceived without sin." The present number is taken from the American Ecclesiastical Review, vol. CXL, no. 2, (February, 1959), pp. 73-78.

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IS OUR VENERATION TO OUR LADY "MARIOLATRY"?

FRANCIS J. CONNELL, C.SS.R.

One of the most frequent objections made by non-Catholics against the Catholic Church is the charge that Catholics in practice are guilty of "Mariolatry." They say that our devotion to Mary is excessive, that we give her the honor that is due only to God by ascribing to her a power and dignity that are actually divine. We attribute our salvation to her rather than to Jesus Christ, they claim. These charges seem to have increased in frequency and vehemence since Pope Pius XII solemnly defined the doctrine of Mary's Assumption.

The first reaction of many Catholics to such objections is to show resentment, to accuse those who present them with bigotry or ignorance, and to dismiss their arguments with a brief and vigorous reply which often is in no wise an adequate explanation of the topic involved.

To my mind, this is an incorrect — and often uncharitable — way of acting. It is true, some of those who bring up these objections are prejudiced and bigoted; but I believe that many others who question Catholics about their devotion to the Blessed Virgin are sincerely disturbed about the way in which some Catholics speak and act in relation to the Mother of God. They are not actually ignorant or bigoted, but are honestly seeking enlightenment about our attitude toward Mary. And they have a right to an answer which will be clear and exact and which will correctly explain the matter to anyone who is honest and intelligent.

In the first place, let us admit without hesitation that there are some Catholics whose manner of devotion toward our Lady is not in accordance with sound Catholic teaching and practice, and can justly be said to be exaggerated and excessive. I have seen Catholics enter a church and go directly to the altar of our Lady without any recognition of the Blessed Sacrament; and when their devotions to Mary were ended they left the church without making even a genuflection toward the tabernacle. Doubtless it was to rectify such an unfortunate custom that the Holy See, in 1923, granted an indulgence to those who, on entering a church, proceed at once to the altar of the Blessed Sacrament and make even a brief adoration there. In Europe I have seen churches in which the altar

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1. Raccolta, n. 147.
of Mary was ablaze with light and adorned with fragrant flowers, while the altar of the Blessed Sacrament, hidden in some obscure corner, had no other adornment than a sanctuary light and a tabernacle veil. There were many persons kneeling before the former, very few before the latter.

Surely, this is not right, nor is it consistent with our repeated statements that honor is due in the first place to God, that He alone is worthy of latria while our Lady receives only hyperdulia, that her place in the economy of salvation is to lead us to God, etc. And it can easily happen that sincere non-Catholics, seeing the emphasis that the practices we have described put on devotion to Mary to the apparent neglect of the adoration that we owe to God, could be scandalized and could be deterred from further investigation of the Catholic faith.

Moreover, I believe that when priests are publicly speaking about our Lady they should refrain from statements which, though they can be interpreted correctly and may even be found in reputable theological manuals, are very likely to be misunderstood by the hearers, who will accordingly conceive a false notion about the Catholic teaching on our Lady. For example, the expression "We can never praise Mary too highly" (which I believe is the sense of De Maria nunquam satis) might be taken literally and the conclusion drawn that we can ascribe infinite power and dignity to the Mother of God — though this axiom is perfectly true in the sense that we can never fully comprehend and express the greatness of Mary’s grace and glory. Again, there is an axiom that is found in some theology textbooks, "What God can do by His command, thou, O Virgin canst do by thy prayer" (Quod Deus imperio, tu prece, Virgo, potes). This axiom might lead some to conclude that according to Catholic teaching Mary is equal to God — the very charge which non-Catholics are constantly making and which we are constantly denying.

However, the fact that some Catholics practice an exaggerated devotion to our Lady and the fact that expressions are sometimes used in reference to her which may be misunderstood should not deter Catholics, both priests and people, from cultivating toward Mary a devotion that is fully in accord with the teaching of the Church, despite the attacks and the ridicule of some non-Catholics. On the contrary, these circumstances make it all the more necessary that Catholics should have a clear and adequate understanding of the basis of the honor the Church renders to Mary, so that their own devotional practices will be properly regulated and they will be enabled to give a correct explanation of the Catholic attitude toward our Lady to non-Catholics who question them on this matter.

It is difficult to see how anyone who admits the fundamental Christian doctrine of the divinity of Jesus Christ can fail to admit the reasonable-
ness of the honor paid to Mary by the Catholic Church. Sincere non-
Catholics who do not grant the force of tradition or the infallible teaching
authority of the Church will not concede some of the privileges ascribed
to Mary by Catholics as proved facts, but at least they should admit that
Catholic doctrine and practice in respect to the Blessed Virgin are not
absurd or derogatory to the adoration due to God, but on the contrary
are quite reasonable and consistent with Christian principles. Of course,
this supposes that the Catholic attitude toward Mary is explained to these
persons exactly and adequately. And this means that priests must them-

Mary is truly the Mother of God. That is the fundamental reason for
the great honor we give her. For if God conferred on her this dignity,
far superior to any privilege given to men or angels, why should we not
honor her as the most exalted of creatures? At the same time, we may
not forget that she is a mere creature and that there is an infinity between
her excellence and that of God. Actually, whenever we honor her our
intention is to extend that honor to Him who gratuitously chose Her for
the high office of Mother of God. To neglect the adoration due to her
Son through exaggerated esteem for her would be entirely contrary to
the true Catholic attitude. Our devotion should never stop with her but
should be a stepping-stone to the worship and love of her Divine Son —
per Mariam ad Jesum. This has been magnificently illustrated at Lourdes
during the past century. The prayers and processions that Mary sought
from Bernadette are nowadays mainly those that honor our Lord in the
Blessed Sacrament. This does not mean less veneration of our Lady; but
it means more adoration of her Son.

When priests explain the doctrine of the divine maternity, it is vitally
important that they point out the significance of the word "God" in the
title "Mother of God." I believe that there is much misunderstanding of
this title on the part of non-Catholics, which is the basis of their refusal
to call Mary the Mother of God. They think that in giving this title to
Mary we attribute to her a real motherhood of the Godhead in its Trinity
— the three Divine Persons possessing the divine nature from all eternity.
Of course, such an interpretation is utterly absurd — heretical, as far as
Catholic faith is concerned. The word "God" in Mary’s most glorious
title signifies only one of the three divine Persons, and not according to
the divine nature which He possesses in common with the Father and
the Holy Ghost, but according to the created human nature which He
alone assumed at the Incarnation. In the words of St. Thomas: "The
Blessed Virgin is called the Mother of God, not because she is the mother
of the divinity, but because she is the mother of a person possessing
divinity and humanity and is mother according to the humanity. . . .
name 'God' although it is common to the three persons, nevertheless sometimes signifies only the person of the Father, sometimes only the person of the Son or of the Holy Ghost. Thus, when we say: 'The Blessed Virgin is the Mother of God' this name 'God' signifies only the person of the Son Incarnate.'

It is just as correct to say that Mary is the Mother of God as it is to say that God walked the streets of Palestine and God died on the cross. It is difficult to see how any intelligent non-Catholic can deny the logic of this conclusion — at least, if he believes that Jesus Christ is a divine person. And once this is admitted, it is easy to perceive why Mary is worthy of great honor as the most highly favored of all creatures. And it should also be easy to realize that it was most fitting (even abstracting from revelation and the teaching of the Church) that God should bestow on her extraordinary privileges, such as the Immaculate Conception and the bodily Assumption.

This is the basic reason for the veneration which Catholics give to Mary, because she is truly the Mother of God — a doctrine solemnly defined by the Church in the Council of Ephesus in 431. It is good for Protestants to know that the title "Mother of God" (Theotokos) was in use among Christians in the third century — thirteen centuries before Protestantism began. But there is another reason for the devotion of Catholics to Mary, particularly for their custom of praying to her in all their needs. It is based on the undeniable fact that Mary participated in the work of man's redemption. She freely accepted the function of Mother of the Redeemer, she protected her Son from the murderous designs of Herod, she induced Him to perform the first of the miracles by which He proved His divine mission, she accompanied Him to Calvary, it is most reasonable to infer that this holy woman whole-heartedly consented to all that the divine plan of redemption demanded of her Son and united her prayers and sufferings to His for the salvation of the human race. And if she took so important a part in the acquisition of graces for the salvation of mankind, is it not reasonable to conclude that she is granted by the Almighty some participation in the distribution of those graces to individual souls from her exalted place in heaven? Indeed, is it not very logical to infer that she has some share in the distribution of every supernatural grace granted to men, since she had a share in the gaining of every grace — in other words, that she is the Mediatrix of all graces?

This is not, indeed, an article of Catholic faith, though it is commonly

2. St. Thomas Aquinas. Summa theologica, IIIa, q. 35, a. 4, ad 2, 3.
accepted by Catholics; and many theologians (including myself) believe that it is contained implicitly in the deposit of divine revelation and could be defined by the Church. However, at present the non-Catholic who denies it is not rejecting a solemn teaching of the Church, as does one who denies that Mary is truly the Mother of God. Of course, Mary's mediatorship does not mean that she has the power to confer supernatural grace herself. For supernatural grace is a participation in the nature of God Himself, and hence can be conferred directly only by God as the principal cause, through an operation of the divine nature. Mary obtains graces for us only by her prayers. Her mediatorship is not derogatory to the unique mediatorship of Jesus Christ; for her power to obtain graces for human beings, like her sanctity, depends entirely on the merits of her Divine Son. All these truths are contained in the doctrine of Mary's mediatorship, and should be explained clearly to Catholics by their priests. It is difficult to see how any prejudiced person to whom this doctrine is properly explained can regard it as unreasonable or blasphemous or an example of "Mariolatry," even though he does not admit it himself.

I wonder how many non-Catholics (and Catholics, for that matter) realize that anyone who believes in Jesus Christ as our Redeemer is really admitting a principle that enters essentially into the Catholic belief in the efficacy of Mary's intercession. For the Christian belief in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ means that through the created humanity of Jesus Christ God willed to save mankind, using that humanity as an instrument of divine power and mercy. Now, the Catholic practice of recourse to Mary's intercession is based on the belief that through her, mere creature though she is, God wills to bestow graces on mankind, using her as an instrument subordinate to the instrumental causality of Jesus Christ. It is true, the humanity of Christ, hypostatically united to the person of the Word, is infinitely superior to Mary. He alone could adequately merit and satisfy for the human race; her very power of prayer comes from His redemptive activity. Nevertheless, the principle involved in both is the same — God has willed to sanctify and save men through created instruments. Those who say: "I will not seek graces through Mary because she is a creature" are completely inconsistent if, at the same time, they pray to Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate, and acknowledge Him as their Saviour because of His suffering in human flesh.

All Catholics should be familiar with these Catholic principles and their practical application, for only then will they have a correct understanding of Mary's place in the economy of man's redemption and of the way we should venerate her and ask her intercession, only then will they be able to refute the unjust charge that true Catholic devotion to our Lady is "Mariolatry."
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