

Honor Thy Mother: Praising Mary and the Saints is Biblically Correct

By Pat Madrid

ISSUE: Does honoring and praising Mary and the saints offend God? Some Christians say that such practices are blasphemous, substituting the “worship” of creatures over God the Creator. What does the Bible say about these matters?

RESPONSE: Catholics do not worship or adore Mary the Mother of God and the saints. Rather, we honor and praise Mary and the saints because of their great love and faithfulness to God. God is glorified in His creation (e.g., angels, mountains, stars, sunsets, human beings), and when we praise the beauty of His creation we are praising Him. This principle is at the heart of the Catholic teaching on honoring Mary and the saints. We recognize the great beauty and the graces God has bestowed on these holy men and women (cf. Rom. 8:30), and praising them redounds to God’s greater honor and glory. Catholics do not worship or adore Mary the Mother of God and the saints. Rather, we honor and praise Mary and the saints because of their great love and faithfulness to God.

DISCUSSION: “Although Catholics deny that they worship and adore Mary, they generally contradict that denial by their practice.”¹ This is how one evangelical Protestant apologist begins his argument against the Catholic Church.

Let’s see if his “Mary worship” charge has any merit. He continues his attack:

There seems to be some confusion on the part of Catholics as to what worship is. They insist in their writings that Mary is to receive honor, not worship; but their explicit practice more resembles worship than honor — bowing to, praying to, and singing praises to anyone must be considered worship, not mere honor.²

This argument collapses when we test it. First, it’s common to read in Scripture of “singing praises” to God, something Catholics and Protestants would agree is an excellent and necessary thing to do. But what about the biblical examples of “singing praises” to humans? Scripture contains many passages that speak of “bowing to” and “praising” human beings:

Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father’s sons shall bow down before you (Gen. 49:7).

[T]he Lord has declared this day concerning you that you are a people for His own possession, as He has promised you, and that you are to keep all His commandments, that He will set you high above all nations that He has made, in praise and in fame and in honor, and that you shall be a people holy to the Lord your God, as He has spoken (Deut. 26:18-19).

Praise His people, O you nations; for He avenges the blood of His servants, and takes vengeance on His adversaries, and makes expiation for the land of His people (Deut. 32:43).

The Bible gives many examples of God Himself praising faithful men and women. For example, “He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal. His praise is not from men but from God” (Rom. 2:29).

St. Paul exhorted his fellow Christians, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. I praise you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you” (1 Cor. 11:1-2).

As for “bowing,” Svendsen’s “all or nothing” approach to Scripture simply doesn’t pan out. He’d have a hard time reconciling his argument—i.e., “bowing to . . . anyone must be considered worship, not mere honor”—with the biblical evidence. For example, he’d have problems explaining how it is that the Patriarch Isaac could say to his son

Jacob, “Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother’s sons bow down to you” (Gen. 27:29).

Joshua bowed down and paid homage to an angel, but committed no sin in doing so (Joshua 5:14). Ruth bowed down to the ground before Boaz in gratitude (Ruth 2:8-10), but she was not worshipping Boaz. The Shunammite Woman bowed down before the Prophet Elisha after he had raised her child from the dead (2 Kings 4:37), but she was not committing idolatry. Neither was Lot, when he “bowed down” before two angels of the Lord (Gen. 19:1). Nor was David sinning against God’s commandment when he “bowed down and did obeisance” before King Saul (1 Sam. 24:8). Bathsheba and Nathan the Prophet were also blameless when they “bowed down in honor” before King David, while the monarch was on his deathbed (1 Kings 1:16, 25).³ When Jacob and Esau had their dramatic reconciliation, we read: “He himself went on before them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother” (Gen. 33:3).

And then there are the words of Christ concerning the honor and glory due to faithful Christians:

I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut; I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie — behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and learn that I have loved you (Rev. 3:8-9).

The Bible is clear that bowing, if it’s done to show respect and honor to a friend of God, is not just tolerable, but admirable.

Why Should We Honor the Saints?

Scripture tells us that if we persevere in fidelity to Christ, we will receive honor and praise. This is exactly what the Catholic Church does when it honors and praises Mary and the saints.

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:6-7).

When we praise the beauty God has wrought in a majestic mountain, or a dazzling sunset, no one thinks that doing so somehow takes away any glory from God. No. God is glorified in His creation (e.g., angels, mountains, stars, sunsets, human beings), and when we praise the beauty of His creation we are praising Him. This principle is at the heart of the Catholic teaching on honoring Mary and the saints. We recognize the great beauty and the graces God has bestowed on these holy men and women (cf. Rom. 8:30), and praising them redounds to God’s greater honor and glory. On the other hand, bowing before anything or anyone in an act of worship is, idolatry (cf. CCC 2112-14). The Catholic Church has always made this distinction clear. The Bible makes this clear too.⁴

Even Martin Luther, well after he had renounced the Catholic Church and became a Protestant, spoke of Mary in these glowing terms:

She, the lady above heaven and earth, must . . . have a heart so humble that she might have no shame in washing the swaddling clothes or preparing a bath for St. John the Baptist, like a servant girl. What humility! It would surely have been more just to have arranged for her a golden coach, pulled by 4,000 horses, and to cry and proclaim as the carriage proceeded, “Here passes the woman who is raised above the whole human race!” . . . She was not filled with pride by this praise . . . this immense praise: “No woman is like unto thee! Thou art more than an empress or a queen . . . blessed above all nobility, wisdom, or saintliness!”⁵

Imitating the Saints

St. Paul reminds us of the need to honor and imitate the saints:

Join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us. . . . Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you (Phil. 3:17, 4:8-9).

The Protestant who objects that this conclusion involves a misapplication of this passage will have to explain why the saints should be excluded from those things that are “honorable,” “just,” and “worthy of praise.” Furthermore, there are several important components of these two passages from Philippians that we must consider. First, notice that we’re told to think about honorable, pure, and just things. The Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints in heaven are the epitome of “honorable,” “just,” and “worthy of praise”—they have received from God the highest honor and praise possible, and they have been perfected in righteousness (cf. Heb. 12:23). So, biblically speaking, Christians are not just permitted to reflect on and speak about the saints, we are exhorted to do so.

Second, we see in Phil. 3:17 St. Paul’s statement, “Join in imitating me.” Protestants generally feel uncomfortable with the Catholic emphasis on the saints, suspecting that such focusing on them somehow robs Christ of attention. But nothing could be further from the truth.

Here we see that St. Paul wants others to imitate him, just as he was striving to imitate Christ. It’s not an “either or” approach here—either the saints or God—but a “both and” attitude: Imitate Christ and imitate those who were exemplary in imitating Him.

This, of course, is what the Catholic Church is doing when it encourages devotion to Mary and the saints. They are the models for us in Christian sanctity, heroism, and fidelity to Christ’s Gospel. When we focus our attention on the saints, we are simply carrying out the excellent advice given to us by St. Paul.

Third, notice that St. Paul tells his readers that they (like we) should “do” (i.e., practice and believe) the things they saw and learned from him. What were these things? In the realm of imitating virtue, St. Paul showed himself to be zealous, diligent, brave, charitable, prayerful, kind, joyful, full of faith, a lover of Scripture and the Church and, above all, unswerving in his love for Christ.

These are precisely the things each of us is called to be, and St. Paul holds himself out as an example. Remember that he was not merely telling his first-century readers to meditate on his example and follow it. The Holy Spirit inspired those words and preserved them in the Church for us. This means that you and I are called to focus our thoughts on all the saints—God’s friends—as models for us to follow:

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith (Heb. 13:7).

In the realm of “doing” the things St. Paul handed on,⁶ we see the whole body of apostolic doctrine and practice that he received from the Lord and handed on to the Church. Part of the reason Catholics emphasize devotion to the saints is that we see in them a profound understanding of and fidelity to the doctrines of the Faith, doctrines handed down to them from Christ and the apostles and which they, in turn, handed down to us in their writings, preaching, and exemplary lives.

Scripture is clear that honoring the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints is good and pleasing to God. But it’s equally clear that God is displeased when someone goes beyond the proper honor due to the Blessed Virgin Mary (*hyperdulia*) and the saints (*dulia*) and crosses into the idolatry of *worshipping them* as gods. To see how to admonish those who fall into this error, consider the case of the angel who rebuked John for his temptation to idolatry:

At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, “Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God!” (Rev. 19:10).

Our Lady herself would say this to any who would seek to worship her.

Patrick Madrid is the editor-in-chief of Envoy Magazine, a bimonthly Catholic journal.
www.envoymagazine.com.

¹ Eric Svendsen, *Protestant Answers: A Response to Recent Attacks Against Protestant Theology by Catholic Apologists* (Atlanta: New Testament Restoration Foundation, 1995), p. 90.

² *Ibid.*

³ Other examples of legitimate bowing down in honor before human beings are found in Gen. 23:7-13, 33:4-7, 42:5, 43:26-29, 48:9; Num. 22:31; and 1 Sam. 20:41; 25:41.

⁴ Cf. Judges 2:17, 16:30; Rom. 11:4. The Hebrew word for “bow down,” *shachah*, means “to lie prostrate.” The same word is used both in the passages that prohibit bowing (e.g., Ex. 20:5) and in some of those that show bowing as legitimate (e.g., Gen. 27:29).

⁵ *Luther's Works* 21:327, 36:208, 45:107. Statements of praise for Mary like these are sources of scandal and irritation for today's Evangelical Protestants. But in reality, they serve to show just how far Evangelicalism has drifted from its own roots. Today's Protestant antagonism against Catholic teachings on Mary and the saints arises not from any authentic, organic doctrinal system, but from five centuries of accumulated hostility towards things Catholic.

⁶ The term “handed on” is the English equivalent of the Greek verb used here, *paredoka*, from which we get the word “tradition.” St. Jerome rendered *paredoka* into Latin as: “*tradidi*” (what I *traditioned* [to you]). Cf. 1 Cor. 11:1, 23-26; Gal. 1:24, 4:12; and Heb. 11:1-40, 12:1-2.

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827 North Fourth St.
Steubenville, OH 43952
(800) 693-2484**

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