

# Devotion to Our Lady

This article explains the veneration given by Catholics to the Mother of God, which started in the Church in ancient times and continues to be felt vividly today. It also tells how this veneration is practised in Opus Dei.

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1. Religious devotion in general is an act of the virtue of religion. Like prayer, it is one of the interior acts of this virtue.<sup>[1]</sup> Devotion is an act of

the will by which people offer themselves to God, giving themselves readily to his service.

The external acts of the virtue of religion include everything connected with public worship.<sup>[2]</sup> Only God is worshipped, and strictly speaking devotion is only given to God, but Our Lady and the saints are rightly venerated, and it is in the context of this veneration that we talk about devotion to Mary, or of people having devotion to a particular saint, etc.

St Thomas Aquinas explained that the devotion given to the saints does not go just to them, but is given ultimately to God who filled them with grace and holiness.<sup>[3]</sup> The worship given to God, and the veneration shown to Our Lady and the saints, are shown through various devotional acts, and as we have seen they are distinguished in

English by using different terms: worship, given to God alone, and 'devotions', venerating our Lady and the saints.

2. Worship is only given to God because it is a way of showing our dependence on him and our adoration of him. The veneration given to the martyrs and saints, and the veneration given to Our Lady, both started very early on in the Church.

The Greek word for the kind of veneration given to God is *latria*. The veneration we offer the martyrs and saints is called *dulia* in Greek. In the case of our Lady the veneration is termed *hyperdulia*. These distinctions were studied in detail at the second Council of Nicea (AD 787), which confirmed the legitimacy of venerating images, and distinguished between *latria* and *dulia*, and then

the veneration of *hyperdulia* given to the Blessed Virgin.

3. Offering veneration to Our Lady is a very ancient practice in the Church. It arises from the recognition of the fact that she is the Mother of God, *Theotokos*, and of the role that Christ gave her in the work of salvation. Our Lady is also our Mother. For this reason, all the honour paid to her has always held a clearly Christological meaning – it leads the believer to Christ.

New Testament writings and the earliest Christian literature, until the Council of Nicea in AD 325 – that is more or less until Christianity was publicly recognised – do not say much on this theme. The passages of St Luke's Gospel, Lk 1:45, 1:48-49, 11:27, and Acts 1:14, have all been considered indirect testimony to devotion to Mary in the very early Church.

Doctrinal interest in Our Lady and her role in the Church, however, do begin to appear in this period – think, for example, of the well-known parallel between Eve and Mary found in St Justin (c.100-165 AD) and St Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202 AD). This is also indirect evidence of veneration for her on the part of the faithful.

Other indications that the Virgin was present in the worship of the primitive Church, are the inclusion of her name in some of the Eucharistic prayers that have come down to us (for example that of Hippolytus), in some of the formulas of baptism (again, see the ritual of Hippolytus) and some ancient hymns (the Odes of Solomon, the Sibylline Oracles, etc).

There is also evidence of buildings dedicated to Mary in Palestine and Alexandria dating from before 400

AD and there are also paintings to be found in the catacombs. There is the famous prayer "*Sub tuum praesidium*" (We fly to thy patronage, O holy Mother of God ... ) in an Egyptian papyrus that is usually dated some time before the year 300 AD.

4. The Second Vatican Council, in Chapter 8 of the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* (nos 66–67),<sup>[4]</sup> deals with the honour paid to Our Lady in the Church. It explains that "Mary has by grace been exalted above all angels and men to a place second only to that of her Son, as the most holy Mother of God, who was involved in the mysteries of Christ: she is rightly honoured by a special cult in the Church" (no. 66).

*Lumen Gentium* also teaches that the honour paid to Our Lady, in spite of being so special, is essentially different from the worship offered to

the Incarnate Word, the Father and the Holy Spirit. At the same time, honour paid to Our Lady strengthens and supports the worship of God (*ibid.*). The Council also encouraged all the faithful to be generous in fostering devotion to Our Lady, especially in the liturgy, and urged that "the practices and devotions to her, recommended by the teaching authority of the Church in the course of centuries, be highly esteemed" (no. 67).

Paul VI wrote an Apostolic Exhortation, *Marialis Cultus*, 2 February 1974, about devotion to Mary. In the Introduction he reminds the faithful that devotion to Our Lady "is an indication of the Church's genuine piety. This devotion fits (...) into the only worship that is rightly called 'Christian', because it takes its origin and effectiveness from Christ, finds its complete expression in

Christ, and leads through Christ in the Spirit to the Father."

He also explains that the reform of the Roman Liturgy, and specifically its General Calendar, "makes it possible in a more organic and closely-knit fashion to include commemoration of Christ's Mother in the annual cycle of the mysteries of her Son" (no. 2).

He points out that the reform of the liturgical books has provided the right perspective for seeing "the Blessed Virgin in the mystery of Christ, and, in harmony with tradition, has recognised the singular place that belongs to her in Christian worship as the holy Mother of God and the worthy Associate of the Redeemer" (no. 15), and emphasises that "the veneration which the universal Church today accords to Blessed Mary is a derivation from, and an extension and an unceasing

increase of, the devotion that the Church of every age has paid to her, with careful attention to truth and with an ever watchful nobility of expression" (*ibid.*).

Paul VI reminds us that the Blessed Virgin is also "a model of the spiritual attitude with which the Church celebrates and lives the divine mysteries. That the Blessed Virgin is an exemplar in this field derives from the fact that she is recognised as a most excellent exemplar of the Church in the order of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ" (no. 16).

The second part of the Apostolic Exhortation gives some leads for a renewal of Marian piety. It lays down four characteristics of genuine devotion to Our Lady: that it is Trinitarian, Christological, of the Holy Spirit, and of the Church. It then indicates four directions that this

renewal should take: biblical, liturgical, ecumenical and anthropological.

Part Three of the Apostolic Exhortation deals with two Marian devotions: the Angelus and the Rosary. The Conclusion explains the theological and pastoral value of devotion to our Blessed Lady.

On August 15<sup>th</sup> 1986, in the context of the renewal of the liturgy and devotion to Our Lady, the Congregation for Divine Worship approved the publication of *Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, a collection of 46 Masses. Its aim was to "promote the right kind of devotion to the Mother of God",[5] and it explained that the reason for these Masses is to be found in the "close participation of the Mother of Christ in the history of salvation. By commemorating the role of the Lord's Mother in the work of the

redemption, or her privileges, the Church celebrates above all, the saving actions in which, according to God's plans, the Virgin Mary took part, with regard to the mystery of Christ."[6]

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, published 11 October 1992, gives a concise summary of devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary at no. 971.

Quoting the Second Vatican Council and the Apostolic Exhortation

*Marialis Cultus*, it reminds us that devotion to Mary is intrinsic to Christian worship; and that the special veneration that is given her is essentially different from the adoration given only to the Blessed Trinity.

It concludes by saying that devotion to Our Blessed Lady finds expression in liturgical celebrations dedicated to the Mother of God and in Marian prayers such as the Holy Rosary.

5. Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, which, as we have seen, has such deep roots in the life of the Church, has obviously been present down through the centuries in the lives of her children and in very many ecclesial institutions. And it has naturally been present in the life of Opus Dei and its founder. St Josemaria used to say that Opus Dei had been born and had developed under Our Lady's mantle.

Our Lady's motherly intercession is clearly seen in her help in matters concerning Opus Dei's canonical path. The successive canonical steps that culminated on 28<sup>th</sup> November 1982 with the establishing of Opus Dei as a Personal Prelature, were each taken hand-in-hand with Our Blessed Lady.

Our Founder constantly turned to the Blessed Virgin Mary for help to overcome the difficulties that arose

along the way to the canonical solution, and he entrusted himself to her by going on numerous pilgrimages to different shrines of Our Lady in Europe and Latin America.

6. It was to Our Lady that he turned whenever God permitted really hard trials to occur, for example at the beginning of the 1950s. It was the climax of what he called 'the opposition from good people', who acted thinking that they were doing a service to God.[7] "Not knowing who I could turn to here on earth, I turned, as always, to heaven. On August 15<sup>th</sup> 1951, after what was, I will admit, a penitential journey to Loreto, I consecrated the Work to the Most Sweet Heart of Mary."[8]

St Josemaria was very happy on the way back from this pilgrimage, certain that he had left all his worries in good hands. He kept

saying, "*Cor Mariae Dulcissimum, iter para tutum* – Most Sweet Heart of Mary, prepare a safe journey!" and so did his children with him. He asked them to use this aspiration from then on as a constant form of prayer.[9] The faithful of Opus Dei used this same aspiration, in union with St Josemaria and Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, to pray to Our Lady, "all-powerful in her supplication", for the final solution to Opus Dei's canonical form.

7. The whole of St Josemaria's life was filled with love for the Blessed Virgin Mary. He did not want to put himself forward as an example of anything, except in his love for Our Lady, whom he loved ardently.

Our Lady's love for him was equally clear, from the time when he was cured through the intercession of Our Lady of Torrecuidad, when he was two years old and had been

given up by the doctors, until June 26<sup>th</sup> 1975 when Our Lord took him to heaven just after he had lovingly greeted a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe in his office.

8. Opus Dei is essentially "marian"; it is part of St Josemaria's spiritual legacy. The lives of the Opus Dei faithful would be incomprehensible if they did not have a great affection for the Mother of God.

Our Lady is there at the beginning of the Christian calling to the Work: "Be Mary's and you will be ours."[10] It is through her mediation that Our Lord gives people the grace to accept their vocation. St Josemaria said in his book, *The Forge*, "Love the Mother of God madly, for she is our Mother too."[11]

He said of his visits to the shrine of Our Lady of the Pillar in Saragossa: "The reason why God wants us to come to this shrine is so that,

strengthened by our Mother's understanding, affection and power, our faith will grow, our hope will become more firm, and we will feel a lively concern to serve all souls lovingly. And, cheerfully and with new strength, we will give ourselves to the service of others, sanctify our work and our life; in short, make all the pathways of the earth divine."[12]

9. A way to love Our Blessed Lady more and more is through the Marian norms and customs that, from morning till night, facilitate the efforts of the Opus Dei faithful to have recourse to her in all situations. "We start with vocal prayers, which many of us have been saying since we were children. They are made up of simple, ardent phrases addressed to God and to his Mother, who is our Mother as well. I still renew, morning and evening, not just occasionally, but habitually, the offering I learned

from my parents, 'O my Lady, O my Mother! I offer myself entirely to you, and in proof of my filial love, I consecrate to you this day my eyes, my ears, my tongue, my heart...'. "[13]

St Josemaria also encourages us: "Let us not be shy about repeating short prayers and aspirations to her throughout the day. There is no need to say them out loud, we can say them in our heart. Christian devotion has gathered together many of these loving words of praise in the Litany which accompanies the Holy Rosary. But each one of us is free to think up new ones, and address new praises to her, telling her with our heart – with a holy bashfulness that she understands and approves – what we would not dare to say out loud." [14]

According to St Josemaria, devotion to Our Lady comes right after devotion to the Blessed Trinity in a Christian's interior life. "Only God is

greater than she." Talking about Our Lady, he said, "Finally, I would recommend that, if you haven't already done so, you find out for yourself by personal experience the meaning of Mary's maternal love. It is not enough just to know that she is our Mother and to think and talk to her as such. She is your Mother and you are her son. She loves you as if you were her only child in the world. Treat her accordingly: tell her about everything that happens to you, honour her and love her. No one will do it for you or as well as you, if you do not do it yourself.

I give you my word that, if you set out along this way, you will quickly discover all the love of Christ; and you will find yourself drawn into the ineffable life of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. You will draw strength from it to put the will of God fully into practice, and you will be filled with desires of

serving all men. You will be the Christian you have sometimes dreamed of being: full of works of charity and justice, happy and strong, understanding towards others and demanding on yourself."[15]

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[1] St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.82, a.1.

[2] *Ibid* II-II, q. 81,5.

[3] *Ibid* II-II, q.82,2 ad 1.

[4] Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution, *Lumen Gentium*:

66. Mary has by grace been exalted above all angels and men to a place second only to her Son, as the most holy mother of God who was involved in the mysteries of Christ: she is rightly honoured by a special

cult in the Church. From the earliest times the Blessed Virgin was honoured with the title of Mother of God, under whose protection the faithful take refuge together in prayer in all their perils and needs. Accordingly, following the Council of Ephesus, there was a remarkable growth in the cult of the People of God towards Mary, in veneration and love, in invocation and imitation, according to her own prophetic words: "all generations shall call me blessed, because he that is mighty has done great things to me" (Lk 1:48). This cult, as it has always existed in the Church, for all its uniqueness, differs essentially from the cult of adoration, which is offered equally to the Incarnate Word and to the Father and the Holy Spirit, and it is most favourable to it. The various forms of piety towards the Mother of God, which the Church has approved within the limits of sound and orthodox doctrine,

according to the dispositions and understanding of the faithful, ensure that while the mother is honoured, the Son through whom all things have their being (cf. Col 1:15-16) and in whom it has pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell (cf. Col 1:19) is rightly known, loved and glorified and his commandments are observed.

67. The sacred synod teaches this Catholic doctrine advisedly and at the same time admonishes all the children of the Church that the cult, especially the liturgical cult, of the Blessed Virgin, be generously fostered, and that the practices and exercises of devotion towards her, recommended by the teaching authority of the Church in the course of centuries, be highly esteemed, and that those decrees, which were given in the early days regarding the cult images of Christ, the Blessed Virgin and the saints, be religiously

observed. But it strongly urges theologians and preachers of the word of God to be careful to refrain as much from all false exaggeration as from too summary an attitude in considering the special dignity of the Mother of God. Following the study of Sacred Scripture, the Fathers, the doctors and liturgy of the Church, and under the guidance of the Church's magisterium, let them rightly illustrate the duties and privileges of the Blessed Virgin which always refer to Christ, the source of all truth, sanctity, and devotion. Let them carefully refrain from whatever might by word or deed lead the separated brethren or any others whatsoever into error about the true doctrine of the Church. Let the faithful remember moreover that true devotion consists neither in sterile or transitory affection, nor in a certain vain credulity, but proceeds from true faith, by which we are led to

recognize the excellence of the Mother of God, and we are moved to a filial love towards our mother and to the imitation of her virtues."

[5] *Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Praenotanda*, vol. I, p. 11.

[6] *Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Praenotanda*, vol. I, p. 13.

[7] See Fuenmayor, Gomez-Iglesias and Illanes, *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei*, Scepter / Midwest Theological Forum, 1994, p. 84.

[8] St Josemaria, cf. Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. 3, *The Divine Ways on Earth*, 2005, p. 143.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] St Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 494.

[11] St Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 77.

[12] St Josemaria, "*Recuerdos del Pilar*", published in *El Noticiero de Zaragoza*, 11 October 1970.

[13] St Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 296.

[14] St Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 293.

[15] St Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 293.

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