

“No One Has Ever Seen God ... Behold Your Mother”:
Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary

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December 3, 2019

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“No one has ever seen God ... Behold your Mother” (Jn 1:18, 19:27)

The Blessed Virgin Mary has always held an esteemed role within Catholic faith. From her willing *fiat*, her sacrifice as she witnessed the excruciating death of her Son, and her Spirit-filled presence at Pentecost, sacred Scripture repeatedly attests to Mary’s devoted witness to God. Through the hundreds of apparition claims (the first dating before her death, to St. James the Elder in Zaragoza, Spain),¹ the declared doctrine of Mary as *Theotókos* (Mother of God) at the Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D., and a wide range of testimony from the Church’s most trusted theologians, Mary has always played an active role in the living Tradition of the Church. However, there has been considerable debate regarding the cult of the Virgin Mary. It has been repeatedly claimed that Catholics worship Mary, yet this argument is based on a misunderstanding of what Marian devotion truly is. It’s crucial to remember that “the maternal duty of Mary toward men in no wise obscures or diminishes [the] unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows His power” (*Lumen Gentium*, 60; henceforth *LG*).² In fact, “since the Church’s earliest days, Marian devotion has been meant to foster faithful adherence to Christ.”³

Although two thousand years ago “the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14, RSV), Christ was still not truly seen, for “the world knew Him not” (John 1:10),

¹ University of Dayton, “Chronological Table of Marian Events,” *All About Mary*, <https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/c/chronological-table-of-marian-events.php> (accessed January 12, 2019).

² Marianne Lorraine Trouvé, editor, *The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1999), 190.

³ Pope St. John Paul II, “General Audience, October 22, 1997,” in *Theotókos: Woman, Mother, Disciple* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2000), 249.

a truth that remains to this day. Even those who understand the Incarnation of Christ and authentically seek His ways cannot grasp the fullness of Truth which is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The vulnerability of humanity, mired by original sin, by necessity needs a guide, a spiritual helpmate who is more intimate with Christ than anyone else; someone who is more open to the Holy Spirit, more willing to unreservedly do God's will, and who can show believers "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6) in a deeper way than can be attained on their own. Humanity was made by God "to come to the fullest development of our own powers in total union with Him,"⁴ but only one human being has ever achieved this goal to the fullest extent—the Blessed Mother. That's why emulating her, seeking her intercessory assistance, and even consecrating oneself to her, is not a slight to Jesus but rather the best and quickest way individuals have develop the deepest possible relationship with Christ.

This is the reason Catholics turn to Mary. Without any possible stain of error it's she, and she alone, who can hold the hands of believers as she urges them toward her Son. She's enthusiastic--as only a proud mother can be—to not only introduce individuals to Christ, but to encourage them to draw closer to Him. She, and only she, can show them how to cultivate that relationship. "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17; see also Mark 1:11, Luke 9:35).

Carrie Gress, Ph.D., writes about the various "layers" of spiritual devotion. "Instead of looking at worship and veneration as a binary option—either you worship something or you don't—early Christians saw that there are different ways, or layers, of

⁴ Frank Sheed, *Theology for Beginners* (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2011 reprint of Sheed & Ward, New York, 1957), 81.

honor.”⁵ The three “ways” or “layers” are that of *dulia*, *hyperdulia*, and *latria*. Simply put, *dulia* is the veneration shown to the saints in heaven. We can ask for their prayers and intercession, but we don’t worship them. We also don’t worship Mary, because she’s a creature like the rest of humanity. Even so, she’s elevated above the ordinary saints because she’s the one human being who has “a special affinity to God.”⁶ No other person has or ever will attain such intimacy with Jesus Christ; no other human being can claim the Holy Spirit as spouse. The Blessed Mother has been “placed by the grace of God, as God’s Mother, next to her Son and exalted above all angels and men” (LG 66). Because of this, *hyperdulia* is the exceptional veneration due to the Blessed Mother because of her glorious, yet human, state. However, *hyperdulia* should never be confused with *latria*, the worship due to God and to Him alone. “The Madonna is not pleased when she is put above her Son.”⁷ When the faithful venerate Mary, it’s because of Christ.

St. Louis de Montfort (1673-1716) wrote about the “virginal path to find Jesus” which is the path guided by Mary. “Virginal” in this sense speaks of complete devotion, uncluttered and untouched by any other distraction. Mary, as maternal guide, provides the “*easy, short, perfect and secure way to attaining union with Our Lord.*”⁸ For this reason, de Montfort not only dedicated his life to the Blessed Mother, but he became the premier saint in promoting consecration to her.

This devotion is a secure means of going to Jesus Christ, because it is the very characteristic of our Blessed Lady to conduct us surely to Jesus, just as it is the very characteristic of Jesus to conduct us surely to the Eternal

⁵ Carrie Gress, Ph.D., *The Marian Option: God’s Solution to a Civilization in Crisis* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 2017), 98.

⁶ *Ibid.*, a. 4, arg. 2.

⁷ Pope John XXIII, as quoted in Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion* (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, Ave Maria Press, 2005), frontpage.

⁸ Louis de Montfort, *True Devotion to Mary with Preparation for Total Consecration*, No. 152 (Charlotte, NC: Tan Classics, 2010 reprint).

Father ... It is the way which Jesus Christ Himself trod in coming to us.⁹

Consecration to Mary has proven spiritually fruitful for centuries, and is now more popular than ever. Pope Leo XIII approved a plenary indulgence to those who consecrate themselves to the Blessed Mother, while Popes Pius X, Benedict XV, Pius XI and XII, and most famously St. John Paul II advocated and consecrated themselves using Louis de Montfort's trusted formula.¹⁰ Most recently, Fr. Michael E. Gaitley, MIC, has written a consecration guide for the modern reader which incorporates the consecration devotions of not only St. Louis de Montfort but also St. Maximilian Kolbe, St. Mother Teresa, and Pope St. John Paul II.¹¹

Perhaps the most famous Marian devotion is that of the Rosary, a string of beads consisting of five decades of the Hail Mary between one Our Father and one Glory Be (a full Rosary consists of fifteen decades). The Rosary is considered the most powerful Marian prayer, so esteemed that it's "second only to the liturgical prayer of the Church centering around the holy Sacrifice of the Mass."¹²

Long-held tradition traces the origins of the Rosary to the thirteenth-century founder of the Dominican order, St. Dominic Guzman.¹³ Preaching against the Albigensian heresy, St. Dominic is said to have mystically received an inspiration from the Blessed Mother, instructing him to use a combination of preaching and meditative

⁹ Ibid., no. 164 and 152.

¹⁰ Ibid., frontpage, "From the Popes."

¹¹ Michael E. Gaitley, *33 Days to Morning Glory: A Do-It-Yourself Retreat in Preparation for Marian Consecration* (Stockbridge, MA: Marian Press, 2014).

¹² Mark Miravalle, *Introduction to Mary: The Heart of Marian Doctrine and Devotion* (Monee, IL: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), 96; see also 110 and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *The Mother of the Saviour and Our Interior Life* (London: England, UK, Catholic Way Publishing, reprint, 2013), 296.

¹³ Ibid., 98; see also Garrigou-LaGrange, 300-301 and Donald H. Calloway, MIC, *Champions of the Rosary: The History and Heroes of a Spiritual Weapon* (Stockbridge, MA: Marian Press, 2016), 23.

prayer in order to reach the hearts of the heretics.¹⁴ Pope Pius V approved the Rosary in 1569; a few years later, in 1573, he announced the Feast of the Rosary.¹⁵ Since that time, popes through the centuries have esteemed and promoted the prayers of this beloved devotion. In recent decades, Pope Pius XII has stated that “the Rosary, as we know, has pride of place,”¹⁶ Pope Pius VI called the Rosary “the compendium of the entire Gospel,”¹⁷ while Pope St. John Paul II stated that “the Rosary is my favorite prayer, marvelous in its simplicity and depth ... The Rosary belongs among the finest and most praiseworthy traditions of Christian contemplation.”¹⁸

Because the Rosary is both a vocal and meditative prayer—along with the tactile fingering of the beads—it incorporates multiple senses, engaging the exterior and the interior aspects of the whole person. The prayerful power of the Rosary derives its benefits from the fact that it’s a purely biblical prayer, centered upon the mysteries of Christ; from His Incarnation to His Ascension, various scenes from His life are meditated upon in order to gain a closer relationship with Him, all through the help and guidance of the one who knew Him best—His Blessed Mother.

Although Christ is the only true Mediator between God and man, in the fallen state of humanity it can be difficult to approach Him. Who better to turn to than His own Mother, who desires nothing more than to reveal the glory of her Son? As theological

¹⁴ Garrigou-Lagrange, 300-301.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁶ Pope Pius XII, “Mediator Dei,” *The Holy See*, http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_20111947_mediator-dei.html (accessed November 30, 2019).

¹⁷ Pope Paul VI, “Marialis Cultus: For the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary,” *The Holy See*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19740202_marialis-cultus.html (accessed January 12, 2019).

¹⁸ Pope St. John Paul II, “Angelus Message, October 29, 1978,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, as quoted in Miravalle, 95 and Pope John Paul II, “Rosarium Virginis Mariae,” *The Holy See*, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/2002/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20021016_rosarium-virginis-mariae.html (accessed November 22, 2019), no. 5.

historian Luigi Gambero observed when commenting on the Marian writing of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, “the importance of Mary’s role stems from the fact that she contributed to bringing man closer to God, to making God more accessible to man.”¹⁹ This is a role she continues to fulfill through her constant, loving intercession.

In conclusion, Catholics don’t worship Mary as if she’s a pagan goddess exclusive of God’s grace. Rather, *hyperdulia* means Catholics honor and venerate the Blessed Mother while fully recognizing her humanity and dependence upon the pure grace of God. The faithful see in her a mirror, a reflection of Eden: God’s perfect creation without blemish or stain of sin. It is she whom believers gaze upon as a model for their own aspiring spiritual perfection. St. Irenaeus of Lyons stated that Mary was the “cause of salvation” in contrast to Jesus, who is salvation.²⁰ “This devotion consists, then, in giving ourselves entirely to Our Lady, in order to belong entirely to Jesus through her.”²¹

¹⁹ Luigi Gambero, *Mary in the Middle Ages* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2005), 133.

²⁰ Brian K. Reynolds, *Gateway to Heaven* (NY, NY: New City Press, 2012), 111.

²¹ Louis de Montfort, *True Devotion*, no. 121.

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