

# Why do Catholics pray to Mary?

**D**ear Father Kerper: Two years ago I married a wonderful Catholic woman. I sometimes go to church with her and I have some attraction to Catholicism, except for the glorification of Mary. It seems that Catholics regard Mary as a goddess, especially by praying to her instead of Christ and by believing that she was conceived without sin and never sinned in her whole life. How is she human? How do you reconcile all this with the Gospel, which never tells us to pray to Mary and says nothing about the Immaculate Conception, the Assumption, and other such doctrines?

Thanks for your questions and comments. At first glance, the Catholic focus on Mary can seem entirely disconnected from the core of Christian faith. And, as you suggest, it appears to distract people from Jesus. However, genuine devotion to Mary actually emerges from our devotion to Christ and always directs our gaze back to him. To put it another way, prayer to Mary never terminates in her; it always moves forward to Christ and ultimately to his Father.

While Catholics do indeed honor Mary more than any other saint, we never worship her. After all, only God should receive worship. Mary is not divine. Rather, she is a human being who receives the highest esteem and honor because of her unique relationship with Christ, notably as the mother of the one who is simultaneously divine and human.

Jesus, though truly the only-begotten Son of the Father, did not fall from Heaven as a fully mature human being. Instead, God's Son received his human nature entirely from his

mother, a creature, not a goddess. As such, he was conceived "through the power of the Holy Spirit," as the Creed states. He developed as a baby within Mary's womb, was born into the world, and grew up within a human family. His life, of course, included natural familial relationships, most importantly the permanent and intense bond between mother and son. This "mother-son" connection is the foundation of all Catholic devotion and teaching about Mary.

For sure, all family members have their own individual personalities, but they also tend to act together as a community rooted in love, sharing their concerns and desires. The same is true for Jesus and Mary. We see this clearly in Saint John's account of the marriage feast at Cana. (cf. John 2:1-11) We can surmise that someone linked with the hosts went to Mary and revealed to her their terrible predicament: running out of wine too early.

Please notice that Mary does not propose that Jesus miraculously produce wine. She simply expresses to him the



concern she learned of from others. She says to Jesus, "They have no wine." (John 2:3) Period. He responds curtly, even a bit rudely: "Woman, what concern is that to you and me?" (John 2:4) This apparent brush-off does not evoke any pleading from her. She leaves the solution entirely to him, and says to the servants, "Do what he tells you." (John 2:5)

No one witnessing the miracle at Cana would ever have attributed the power to Mary. They would have seen the "sign" of the water made into wine as coming from the hands of Jesus. Can anyone imagine that Jesus would have resented his mother's discreet intervention on behalf of the hosts? I don't think so. Indeed, by responding to her concern, which flowed from the concern of the hosts, Jesus deliberately enabled Mary to share in his work. Son and mother operate together, not as rivals for acclaim.

Mary's involvement here did not diminish her Son's indispensable role as the one who answered the prayer, so to speak. On the contrary, the intercession of Mary directed all eyes toward her Son, who responded lovingly to her concern by changing water into wine.

The Cana event, then, is the key to understanding why Catholics pray to Mary: It reveals the essential harmony between Mary and Jesus, who freely



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# Saint Catherine of Siena

**BORN** March 25, 1347

**DIED** April 29, 1380

**FEAST DAY** April 29

**PATRON SAINT** of Italy, nurses; against fire, illness, miscarriages, sexual temptation

**PATRON OF** Saint Catherine of Siena Parishes in Lisbon and Manchester.



Caterina (Catherine) Benincasa was born on March 25, 1347, in Siena, Italy, to Giacomo di Benincasa, a wool dyer, and his wife, Lapa Piagenti. Catherine was one of 25 children and had a twin sister, Giovanna, who died shortly after birth. Catherine claimed to have a vision of Christ when she was about six years old. At seven, she vowed perpetual chastity. When she was 16, Catherine's older sister Bonaventura died in childbirth, and her parents wanted her to marry Bonaventura's widower.

In protest, Catherine began fasting and cut off her long hair. Eventually, her parents relented, but her mother, Lapa, did not want her to join the Dominican Order, as was Catherine's wish. Catherine then became ill, but recovered once Lapa went to the sisters of the Order and persuaded them to admit Catherine as a tertiary member (something normally available only for widows).

She still lived with her family, although this became a trial for them as Catherine refused to eat their food and often gave belongings away. In her letters, Catherine relates a second mystical experience wherein she marries Jesus. In this vision, Jesus instructed her to go out and tend to the sick and poor. The plague was sweeping Europe at the time, and Catherine fearlessly nursed those suffering from it.

Catherine began attracting followers and travelling with some of them, advocating for clergy reform. She began a voluminous correspondence that survives today, in which she wrote to popes and lay people, urging for peace, the unification of the states of Italy, and the return of the papal seat to Rome from its place in Avignon, France. Her tireless efforts advising Pope Gregory XI and other leaders of the opposing papal factions were successful and she is credited as the person who brought the Holy See back to Rome.

Catherine died at age 33. In another of her mystical visions, she experienced stigmata that no one else could see, but which became visible after her death. Her body was buried in a grave near the Pantheon and miracles were reported to have occurred on its site.

She was canonized in 1461. On May 5, 1940, Pope Pius XII named her the patron saint of Italy, along with Saint Francis of Assisi, and in 1970, Pope Paul VI gave her the title Doctor of the Church. She is the first woman to receive this honor. Her influence on the Church and the political world was almost unheard of for a woman of her time, and her writings are considered classics of the Catholic faith and Italian literature.

draws human beings into his works on behalf of others. Indeed, this basic principle undergirds every act of prayer we utter on behalf of other people: the Lord desires our active involvement in doing his work. Mary, as Christ's mother, does this better than anyone else because no one else has been closer to him or shown him more love.

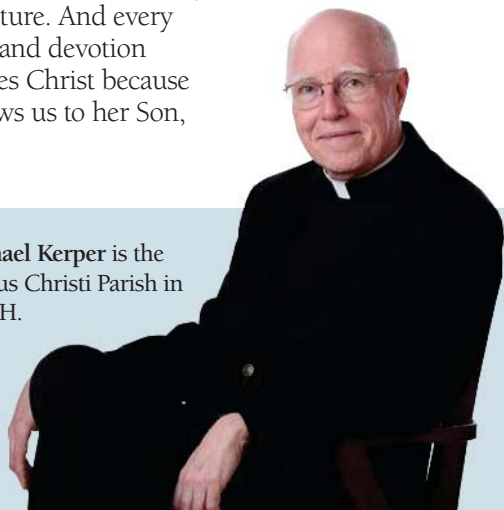
This harmonious relationship between Mary and Jesus helps us to understand the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. This doctrine does not elevate her into a form of divinity, which we associate with total freedom from sin. Please remember that according to the biblical account of creation, God created human beings without sin and without the inclination to commit sin. As such, sin is an unnatural tendency of human beings. Unfortunately, we frequently think the opposite: that sin is the necessary trait of humanity. It isn't.

Mary's freedom from sin from the first moment of her existence is rooted in her maternal relationship to Christ, not in anything inherent in herself. According to early theologians, the humanity of Christ, which came entirely from Mary, needed to come from a fully human woman. Since the fullness of "original" humanity was sinless, the mother of Christ needed to replicate that original goodness. Hence, God created Mary as the "New Eve," a sinless woman capable of giving birth to the Son of God, also sinless. The Immaculate Conception, then, attests that Mary is actually "more human" than we are because she resembles the original Eve, who was created sinless.

Catholics also believe that Mary remained free from all sin throughout her earthly existence. To put it another way, Mary remained in harmony with God and never willingly deviated from God's ways. She did this as a human being, not as a goddess, by using her human freedom to cooperate fully with God.

Once again we see that Mary is actually "more human" than people who sin because she always followed the pattern of "original humanity" rather than the pattern of "post-sin humanity," a gross distortion of the original.

All Catholic beliefs about Mary flow from a deep theological reflection on key biblical texts that portray the relationship between Christ and Mary. Properly understood, nothing that we believe about Mary contradicts Scripture. And every Marian doctrine and devotion ultimately glorifies Christ because Mary always draws us to her Son, never to herself.



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