

THE CONTROVERSIAL DEVELOPMENTS OF  
MARIAN VENERATION IN THE CHURCH

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## THE CONTROVERSIAL DEVELOPMENTS OF MARIAN VENERATION IN THE CHURCH

The veneration of Mary has been a controversial issue since early in the History of the Church. In the eyes of many Protestants this tradition is tantamount to idolatry, the worship of someone other than the one true God. However, the origins of Marian adoration are far older than the origins of Protestantism. The Roman Catholic Church did not set out to worship Mary. The practice evolved over two thousand years, sometimes with and often without official Church approval. This paper will set forth the major developments that influenced the practice of Mariolatry, from both the Catholic and Protestant perspectives, in an attempt to put those events into a historical context.

The Roman Catholic perspective of the origins of Mariolatry begins in the late first century. However, the story of Mary on which this adoration is based, goes back to scripture. Henri Daniel-Rops, in *The Book of Mary*<sup>1</sup>, lists the references and corresponding Catholic titles to the texts in the New Testament. The majority of these citations are in the gospels, especially Matthew and Luke, with a few in the book of Acts and one in Revelations. The most controversial of the Marian texts is Revelations 12:1-17, which symbolically may be referring either to the Church or to Mary. Augustine and Epiphanius both stated that there is a “supernatural resemblance between Mary and the Church.”<sup>2</sup> In light of these statements, both interpretations of this text could be taken as a reference to Mary.

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Daniel-Rops, *The Book of Mary*, trans. Alastair Guinan (New York: Hawthorn Books, inc., 1960): 121-134.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

According to *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, the actual practice of devotion to Mary began with the laity and worked its way up, gradually, to the clergy.<sup>3</sup> Most practices of worship and devotion moved in the opposite direction. The leaders of the church would decide on a theological idea, pronounce it as dogma and reveal it to the laity as God's will, initiating the practices used in worship and in the personal devotions of the believers. However in the case of Marian adoration, it appears that the laity took the initiative in placing Mary on a pedestal as someone to be venerated. This conclusion is based on the fact that none of the official writings of the apostolic age contain any reference to the practice of Mariolatry. However, frescoes discovered in the catacombs dating from the late first or early second century representing Mary may demonstrate how highly she was regarded in the opinion of the early Christians.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, these early works of art exhibit no sense that Mary was more than human. For the most part the intention of these paintings has little to do with Mary and everything to do with telling the story of her son, Christ. Mary was depicted, usually, within the context of a gospel story, such as the Annunciation, the Adoration of the Magi, or the Presentation in the Temple. Icons containing Mary's image intended specifically to be used in the veneration of her did not appear until much later.<sup>5</sup>

The apocryphal writings of this period tended to try to fill in the blanks of the apostolic writings in regards to the childhood of Jesus and the origins of his earthly

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<sup>3</sup> Herbert Thurston, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1912 ed., s.v. "Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary," [book on-line] (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912, accessed 29 October 2002); available from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15459a.htm>; Internet.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Otto Zöckler, *The New Schaff-Herzog Religious Encyclopedia*, 1959 ed., s.v. "Mary, Mother of Jesus Christ": 223.

parents. Some of these mostly anonymous writings were devoted entirely to Mary. One of the more influential of these writings is the “Protevangelion” also known as “The Gospel of St. James” which depicts the “purity and sanctity of the Blessed Virgin, and affirms her virginity *in partu et post partum*,” that is during and after the birth of Jesus<sup>6</sup>.

This extracanonical writing also contained many of the details that have become common to the Mary legend including the names of her parents, Joachim and Anna. Anna’s story parallels those of the Hebrew matriarchs in that she was barren and promised God that if she was given offspring her child would be solemnly dedicated into the service of the Lord. Other influential apocryphal narratives, which date from the middle of the fourth century, dealt with the life of Mary after the ascension of her son. Although the church renounced the majority of these writings many of the details were adopted into their tradition.<sup>7</sup> Giovanni Miegge, the Waldensian theologian, wrote, “From the apocryphal literature comes almost everything that is believed and thought about the Virgin Mary.”<sup>8</sup> Other apocryphal writings which are devoted to or make reference to Mary are *The Book of the Birth of the Blessed Mary and of the Childhood of Jesus Christ, from the Gospel of Psuedo-Matthew; The Ascension of Isaiah; A History of Joseph the Carpenter; The Book of the Passing of the Most Holy Virgin, the Mother of God; The Arabian Book of the Passing of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary; and the Infancy Gospels*.<sup>9</sup>

Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian were among the first Church Fathers to develop a Marian theology in which a comparison was made between Mary, the mother

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<sup>6</sup> Thurston, “Devotion”.

<sup>7</sup> Zoeckler, “Mary,”: 221.

<sup>8</sup> Giovanni Miegge, *The Virgin Mary*, trans. Waldo Smith (London: Lutterworth Press, 1955): 51.

<sup>9</sup> Roland H. Seboldt, *Christ or Mary?*, (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963): 9.

of Jesus and Eve, the mother of mankind. According to Roland H. Seboldt, the inspiration for this maternal analogy could have derived from the parallel Paul made between “Adam and Christ, the second Adam in Romans 5.” Seboldt states that the early fathers drew a similar comparison between “Eve, who brought misfortune upon man through her disobedience, and Mary, who brought grace upon man through her obedience.”<sup>10</sup> Justin Martyr emphasized Mary’s role in the work of redemption and was the first after Luke to call her “the virgin.”

During the Fourth Century monasticism, with its strong beliefs in an ascetic and celibate life adopted Mary, whose perpetual virginity was an example to their chaste lifestyles, as an object of ardent praise.<sup>11</sup> St. Epiphanius, who lived during the late Fourth Century, denounced an obscure sect called the Collyridians for their sacrificial offering of cakes to Mary. Because of this apparent act of idolatry, Epiphanius set forth the rule in “*ten Marian medeis prosknueito*”, “Let Mary be held in honor. Let the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost be adored, but let no one adore Mary.”<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, Epiphanius also praised Mary and believed that “there was some mysterious dispensation with regard to her death implied in the words of Revelations 12:14.”<sup>13</sup> He also condemned as heretics anyone who averred that Mary had married Joseph and had born him children. These heretics were entitled “Antidicomarianites”.<sup>14</sup>

Soon afterward the “theory of a merely nominal marriage” between Mary and Joseph was generally accepted. Origen described their nuptials in *Homilia in Lucam*

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>12</sup> Thurston, “Devotion”.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Zoeckler, “Mary,”: 220.

chapter VI as being a necessity in order to conceal the “mystery of the virgin birth from the princes of the world.”<sup>15</sup> Other passages written by the Church Fathers in regards to the Virgin Mother further influenced her adoration in Christendom. St. Jerome referred to Mary as “mother of the human race” and St. Ambrose stated, “she leads the choirs of virgin souls” in heaven.<sup>16</sup> Ambrose also averred that Mary’s purity, chastity and perfection were a model for the church. He stated, “The role of the church, like that of Mary, is to conceive by the Spirit and to bring new children into the world.”<sup>17</sup> Mary was not to be adored, according to Ambrose, as is evident in his statement that, “Mary was the temple of God, no the god of the temple.”<sup>18</sup> St. Augustine declared “Mary’s unique privilege of sinlessness.”<sup>19</sup> He emphasized, however, that the fact that Mary became a disciple of her son was greater than the fact that she had given birth to the messiah. He wrote, “Mary is more blessed for grasping faith in Christ than for conceiving his flesh; the maternal relationship would not have profited Mary had she not borne Christ in her heart more happily than in her womb.”<sup>20</sup> St. Gregory Nazianzen’s acknowledged in a sermon on St. Cyprian that the maiden Justina “invoked the Blessed Virgin to preserve her virginity.”<sup>21</sup>

This last statement brings up an interesting occurrence that began to be evident from this time on, that has come to be known as “Marienlegenden” or “Mary Stories.” These accounts tell of phenomenal appearances of Mary to Christians in need, and

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Thurston, “Devotion”.

<sup>17</sup> Eugene La Verdere, *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “Mary,”: 736.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Thurston, “Devotion”.

<sup>20</sup> La Verdere, “Mary,”: 736.

<sup>21</sup> Thurston, “Devotion”.

miraculous healings and events that occurred upon the calling of the Virgin Mother's name. These stories are so far fetched in their nature that even the *Catholic Encyclopedia* states, "It is all pure invention."<sup>22</sup> However, as legends often do, these stories added to the popularity of Mary as a being that could be called upon in time of need.

The festivals and Calendar days that are devoted in the Roman Catholic tradition to Mary are evident as early as the Fifth Century. Balai, a Syriac writer who composed hymns during the first half of that century penned the words, "Praise to Thee Lord upon the memorial of Thy Mother" and in the year 429 St. Proclus, the Patriarch of Constantinople, began a sermon with the words "The Virgin's festival incites our tongue today to herald her praise." He further stated that Mary is the "only bridge between God and men."<sup>23</sup> At this point in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, Mariology had begun to be not just the practice of a few but a widely spread practice accepted and encouraged by the Church itself in personal devotion and corporate worship. The Council of Ephesus, controversially accepted the title "qeotokoV" or "God-Bearer" as dogma in the year 431.<sup>24</sup> This title, accepted by orthodox Christians of both the eastern and western traditions, came about in order to affirm that the person whom Mary had born was truly divine as well as truly man. Shortly after, a group known as the Monophytes used the title "qeotokoV" in an attempt to deny the humanity of Jesus. Their views, however, were declared heretical by the church. The result was that the "qeotokoV" came to mean "Mother of God" instead of "God-Bearer" in order that Mary's

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Seboldt, *Christ or Mary?:* 57.

motherhood would be expressed in both a spiritual and physical sense.<sup>25</sup> Cathedrals throughout Europe were built and dedicated in the name of the Mother of Christ. Reims, Chartres, Rouen, Amiens, Nimes, Evreux, Paris, Bayeux, Seez, Toulon, and others were the sights of cathedrals that bore the name of Mary.<sup>26</sup> From the fourth century onward, Mary's likeness became increasingly more evident in paintings, sculptures, mosaics, and frescoes as her veneration became more popular and more widely excepted. During the sixth century, these images began to take the form of the "Queen of Heaven" complete with nimbus to represent her veneration, enthroned in places of prominence within cathedrals.<sup>27</sup> At the Second Council of Nicea in 787 it was declared that, "veneration paid to (Mary's) image passed on to her, and that he who adored (*ho proskunon*) the image adored the original." With this statement icons of the Virgin Mother multiplied exponentially and each icon held a story to attract pilgrims to the site that contained it. Numerous copies were made of a painting of Mary in the Byzantine style that was credited to St. Luke, and angels allegedly painted several Marian icons that were on display in Italy and Spain.<sup>28</sup>

During the eleventh century Marian Devotion continued to rise to new levels. The idea that Mary could be prayed to and would act as a mediator between Christ and the world was summed up during this time by Bernard of Clairvaux who asked, "Dost thou fear the divine Majesty of the Son? Wilt thou find an advocate before him? Flee to

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<sup>25</sup>La Verdere, "Mary,": 735.

<sup>26</sup> Thurston, "Devotion".

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Zoeckler, "Mary,": 221.

Mary; in her humanity is pure. The Son will listen to the mother, and the Father to the Son.”<sup>29</sup> Clairvaux also penned the maxim “Everything through Mary.”<sup>30</sup>

By the twelfth century the *Ave Maria* and the *Salve Regina* had become accepted, universally, as salutations to be used in private devotion and public worship, supplemental to the *Lord’s Prayer*. Monasteries, during this period continued to emphasize devotion to Mary and to the writing and copying of Mary-stories. These legends were at their pinnacle of popularity during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when writers such as Alfonso Ligouri produced a compilation of Mary-stories entitled The Glories of Mary.<sup>31</sup> The Cistercians, Dominicans, Carmelites, and the Servites all gave prominence to the adoration and special practices of devotion to “mark their particular allegiance to the Mother of God.”<sup>32</sup> The further popularity of the Legends of Mary grew to the point that a multitude of shrines devoted to her, sprang up through out Europe. Pilgrimages to these Marian shrines became commonplace, for it was generally held that they contained healing powers or miraculous manifestations were purported to have occurred there.<sup>33</sup> Some examples of these alleged manifestations are Marian statues and paintings that shed tears of blood, exuded moisture, bowed their heads in prayer or raised their hands in benediction.

By 1854, Mary’s Immaculate Conception was officially recognized as dogma by the Church.<sup>34</sup> This decision was necessary in light of the Augustinian doctrine of original

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> John Reumann, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1987 ed., s.v. “Mary,”: 251.

<sup>31</sup> Reumann, “Mary,”: 252.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Seboldt, *Christ or Mary?:* 57.

sin that had been adopted by the church. If this doctrine is to be held as fact then something had to be done in order to explain how Christ was without sin when he should have inherited sin from his Mother. The idea of the Immaculate Conception was that Mary was exempt from original sin of her ancestors. At Lourdes, in 1858, the Virgin Mother evidently appeared and announced, “I am the Immaculate Conception.”<sup>35</sup> Since that time, many pilgrims who have visited the shrine set up there, have reported that they have received “supernatural favors” from Mary in the form of healings and visions.<sup>36</sup> Other such appearances have sparked pilgrimages to Fatima, Portugal and Czestochowa, Poland. Continuing through the twentieth century, and even into this century, the legends of Mary rival the stories of her son among the people of the Roman Catholic Church. In 1950, Pope Pius XII issued a papal proclamation, accepting and defining the dogma related to the assumption of Mary.<sup>37</sup> In the apostolic constitution, *Munificentissimus Deus*, he wrote, “The Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary...was assumed body and soul to heavenly glory.”<sup>38</sup> This dogma had evolved from the idea that Mary’s soul (but not her body) was assumed into heaven, as described in the apocryphal narratives *The Falling Asleep of Mary* and *The Passing of Mary*.<sup>39</sup> Even now, the church, as a viable theological dogma, is debating whether or not the controversial title of “co-redemptrix” of humanity should be applied to the mother of Christ. This means that Mary will not only be as popular as Jesus among Catholicism, but as important

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<sup>35</sup> Reumann, “Mary,”: 252.

<sup>36</sup> Thurston, “Devotion”.

<sup>37</sup> Seboldt, *Christ or Mary?*: 57.

<sup>38</sup> Reumann, “Mary,”: 252.

<sup>39</sup> La Verdere, “Mary,”: 736.

theologically, in the redemption of the sins of Man.<sup>40</sup> From their own historical viewpoint, this next stage in the development of Mariolatry is justifiable in that the Catholic church has many precedents on which to base their decisions. The question that rises from the other side of the controversy is whether there is any scriptural basis for the worship of any one other than God and his incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ.

The Protestant perspective of the adoration of Mary begins with scripture, just as the Catholic viewpoint does. However, the Protestant view of the Bible is that it is the inerrant Word of God and the true source of authority for the Church, giving little credence to the later Patristic, Apocryphal and Papal writings as viable insights to the will of God on dogmatic issues. Many Protestant scholars view the infancy narratives in the gospels of Matthew and Luke as “her memoirs revealed years later to an evangelist.”<sup>41</sup>

There is little argument over the influence Mary had on the Church through its first millennium because at that point Protestants and Catholics shared the same history. In retrospect, however, Protestants have looked back and compared the stories of tradition with the scriptures. This idea of going back to the source was one of the major points of conflict that the Reformation Movement had with the Roman Catholic Church. The veneration of Mary, nevertheless, proved to be a tradition many of the reformists had a problem giving up. Martin Luther appeared to have retained his belief in Mary’s immaculate conception and continued to practice some Marian Festivals. However, he gave these practices more of a Christological emphasis than the Catholic Church had

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<sup>40</sup> Seboldt, *Christ or Mary?*: 58.

<sup>41</sup> Reumann, “Mary,”: 249.

previously done.<sup>42</sup> In his 1521 exposition of the Magnificat he stated that Mary is “the foremost example” of God’s grace and proper humility.<sup>43</sup> Earlier in 1516, he had referred to Mary as “the only pure drop in the ocean of human perdition.”<sup>44</sup> The one issue Luther appeared to have opposed in regards to Mary was the practice of asking for her intercession in prayer. The majority of the other leaders involved in the German Reformation also championed this issue.<sup>45</sup> John Calvin had misgivings about the application of the title of “mother of God” to Mary but still hailed her as “holy virgin.”<sup>46</sup>

The Protestant view of Mariolatry tends to point out factors that have been omitted from the Catholic perspective of the origins of veneration. For instance, the history and writings of the church indicate that though Mary was highly regarded by the believers, the Church did not sanction any veneration or prayers addressed to her until late in the fourth century.<sup>47</sup> Many attribute this change in official doctrine to the great influx of pagans to the church during this period. Gregory the great sent this note to Augustine of Canterbury via abbot Mellitus to explain how the Angles were to be converted to Catholicism:

The heathen temples of these people need not be destroyed, only the idols which are to be found in them... If the temples are well built, it is a good idea to detach them from the service of the devil, and to adapt them for the worship of the true God... And since the people are accustomed, when they assemble for sacrifice, to kill many oxen in sacrifice to the devils, it seems reasonable to appoint a festival for the people by way of exchange. The people must learn to slay their cattle not in honour of the devil, but in honour of God and for their own food; when they have eaten and are full, then they must

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 251

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 252

<sup>44</sup> Zoeckler, “Mary,”: 222.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 221.

render thanks to the giver of all good things. If we allow them these outward joys, they are more likely to find their way to the true inner joy... It is doubtless impossible to cut off all abuses at once from rough hearts, just as the man who sets out to climb a high mountain does not advance by leaps and bounds, but goes upward step by step and pace by pace.<sup>48</sup>

This statement exemplifies the syncretistic nature of the Roman Empire that had influenced the church since the time of Constantine. Many are quick to point out the similarities between The Virgin Mother of Jesus and the mother-goddesses of the pagan religions. Comparisons have been made between Mary and Ishtar the Babylonian goddess of fertility who was similarly called the “Queen of Heaven”. Even the iconography between them is similar. Statues and paintings of Mary holding the baby Jesus have been compared to Isis holding Horace. However, this can be regarded as little more than coincidence since there is no historical documentation supporting this hypothesis. Similar comparisons can be drawn between any number of Christian practices that resemble ancient pagan rituals.

It is apparent from scripture and from the writings of Ambrose, Justin Martyr and the other church fathers that Mary was never meant to be “worshipped”. The intent of the early Christians appears to have been to honor the Mother of their savior. Somewhere between the first century and the twenty-first century, that honor seems to have been exaggerated to a new level that places Mary above all creation. When taken one event at a time, the evolution of Mariolatry is at the same time justifiable and condemnable. Justifiable to Catholics because it is, in their eyes, harmless adoration and is tradition that

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<sup>48</sup> Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Revised by Owen Chadwick (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1964): 59.

has been passed down since the time of the apostles. Condemnable by Protestants because it was not the intent of Christ to do anything more than “honor thy mother”.

The main argument in the denouncement of Mariolatry comes from 1 Timothy 2:5, which states, “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”<sup>49</sup> In the same way, Romans 8:26-27 reads, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”<sup>50</sup> If one believes that it is necessary to pray to Mary to interceded on his behalf, does that not belittle the work of the Spirit and the sovereignty of Christ who is our only mediator? The need to pray to anyone other than God may be evidence of one’s lack of faith that He is capable of accomplishing what he set out to do through His son. One would be wise to remember Ambrose’s aforementioned adage, “Mary was the temple of God, not the god of the temple.”<sup>51</sup> Only the God of the temple has the power to aid in the redemption of our souls. To believe otherwise is to demean the sacrifice he made for us.

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<sup>49</sup> *The Revised Standard Version*, (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.) 1973, 1977.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> La Verdiere, “Mary,”: 736.