

Do Catholics Worship Mary?

By Bishop Victor Galeone

"In him dwells the fullness of divinity in bodily form." (Col. 2:9) These few words synthesize the theme of my last two messages. Namely, Jesus Christ is the Son of God incarnate (= in the flesh); hence, the mystery of the Incarnation: Jesus is true God and true man.

I'll have more to say about the Incarnation in the July issue. But since May is the month when Catholics pay special honor to Mary, I want to examine the Incarnation as it relates to her.

Some of our separated brethren accuse Catholics of making a goddess out of Mary for calling her the Mother of God. They insist that she is not the mother of God, but only the mother of Jesus. But such language makes Jesus two persons - one human, and the other divine. Jesus, however, is only one person - the second person of the Blessed Trinity, as we pray in the Creed, "the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father." Two thousand years ago, that divine person took on our human nature in Mary's womb, thus initiating his existence as one of us. Since he was God from all eternity, Mary became the mother of God - not of God the Father, nor of God the Holy Spirit, but of God the Son. To deny that Mary is the mother of God is to deny that Jesus is God.

Perhaps an analogy might help. If a woman were to introduce herself by saying, "Hello, I'm the mother of Jane's body," how would you react? Surely, you would question her sanity. A woman becomes the mother of a person ("I'm Jane's mother."), even though she gives the baby only its body, not its soul which is created by God. Mary gave Jesus what every mother gives her child: conception, birth and nourishment. Since Jesus is only one person, and that person is divine, Mary is truly the Mother of God.

The previous discussion is a summary of the Council of Ephesus, which condemned Nestorius in 431 by solemnly declaring that Mary was "Theotokos" (Mother of God). After the bishops' decision, the jubilant residents of Ephesus marched through the town all night long, chanting, "Theotokos! Theotokos!"

Someone may ask why this teaching is not in the Bible. Actually it is - implicitly. Immediately after conceiving Jesus, Mary went to visit her relative Elizabeth. After greeting Mary, Elizabeth asks, "And how have I deserved this visit from the mother of my Lord?" (Luke 1:48)

Another objection that is sometimes raised is why Catholics give Mary so much honor. The reason is that God honored her first. As St. Bernardine of Sienna expressed it, "Lord, you could create a universe a thousand times more splendid than our present one; but a creature greater than Mary, impossible - since you made her the Mother of your only Son!"

Back in the late '60s, I attended a clergy conference presented by Max Lachmann, a Lutheran pastor from Germany and a former concentration camp inmate. His talk addressed eight key issues dividing Protestants and Catholics, among which was Mary. I can still recall his impassioned presentation on Our Lady. Having described the position of both sides, he concluded, "True, perhaps some Catholics, especially in Latin countries, may be giving Mary exaggerated honor. On the other hand, have not we Protestants been negligent in this area? I have preached sermons on Sarah...and on Ruth...and even on Mary Magdalene - but to this day, I have not once preached a sermon on Mary - for fear of being labeled 'too Roman.' Are we Protestants fulfilling what Mary said under divine inspiration, 'Behold, all generations will call me blessed?' Why should we not honor the portal through which God deigned to slip his only Son into this world for our redemption?"

Let me close by quoting Bishop Fulton Sheen: "God, who made the sun, also made the moon. The moon does not take away from the brilliance of the sun. All its light is a reflection from the sun. The moon would be only a burnt out cinder, if it were not for the sun. The Blessed Mother reflects her divine Son. Without him she is nothing...On dark nights, we are grateful for the moon. When we see it shining, we

know there must be a sun. So, too, in this dark night of the world, when men turn their backs on him who is the Light of the World, we look to Mary to guide our feet while we await the sunrise."