Theotokos, Mediatrix, and Mother: The Catholic theology of Mary, its historical evolution, and the distinction between veneration and worship

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Contents

1. Introduction

Any discussion of Lourdes, the apparitions, and Bernadette with non-Catholic Christian friends has often led to a discussion of the place of Mary in the scheme of salvation. However valiant our efforts to distinguish the veneration of Mary from the 'worship' of her, we are often not helped by two factors: first, a lack of understanding, and second, on occasion, the particular practices of Catholics whose sincere love for the mother of God can, rightly or wrongly, lead our non-Catholic friends to wonder, confronted by what they may (rightly) see as almost lurid devotion, what has happened to Jesus. Little wonder that those few subjects in Christian theology have generated as much internal debate, ecumenical friction, and interreligious curiosity as the figure of Mary. For Catholics, she occupies a position of singular importance: she is the Mother of God, the first disciple, a model of faith, and an intercessor whose prayers are sought by hundreds of millions daily. For many Protestants, Catholic Marian devotion represents a cautionary instance of tradition overwhelming Scripture, of piety leaning into something uncomfortably close to idolatry. For Orthodox Christians, Mary—the *Theotokos*—is cherished with an intensity that frequently exceeds even Catholic practice, yet their theological grammar for expressing this devotion differs in instructive ways. And beyond Christianity altogether, Mary appears as a revered figure in the Qur'an, a subject of rabbinic comment, and a symbol that has attracted the attention of feminist scholars, historians of religion, and comparative theologians.

In this chapter, we examine Mary through scriptural sources, trace her historical development across the patristic, medieval, and modern periods, analyse the reception of Marian theology within various Christian traditions and beyond, and critically explore the theological language that differentiates veneration of Mary from worship of her. The overarching argument is that Marian theology is not a peripheral addition, but is closely integrated with the core of Catholic Christology, ecclesiology, and soteriology. Furthermore, understanding the distinction between veneration and worship necessitates an appreciation of how Catholic theology conceptualises the relationship between the Creator and the creature, grace and nature, Christ and His Church.

2. Scriptural foundations of Marian theology

The New Testament references to Mary are comparatively sparse, yet each has borne an extraordinary weight of theological interpretation. The infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke provide the foundational texts. Luke's Gospel is particularly significant: the Annunciation (Lk 1:26–38), the Visitation (Lk 1:39–56), and the Magnificat (Lk 1:46–55) present Mary as a figure of obedient faith whose "fiat"—"let it be done to me according to your word"—reverses Eve's disobedience (Brown, 1978). This Eve–Mary typology, already implicit in Luke's narrative, would become a dominant motif in patristic theology.

Matthew's infancy narrative emphasises the virginal conception (Mt 1:18–25) and places it within the context of Old Testament fulfilment, citing Isaiah 7:14. The Johannine corpus contributes two further texts of enduring importance: the wedding at Cana (Jn 2:1–12), where Mary's intercession precipitates Jesus's first sign, and the scene at the foot of the cross (Jn 19:25–27), where Jesus entrusts Mary to the Beloved Disciple and vice versa. Catholic exegesis has read this latter passage not merely as an act of filial care but as the symbolic bestowal of Mary's spiritual motherhood upon the whole Church (Brown, 1966).

The Book of Revelation includes an additional Marian reference that remains subject to debate. The term "woman clothed with the sun" (Rev 12:1) has been interpreted by numerous Catholic scholars as symbolising both Israel and Mary; her cosmic conflict with the dragon reflects the protoevangelium of Genesis 3:15 (Beale, 1999). Conversely, Protestant commentators have predominantly opposed this Marian interpretation, preferring a strictly ecclesial or Israel-centric perspective. Nevertheless, the inherent ambiguity of apocalyptic symbolism permits multiple interpretations.

Paul's epistles contain a solitary explicit reference to Mary—Galatians 4:4, "born of a woman, born under the law"—yet this passage bears significant doctrinal weight. It affirms that Christ's humanity was authentic and obtained from a human mother, a point that was instrumental in the Christological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries (Gaventa, 1999).

The Acts of the Apostles situates Mary among the disciples assembled in the upper room at Pentecost (Acts 1:14), a detail that Catholic ecclesiology has duly noted. Mary's presence at the inception of the Church, having also been present at the birth of Christ, establishes a parallelism that subsequent theology would elaborate extensively. She serves as the linkage between the Incarnation and the Church, bridging Christology and ecclesiology. The limited yet strategically positioned references to Mary in the New Testament do not constitute a fully developed Mariology; rather, they represent the initial seeds—nurtured by liturgical practice, theological reflection, and the lived piety of Christian communities—long before the medieval period, which Protestants often erroneously regard as the origin of Marian devotion (Gaventa, 1999).

It is also worth noting that the Gospels present Mary as a contemplative figure. Luke mentions on two occasions that Mary "treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Lk 2:19, 51). This depiction of Mary as one who reflects on the mystery of God's actions has significantly influenced the Catholic understanding of her as an exemplar disciple—primarily characterized not by power or authority, but by receptivity, faithfulness, and inner prayer. The Magnificat, highlighting themes of divine reversal and justice for the impoverished, has further elevated Mary's significance within liberation theology and Catholic Social Teaching more broadly (Johnson, 2003).

3. Patristic and Conciliar development

3.1 The Eve–Mary typology and early Mariology

The earliest post-biblical Marian theology is documented in the writings of Justin Martyr (circa 100–165) and Irenaeus of Lyon (circa 130–202). Justin initiated the parallel between Eve and Mary, asserting that as Eve's disobedience resulted in death, so Mary's obedience brought about life. Irenaeus expanded upon this concept into a comprehensive theology of recapitulation: Mary is recognized as the new Eve whose faith "unties the knot" of Eve's transgression (*Adversus Haereses* III.22.4). This is not merely speculative piety; it places Mary within the framework of the economy of salvation and establishes a pattern of theological reasoning—namely, that Mary's role is consistently derived from and subordinate to that of Christ—which has remained normative within Catholic doctrine (Gambero, 1999).

The third-century *Sub Tuum Praesidium*, the oldest known prayer to Mary, discovered on a papyrus fragment and dated to approximately 250 CE, demonstrates that Marian devotion was not a medieval invention but a feature of early Christian piety. The prayer addresses Mary as *Theotokos*—Mother of God—more than a century before the Council of Ephesus formally ratified the title (De Smedt, 1921).

3.2 The Council of Ephesus (431) and *Theotokos*

The pivotal moment in the collaborative development of Marian theology was the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD. The dispute focused on Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, who opposed the designation *Theotokos for Mary,* preferring the term *Christotokos* (Mother of Christ) on the basis that a human woman could not be considered the mother of God. Cyril of Alexandria contended that because the individual born of Mary was the divine Logos incarnate—an entity with two natures—Mary could appropriately be called the Mother of God. The Council's endorsement of *Theotoko*s, as Pelikan (1971) noted, was primarily a Christological rather than a Mariological affirmation; it aimed to preserve the unity of Christ's person against the Christology of Nestorius, which argued separation.

This point deserves emphasis because it illustrates a recurring pattern in the development of Marian doctrine: claims about Mary are, at their deepest level, claims about Christ. The title *Theotokos* does not assert Mary's divinity; it asserts the Incarnation. Catholic theologians have consistently maintained that Marian theology is a function of Christology, not an independent domain (O'Carroll, 1982).

3.3 Perpetual virginity

The doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity—that she was a virgin before, during, and after the birth of Christ—was widely affirmed in both East and West by the fifth century. The Second Council of Constantinople (553) referred to Mary as "ever-virgin" (*aeiparthenos),* and this teaching was upheld by Augustine, Jerome, and Ambrose among the Latin Fathers. The doctrine rests partly on exegetical arguments (the "brothers of Jesus" mentioned in the The

Gospels are being interpreted as related in familial terms, such as cousins or step-brothers, partly based on theological reasoning. the sanctity of Mary's womb as the dwelling place of the incarnate Word, and partly on the developing association of virginity with holiness in late antiquity (Brown, 1988).

It is worth noting that the perpetual virginity of Mary was affirmed by Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, a fact that sometimes surprises modern Protestants whose traditions have moved considerably from the views of their founders on this matter (Pelikan, 1996).

4. Medieval and modern doctrinal development

4.1 The Immaculate Conception

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception—that Mary was preserved from original sin from the first moment of her conception—has a longstanding and debated history prior to its dogmatic definition by Pius IX in *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854). This definition subsequently played a significant role in the investigations into Bernadette's experiences at the grotto of Massabielle, where this young, largely illiterate girl's assertion that 'the lady' had described herself as such would both confound Church authorities before going on to play a part in confirming Bernadette's accounts as authentic. During the medieval period, a notable dispute arose between Franciscan and Dominican theologians. Duns Scotus (circa 1266–1308) advocated for the Immaculate Conception based on his concept of "perfect redemption": he contended that it was more appropriate for Christ's redemptive power to ensure Mary's preservation from sin rather than merely rescuing her from it after the fact. Conversely, Thomas Aquinas appeared to oppose the doctrine; however, Thomist scholars have debated the precise implications of his stance for centuries (Bonnefoy, 1954).

The definition of 1854 represented a significant exercise of papal authority, being promulgated by Pius IX without a prior conciliar decree, though after extensive consultation with the world's bishops. It would later serve as a precedent for the formal definition of papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council in 1870. The theological logic of the doctrine is essentially Christological: Mary's sinlessness is understood not as an independent privilege but as the work of Christ's grace applied anticipatively. As the 1854 definition states, Mary was preserved "in view of the foreseen merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race" (Pius IX, 1854).

The medieval development of Marian theology was not confined solely to doctrinal disputation. The era experienced a remarkable proliferation of Marian devotion across art, architecture, liturgy, and popular piety. The magnificent cathedrals of Chartres, Paris, Salisbury, and Cologne were dedicated to Our Lady. The Rosary took its recognisable form during the late medieval period, widely attributed to Dominican spirituality. Marian antiphons—such as the *Salve Regina,* the *Ave Maria,* and the *Alma Redemptoris Mater*—

became integral to the Liturgy of the Hours. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) was among the most eloquent Marian preachers of the medieval Church; his sermons on the Song of Songs developed an intricate Marian interpretation of the bridal imagery, which profoundly influenced subsequent Catholic mysticism (Boss, 2007).

The medieval cult of the Virgin also possessed social dimensions that merit recognition. Marian guilds, confraternities, and sodalities created networks of mutual support. The depiction of Mary as a compassionate mother offered a counterbalance to the more austere and juridical representations of God that occasionally prevailed in medieval preaching. Feminist historians have engaged in scholarly debate regarding whether this veneration of Mary genuinely enhanced the status of women within medieval Christendom or functioned as a compensatory mechanism, which idealised one woman while imposing restrictions on others. Warner (1976) persuasively advocated for the latter interpretation, whereas contemporary scholarship has presented more nuanced assessments of the relationship between Marian devotion and women's tangible social experiences. Certainly, the veneration of Mary by the French peasantry at and around the time of the apparition on Lourdes was well embedded, even if the practices occasionally offended Church authorities and mid-nineteenth-century bourgeois sensibilities (Uttley, 2026).

4.2 The Assumption

The dogma of the Assumption—that Mary, at the end of her earthly life, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory—was defined by Pius XII in *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950). Unlike the Immaculate Conception, the Assumption had been virtually uncontested within the Catholic and Orthodox traditions for over a millennium, celebrated liturgically in both East (as the Dormition) and West from at least the sixth century (Shoemaker, 2002).

The definition deliberately omits specifying whether Mary died prior to her Assumption, a matter on which Eastern and Western traditions have historically diverged. Theologically, the Assumption is regarded as the fulfillment of Mary's Immaculate Conception: her preservation from sin was coupled with her preservation from the corruption of death. Furthermore, it is interpreted as an anticipation of the general resurrection, whereby Mary's glorified body signifies the destiny assured to all the faithful (Ratzinger, 2005).

4.3 Mary in the Second Vatican Council

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) elected, following extensive deliberation, to incorporate Marian theology within the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, specifically in Chapter VIII, rather than in a standalone document. This choice was intentionally ecumenical in nature: it indicated that the understanding of Mary's role is to be situated within the mystery of Christ and the Church, rather than presented in isolation. The Council confirmed all preceding Marian dogmas, articulating them in biblical and patristic

language, while refraining from adopting the maximalist Marian titles (such as “Co-Redemptrix”) that some Council Fathers wished to promulgate (Sullivan, 1996).

Lumen Gentium 67 holds particular significance concerning the distinction between veneration and worship. It exhorts the faithful “to abstain zealously both from all false exaggeration and from too summary an attitude in considering the special dignity of the Mother of God” and emphasizes that Marian devotion “be directed so that while the Mother is honoured, the Son… is rightly known, loved, and glorified” (Vatican II, 1964). This passage encapsulates the authoritative position of the Catholic Church: Marian veneration is justified and bounded within the framework of Christology.

5. Marian theology in other Christian traditions

5.1 Eastern Orthodoxy

The Orthodox churches share with Catholicism an intense devotion to the *Theotokos.* Icons of the Virgin are central to Orthodox worship, and the feasts of the Dormition, the Nativity of the *Theotokos*, and the Presentation of the *Theotokos* in the Temple rank among the most important in the liturgical calendar. Theologically, Orthodoxy affirms the perpetual virginity and the Assumption (as the Dormition), and Orthodox tradition has consistently upheld Mary’s sinlessness, though it has not adopted the specific Western formulation of the Immaculate Conception. The Orthodox objection is not to Mary’s holiness but to the Augustinian doctrine of original sin upon which the Western definition depends: if there is no inherited guilt in the Western juridical sense, there is no need for a special exemption from it (Ware, 1993).

The principal difference between Catholic and Orthodox Marian theology lies less in content than in method. Orthodoxy is wary of dogmatic definitions that go beyond what it regards as the consensus of the undivided Church of the first millennium. The definitions of 1854 and 1950, promulgated by papal authority alone, are regarded by Orthodox theologians as overreaches—not necessarily wrong in substance, but procedurally illegitimate (Meyendorff, 1983).

5.2 Anglicanism

The Anglican position on Mary exhibits considerable diversity, ranging from the near-Catholic Mariology of the Anglo-Catholic tradition to the minimal emphasis on Marian theology within evangelical Anglicanism. The 2005 statement by the Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), titled "Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ," signifies a noteworthy ecumenical accomplishment. This document affirmatively states that the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption are “consonant with” Scripture and ancient Christian traditions, while clarifying that they are not accepted as dogmas requiring formal

assent. Additionally, it recognises the legitimacy of seeking Mary's intercession, whilst emphasising that such practice is not obligatory.

The historical trajectory of Anglicanism is instructive. The English Reformers retained the ancient Marian feasts in the Book of Common Prayer and affirmed the virginal conception, though they stripped away medieval devotional accretions such as the Rosary, the Angelus, and the Litany of Loreto. The Oxford Movement of the nineteenth century recovered much of this Marian devotion within Anglo-Catholicism, and the late twentieth century saw a broader Anglican willingness to re-engage with Marian theology, partly under the impetus of ecumenical dialogue (Boss, 2007).

5.3 Protestantism

The Protestant traditions exhibit the broadest range of attitudes towards Mary. The magisterial Reformers were considerably more Marian than their contemporary successors. Luther delivered sermons on the Magnificat with evident warmth and affirmed both the virginal conception and the perpetual virginity. Calvin accepted the title *Theotokos* and spoke of Mary with respect, although he insisted that she must not become an object of devotion that detracts from the sole mediatorship of Christ. Zwingli, too, affirmed Mary's perpetual virginity and her role as Mother of God (Pelikan, 1996).

Later Protestantism, particularly in its Reformed, Baptist, and Pentecostal expressions, moved decisively away from these positions. The concern is essentially soteriological: if Christ alone is the mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim 2:5), then any practice that appears to interpose Mary between the believer and Christ is seen as incompatible with the Gospel. The language of "praying to Mary" is taken to imply either that Mary possesses divine attributes (omniscience, omnipresence) or that Christ's mediation is insufficient—both of which are rejected as unscriptural (McGrath, 2012).

Catholic responses to these concerns emphasise that asking Mary's intercession is structurally identical to asking a fellow Christian to pray for one: it does not bypass Christ but approaches him through the communion of saints. The distinction between mediation and intercession—between the unique salvific mediation of Christ and the participation of the saints in that mediation through prayer—is, Catholics argue, well attested in the New Testament itself (1 Tim 2:1–4; Rom 15:30; Col 4:3) (Hahn, 2001).

The ecumenical movement of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has engendered notable convergences. The Groupe des Dombes, an ecumenical study group comprising Catholics and Protestants in France, published a landmark document in 1997–1998, recognizing that both traditions had distorted their understanding of Mary—Catholics through excess, Protestants through neglect—and advocating for a reappropriation of the "Mary of the Gospels" as a shared heritage. Additionally, several Evangelical theologians have begun to contend that the Reformation overcorrected regarding Mary, and that a biblically

rooted appreciation of her role does not necessarily undermine Protestant doctrines concerning the sole sufficiency of Christ (Pelikan, 1996).

6. Mary in non-Christian religions

6.1 Mary in Islam

Mary (Maryam) holds a position of significant honour within Islam. She is the sole woman mentioned by name in the Qur'an, which dedicates an entire surah to her (Surah 19, Maryam). The Qur'an affirms the virginal conception of Jesus ('Isa), depicts Mary as selected by God above all women (Q 3:42), and recounts a birth narrative that bears notable similarities to Luke's Gospel (Q 19:16–21). The Qur'anic depiction of Mary highlights her piety, obedience to God, and perseverance through suffering. She is acknowledged among the most revered women in Islamic tradition, alongside Khadijah, Fatimah, and Asiyah (Stowasser, 1994).

There are, naturally, essential theological distinctions. Islam repudiates the divinity of Jesus and consequently cannot endorse the title *Theotokos* in its Christian interpretation. Mary is esteemed not as the Mother of God but as the mother of a prominent prophet. Nevertheless, the Qur'anic veneration for Maryam has offered a noteworthy point of engagement in Muslim–Christian dialogue, particularly at Marian shrines such as the House of the Virgin Mary near Ephesus and the shrine of Our Lady of Zeitoun in Cairo, which draw both Muslim and Christian pilgrims.

6.2 Mary in Judaism

The Jewish engagement with Mary is necessarily more complex and more fraught. Rabbinic literature contains scattered references to Mary (Miriam), some of which are polemical in character, reflecting the centuries-long tensions between Judaism and Christianity. The Toledot Yeshu, a medieval counter-narrative of the life of Jesus, presents Mary in unflattering terms, though this text is best understood as a product of communal self-defence in the context of Christian anti-Judaism rather than as a serious theological engagement (Schaefer, 2012).

In contemporary discourse between Jewish and Christian communities, Mary has occasionally been regarded as a point of connection rather than division. Some Jewish scholars have emphasized Mary's Jewish heritage and have interpreted the Magnificat as a distinctly Jewish prayer, rooted in the canticles of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1–10) and the prophetic tradition advocating justice for the poor. Amy-Jill Levine (2006), for instance, has contended that considering Mary's Jewish identity can enhance the mutual understanding of both Judaism and Christianity, provided that Christians avoid the temptation to contrast Mary's faith with that of her Jewish contemporaries.

6.3 Mary in wider religious and cultural contexts

Any modern-day visitor to Lourdes cannot help but notice the number of pilgrims whose own faith may well be very different to that of Bernadette, though they nevertheless see themselves drawn to the shrine. The figure of Mary has attracted attention in the broader comparative study of religion. Scholars have noted parallels between Marian devotion and the veneration of feminine divine figures in Hinduism (particularly Devi and the various manifestations of Shakti), in Buddhism (especially Guanyin/Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion, who is frequently depicted in a manner reminiscent of the Madonna), and in pre-Christian Mediterranean religions (the cults of Isis, Artemis, and Cybele). The question of historical influence versus structural parallel remains debated: some scholars argue for direct borrowing from Isis to Mary, while others regard the resemblances as reflecting deep psychological or anthropological patterns in human religiosity (Warner, 1976; Benko, 2004).

Catholic theology has generally exercised caution regarding these comparisons, recognizing superficial similarities while asserting that Marian theology is grounded in the historical particularities of the biblical narrative and the dogmatic tradition, rather than in archetypal patterns of "the divine feminine." The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 1974 document Marialis Cultus, issued under Pope Paul VI, affirmed that authentic Marian devotion must be "Trinitarian, Christological, and ecclesial" and issued a warning against syncretistic interpretations that detach Mary from her theological context. W

7. Veneration and worship: The Theological Distinction

7.1 The Classical framework: *Latria, Dulia*, and *Hyperdulia*

The distinction between worshipping God and venerating the saints is one of the oldest and most carefully elaborated in Catholic theology. Its classical formulation derives from Augustine and was systematised by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae* (II-II, q.84, a.1; q.103, a.3–4). Aquinas distinguishes three forms of honour: *latria,* the adoration owed to God alone, which acknowledges absolute divine excellence; *dulia*, the veneration given to the saints, which acknowledges their holiness as a participation in divine grace; and *hyperdulia*, a special form of veneration given to Mary alone, which recognises her unique role in salvation history without attributing to her any divine status.

This taxonomy is not arbitrary. It reflects Aquinas's broader metaphysical framework, in which every created excellence is a participation in the uncreated excellence of God. To honour a saint is not to divert honour from God but to honour the work of God's grace in a creature. Aquinas's analogy is instructive: just as honouring a king's ambassador is a way of honouring the king, so venerating the saints is a way of glorifying the God whose grace made them holy (*Summa Theologiae* II-II, q.103, a.1, ad 3). The distinction between *latria* and *dulia*

is not one of degree but of kind: *latria* acknowledges the infinite, uncreated source of all goodness; *dulia* acknowledges its finite, created reflections.

7.2 The Council of Trent and Post-Reformation clarification

The Protestant Reformation challenged the distinction between veneration and worship consistently. The Reformers argued that, in practice—if not in doctrine—Catholic Marian devotion amounted to a form of worship that infringed upon the First Commandment. The Council of Trent (1545–1563) responded by reaffirming the legitimacy of invoking saints and venerating their images and relics, while emphasising that "all godliness and all religion" ultimately directed towards God (Session XXV, 1563). Although the Council acknowledged the existence of abuses—recognising that popular devotion occasionally overstepped theological boundaries—it upheld the validity of the practice itself.

The Tridentine position rests on a key theological claim: that the communion of saints is a reality, not a metaphor. If the dead in Christ are alive in Christ (Rom 6:8–9; Phil 1:21–23), and if the members of the Body of Christ can and should pray for one another (Jas 5:16), then it follows that those who have died in a state of grace continue to exercise this ministry of intercession. Asking Mary to "pray for us sinners" is, on this view, no different in principle from asking a living friend to pray for us; the difference is that Mary, being in the immediate presence of God, is presumed to pray with a purity and efficacy that surpasses any earthly intercession (Dulles, 1992).

7.3 *Lumen Gentium* and the contemporary position

The Second Vatican Council's treatment of Mary in *Lumen Gentium* represents the most authoritative contemporary statement of the veneration–worship distinction. Chapter VIII is remarkably careful in its language. It affirms that Mary's "maternal duty" toward the faithful "in no way obscures or diminishes" the unique mediation of Christ, that her influence on the salvation of the faithful "flows forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ" and "in no way hinders the immediate union of the faithful with Christ but on the contrary fosters it" (*Lumen Gentium* 60–62).

The Council's Christocentric framing of Marian theology answers the central Protestant objection: that Catholic Marian devotion interposes a creature between the believer and Christ. The conciliar text insists that precisely the opposite is the case. Mary's role is not to stand between Christ and the faithful but to lead the faithful to Christ. Her intercession is not a supplement to Christ's mediation but a participation in it, made possible by grace. The analogy is with the Church itself: the Church mediates the grace of Christ to its members not by replacing Christ but by being his Body, the instrument through which his saving work continues in history (Ratzinger, 2005).

7.4 Philosophical and phenomenological considerations

The distinction between veneration and worship further allows for a philosophical analysis. Worship, in the strict theological sense, involves acknowledging the existence of an absolute, unconditioned, and self-subsistent Being—referred to as aseity in classical theism. It constitutes the appropriate response to that which exists independently and upon which all other entities depend for their existence. Conversely, veneration is the recognition of a derivative, participatory excellence: it honours not the self-subsistent Being itself but the goodness that a creature has received from God. The nature of veneration is inherently relational and referential; it directs attention beyond the creature to the Creator (Marion, 2002).

Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenological analysis of the icon offers valuable insights here. Marion differentiates between the idol, which absorbs the gaze and redirects it back to the viewer—thus establishing a closed cycle of self-regard—and the icon, which guides the gaze outward to the invisible reality it represents. According to Marion, authentic Marian veneration is characterised by its icon-like nature rather than idolatry: the devotee's gaze does not fixate on Mary as an end in itself but instead passes through Mary to the Christ she embodies. Should the gaze become fixed on Mary as an ultimate object—transforming her into an idol in Marion's sense—such veneration would lapse into worship, thereby contravening the theological framework.

This phenomenological account elucidates the reasons why Catholic theologians persistently assert that Marian devotion that is misdirected constitutes not merely an error of degree but a fundamental error of kind. The distinction between venerating Mary and worshipping her is not akin to the difference between a warm fire and a dangerously hot fire; rather, it is comparable to the difference between viewing through a window and simply gazing at the glass. Properly ordered Marian devotion remains transparent to Christ; conversely, disordered Marian devotion becomes opaque. The Catholic tradition has consistently recognised the potential for the latter—*Lumen Gentium* 67's caution against "false exaggeration" is an explicit warning against such a deviation—but it affirms that the risk of distortion does not render the practice invalid any more than the risk of heresy invalidates theological doctrine.

A further consideration warrants mention. The Protestant critique occasionally proceeds as if the first-century Church practiced a bare, unadorned faith centered exclusively on Christ, to which later centuries added Marian accretions. Nevertheless, the historical evidence does not substantiate this narrative in any unambiguous manner. The *Sub Tuum* Praesidium from the mid-third century, the widespread use of *Theotokos* prior to Ephesus, and Marian art found in the Roman catacombs all attest to the antiquity of Marian devotion. What evolved over time was not the devotion itself but rather its theological articulation and dogmatic precision. The ongoing practice of the community—the *sensus fidelium*—preceded and indeed motivated the formal definitions. This aligns with the Catholic understanding of

doctrinal development as articulated by John Henry Newman (1845): authentic development clarifies what was already implicit in the deposit of faith, rather than providing genuinely novel content.

The issue of Marian apparitions—including those at Guadalupe (1531), Lourdes (1858), Fátima (1917), among others—raises further important considerations. The official stance of the Catholic Church regarding these apparitions remains notably cautious: while approved apparitions are considered “worthy of belief," they do not constitute obligatory faith for the faithful. These phenomena are classified as “private revelation," distinct from the “public revelation” contained within Scripture and Tradition. Even at their most impactful, approved apparitions have consistently served to reinforce, rather than replace or expand upon, the fundamental message of the Gospel: the appeals at Lourdes and Fátima were directed towards prayer, penance, and conversion—involving the sacraments and faith in Christ—rather than the veneration of Mary. This distinction is both vital and frequently misunderstood by external observers (Harris, 1999).

8. Marian Devotion in Practice: Liturgy, Prayer, and Popular Piety

The theoretical distinction between veneration and worship finds its practical expression in the liturgical and devotional life of the Church. The Church’s liturgical calendar includes numerous Marian feasts—the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God (1 January), the Annunciation (25 March), the Assumption (15 August), and the Immaculate Conception (8 December), among others—but these feasts are structured so that Mary is always celebrated in relation to the mysteries of Christ. The Prefaces of the Marian Masses consistently direct praise to God for what he has accomplished in and through Mary (Vagaggini, 1957).

The Rosary, arguably the most distinctive Marian prayer, exemplifies the Christocentric framework of Marian devotion. Its twenty mysteries reflect the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, viewed through the perspective of Mary’s experience. The Hail Mary, repeated frequently, begins with the angel’s salutation of the Annunciation and ends with a plea for Mary’s intercession. The prayer does not ascribe any divine power to Mary; rather, it requests her intercession—similar to requesting a fellow Christian’s prayers—and is conducted within the context of contemplating the fundamental events of the Gospel (Johnson, 2003).

Pilgrimages to Marian shrines—Lourdes, Fátima, Guadalupe, Częstochowa, Walsingham—represent another form of Marian devotion with deep roots in Catholic culture. These sites are typically associated with Marian apparitions or miraculous images, and they attract millions of visitors annually. The theology of pilgrimage understands these sites not as locations where Mary is worshipped but as places where the encounter with Christ through Mary’s intercession is especially vivid. The emphasis at Lourdes, for example, is on conversion,

penance, and the sacraments—particularly the Eucharist and Reconciliation—rather than on Mary as an end in herself (Harris, 1999).

9. Conclusion

The Catholic theology of Mary constitutes a complex, historically nuanced, and theologically refined corpus of doctrine that resists simplification into basic formulas. Its biblical foundations, though modest, have been expanded over two millennia through patristic, conciliar, and theological insights into a series of interconnected dogmas—*Theotokos,* Perpetual Virginity, Immaculate Conception, Assumption—that Catholics regard not as superficial embellishments but as necessary implications of the central Christian confession that in Jesus Christ, God assumed human form.

The reception of this theology across Christian traditions reveals both profound commonalities and ongoing tensions. Orthodox and Catholic Mariology exhibit far more similarities than differences, mainly diverging on issues of authority and formulation rather than on core substance. Anglican engagement with Mary has been enhanced through ecumenical dialogue, and even the most critical Protestant traditions demonstrate a reverence for the woman who accepted God's invitation at the Annunciation, similar to Catholicism. Beyond Christianity, Mary's esteemed position in Islam and the comparative insights identified by scholars of religion affirm that her figure resonates deeply within human religious consciousness, even though her theological importance is closely tied to the specific doctrines of the Christian Gospel.

The distinction between veneration and worship is not merely a piece of theological casuistry designed to deflect Protestant criticism. It constitutes a fundamental structural feature of Catholic theology, rooted in the metaphysical distinction between the Creator and the creature, as well as between uncreated grace and its created effects. To venerate Mary is to honour the divine actions within a human life; to worship God is to honor the divine essence and being of God. These two acts are not mutually exclusive; rather, when properly understood, they represent two facets of a singular act of faith. As articulated in Lumen Gentium, in honouring the Mother, the Son is "rightly known, loved, and glorified." This principle encapsulates the core of Catholic Marian theology and remains, across ecumenical and interfaith boundaries, the most coherent explanation for why Christians have, from the earliest centuries, referred to this woman as blessed.

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