

POPULAR DEVOTIONAL PRACTICES: BASIC QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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As the Second Vatican Council pointed out so clearly, the life of the Church centers on the liturgy, the official public worship of God by the Church as the Body of Christ. The liturgy includes, above all, the Eucharist and the other six sacraments, but also other actions of the Church such as the daily prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours, the rites of Christian burial, and the rites for the dedication of a church or for those making religious profession. Christ himself is at work in the liturgy, so that the action of the Church, which is the Body of Christ, participates in the saving act of Christ as priest.¹ Precisely because every liturgical celebration "is an action of Christ the priest and of His Body which is the Church," no other form of worship can take its place: a liturgical celebration "is a sacred action surpassing all others; no other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree."²

While the liturgy is "the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed" and "the font from which all her power flows,"³ it is not possible for us to fill up all of our day with participation in the liturgy.

The Council pointed out that the spiritual life "is not limited solely to participation in the liturgy. . . . according to the teaching of the apostle, [the Christian] must pray without ceasing."⁴ Popular devotional practices play a crucial role in helping to foster this ceaseless prayer. The faithful have always used a variety of practices as a means of permeating everyday life with prayer to God. Examples include pilgrimages, novenas, processions and celebrations in honor of Mary and the other saints, the rosary, the *Angelus*, the Stations of the Cross, the veneration of relics, and the use of sacramentals. Properly used, popular devotional practices do not replace the liturgical life of the Church; rather, they extend it into daily life.⁵

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council recognized the importance of popular devotions in the life of the Church and encouraged pastors and teachers to promote sound popular devotions. They wrote, "Popular devotions of the Christian people are to be highly commended, provided they accord with the laws and norms of the Church."⁶ More recently, Pope John Paul II has devoted an entire apostolic letter to a popular devotion, the rosary, calling on bishops, priests, and deacons "to promote it with conviction" and recommending to all the faithful, "*Confidently take up the Rosary once again*. Rediscover the Rosary in the light of Scripture, in harmony with the Liturgy, and in the context of your daily lives."⁷

Because popular devotional practices have such an important role in the spiritual life of Catholics, we, the bishops of the United States, have prepared this text to respond to questions that commonly arise in regard to such devotions. We aim to provide some explanation of popular devotional practices and their proper function in the life of the Church. On the one hand, we expect that, equipped with a fuller understanding of the proper role of popular devotional practices, the faithful will be better able to avoid possible misapplications and to recognize devotions whose appropriateness is questionable. On the other hand, we hope to encourage the faithful to make use of sound devotional practices, so that their lives

might be filled in various ways with praise and worship of God. Faithful practice of popular devotions can help us experience God in our everyday lives and conform us more closely to Jesus Christ. As Pope Pius XII pointed out, the purpose of popular devotional practices is

to attract and direct our souls to God, purifying them from their sins, encouraging them to practice virtue and, finally, stimulating them to advance along the path of sincere piety by accustoming them to meditate on the eternal truths and disposing them better to contemplate the mysteries of the human and divine natures of Christ.⁸

Referring to the many forms of popular piety found in America, Pope John Paul II declared, "These and other forms of popular piety are an opportunity for the faithful to encounter the living Christ."⁹

1. What are the origins of popular devotions?

Unlike the sacraments themselves, popular devotions cannot be traced directly back to the ministry of Jesus and the practice of the Apostles. Most developed gradually over the years and even centuries as people sought ways of living out their faith. The origins of the more ancient devotions are often rather obscure. Some devotions, such as the rosary and scapulars, have come down to us as adaptations of the practices of religious orders. A few, such as devotion to the Sacred Heart and the Miraculous Medal, are considered to have their origin in a private revelation, that is, some vision or message given to one of the faithful.

2. What is the relationship between popular devotions and the liturgy?

Since the liturgy is the center of the life of the Church, popular devotions should never be portrayed as equal to the liturgy, nor can they adequately substitute for the liturgy.¹⁰ What is crucial is that popular devotions be in harmony with the liturgy, drawing inspiration from it and ultimately leading back to it. "These devotions should be so drawn up that they harmonize with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some fashion derived from it, and lead the people to it, since, in fact, the liturgy by its very nature far surpasses any of them."¹¹ While the liturgy always remains the primary reference point, "the liturgy and popular piety are two forms of worship which are in mutual and fruitful relationship with each other."¹² Personal and family prayer and devotions should flow from and lead to a fuller participation in the liturgy.

As Pope Paul VI recognized, maintaining the proper balance may not always be easy and may require patient and persistent effort.¹³ He indicated that there are two extreme attitudes to be avoided. On the one hand, he rejected the position of those "who scorn, *a priori*, devotions of piety which, in their correct forms, have been recommended by the Magisterium, who leave them aside and in this way create a vacuum which they do not fill. They forget that the Council has said that devotions of piety should harmonize with the liturgy, not be suppressed."¹⁴ On the other hand, he likewise did not accept the position of

those who, without wholesome liturgical and pastoral criteria, mix practices of piety and liturgical acts in hybrid celebrations. It sometimes happens that novenas or similar practices are inserted into the very celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. This creates the danger that the Lord's Memorial Rite, instead of

being the culmination of the meeting of the Christian community, becomes the occasion, as it were, for devotional practices.¹⁵

Here Pope Paul VI admonished us that "exercises of piety should be harmonized with the liturgy, not merged into it."¹⁶

3. What is the relationship between popular devotions and the Bible?

As the Bible stands at the core of what God has revealed to the Church, sound popular devotions should naturally be strongly imbued with biblical themes, language, and imagery. Pope Paul VI explained, "Today it is recognized as a general need of Christian piety that every form of worship should have a biblical imprint."¹⁷ He applied this in particular to the example of Marian devotions: "What is needed is that texts of prayers and chants should draw their inspiration and their wording from the Bible, and above all that devotion to the Virgin should be imbued with the great themes of the Christian message."¹⁸ In speaking of the rosary, Pope John Paul II insisted that it is not a substitute for the reading of the Bible; "on the contrary, it presupposes and promotes" prayerful reading of the Holy Scriptures.¹⁹ While the mysteries of the rosary "do no more than outline the fundamental elements of the life of Christ, they easily draw the mind to a more expansive reflection on the rest of the Gospel, especially when the Rosary is prayed in a setting of prolonged recollection."²⁰

4. What is the relationship between popular devotions and culture?

Popular devotions arise in the encounter between the Catholic faith and culture. As the Church brings the faith into a culture, there are two kinds of transformation that take place. First of all, by introducing the Catholic faith, the Church transforms the culture, leaving the imprint of the faith on the culture. At the same time, however, the Church assimilates certain aspects of the culture, as some elements of the culture become absorbed and integrated into the life of the Church. This twofold process can be seen in the development of popular devotional practices. "In genuine forms of popular piety, the Gospel message assimilates expressive forms particular to a given culture while also permeating the consciousness of that culture with the content of the Gospel."²¹

The Catholic faith is thus able to enter into every culture, and people are able to live the faith in their own cultures, once these cultures have been purified of elements foreign to the Catholic faith. While this inculturation of the faith takes place in the liturgy, popular devotions carry the faith a step deeper into the everyday life of a particular culture. When properly ordered to the liturgy, popular devotions perform an irreplaceable function of bringing worship into daily life for people of various cultures and times. "The liturgy is the criterion; it is the living form of the Church as a whole, fed directly by the Gospel. Popular piety is a sign that the faith is spreading its roots into the heart of a people in such a way that it reaches into daily life."²² Popular devotions allow the practice of the faith to pass beyond the bounds of the Church's official liturgy and to permeate more thoroughly the daily lives of people in their own culture.

Pope John Paul II pointed out that popular piety provides important guidance to the Church for carrying out the task of inculturation.²³ Understanding the popular piety of a particular people helps the Church to understand their particular spiritual needs and gifts. "This is especially important among the indigenous peoples, in order that 'the seeds of the Word' found in their culture may come to their fullness in Christ."²⁴

The pope also referred to the example of Americans of African origin: "The Church 'recognizes that it must approach these Americans from within their own culture, taking seriously the spiritual and human riches of that culture which appear in the way they worship, their sense of joy and solidarity, their language and their traditions.'" ²⁵

5. Why are there so many different forms of popular devotion?

Since popular devotions arise in response to the spiritual needs of the culture in which they take shape, the degree to which any particular devotion is practiced will vary over time and according to the culture. Referring to different forms of Marian devotion originating in various historical and cultural contexts, Pope Paul VI explained that the Church "does not bind herself to any particular expression of an individual cultural epoch or to the particular anthropological ideas underlying such expressions. The Church understands that certain outward religious expressions, while perfectly valid in themselves, may be less suitable to men and women of different ages and cultures." ²⁶ Some devotional practices evidently correspond more closely to the spiritual needs of a certain people at a certain time than others. Popular devotions are not a matter in which "one size fits all." We must be aware that in our Church today in the United States there are various ethnic groups who are living in different cultural contexts, and we must be sensitive to the fact that these groups often find that some devotional practices meet their spiritual needs better than others.

Sometimes a certain amount of adaptation is required to make a popular devotion suitable for people in another place and time. For example, the Stations of the Cross began as the practice of pious pilgrims to Jerusalem who would retrace the final journey of Jesus Christ to Calvary. Later, for the many who wanted to pass along the same route but could not make the trip to Jerusalem, a practice developed that eventually took the form of the fourteen stations currently found in almost every church. Similarly, the 150 Hail Marys that were recited for the rosary were an adaptation of the medieval monastic practice of reciting the 150 psalms in the Psalter.

6. What is the role of the saints in the life of the Church?

Many popular devotional practices involve veneration of the saints. The saints have a special place in the Body of Christ, which includes both the living and the dead. Through Christ we on earth remain in communion both with the saints in heaven and with the dead who are still in Purgatory. We can pray for those in Purgatory and ask the saints to pray for us. ²⁷ Through their prayers of intercession, the saints in heaven play an integral role in the life of the Church on earth. "For after they have been received into their heavenly home and are present to the Lord, through Him and with Him and in Him they do not cease to intercede with the Father for us, showing forth the merits which they won on earth through the one Mediator between God and man." ²⁸ The saints, the members of the Church who have arrived at perfect union with Christ, join their wills to the will of God in praying for those in the Church who are still on their pilgrimage of faith.

Besides what the saints can do for us by their prayers, the very practice of venerating the saints does great good for those who are devoted to the saints. By practicing love of the saints we strengthen the unity of the entire Body of Christ in the Spirit. This in turn brings us all closer to Christ. "For just as Christian communion among wayfarers brings us closer to Christ, so our companionship with the saints

joins us to Christ, from Whom as from its Fountain and Head issues every grace and the very life of the people of God." ²⁹ Love of the saints necessarily includes and leads to love of Christ and to love of the Holy Trinity. "For every genuine testimony of love shown by us to those in heaven, by its very nature tends toward and terminates in Christ who is the 'crown of all saints,' and through Him, in God Who is wonderful in his saints and is magnified in them." ³⁰

7. Why does Mary have a special role in helping us?

As the Mother of God, the Virgin Mary has a unique position among the saints, indeed, among all creatures. She is exalted, yet still one of us.

Redeemed by reason of the merits of her Son and united to Him by a close and indissoluble tie, she is endowed with the high office and dignity of being the Mother of the Son of God, by which account she is also the beloved daughter of the Father and the temple of the Holy Spirit. Because of this gift of sublime grace she far surpasses all creatures, both in heaven and on earth. At the same time, however, because she belongs to the offspring of Adam she is one with all those who are to be saved. ³¹

Mary embraces God's will and freely chooses to cooperate with God's grace, thereby fulfilling a crucial role in God's plan of salvation. ³² Throughout the centuries, the Church has turned to the Blessed Virgin in order to come closer to Christ. Many forms of piety toward the Mother of God developed that help bring us closer to her Son. In these devotions to Mary, "while the Mother is honored, the Son, through whom all things have their being and in whom it has pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell, is rightly known, loved and glorified and . . . all His commands are observed." ³³ The Church honors her as the Mother of God, looks to her as a model of perfect discipleship, and asks for her prayers to God on our behalf.

8. How does our veneration of Mary and the saints relate to our worship of God?

The honor we give to God alone is properly called adoration, the highest honor we can give. The honor we give to Mary and the saints is called veneration. Proper veneration of the saints does not interfere with the worship due to God, but rather fosters it. "Our communion with those in heaven, provided that it is understood in the fuller light of faith according to its genuine nature, in no way weakens, but conversely, more thoroughly enriches the laetific ³⁴ worship we give to God the Father, through Christ, in the Spirit." ³⁵ With this understanding, we see that proper veneration of Mary does not detract from worship of God. Even as the Mother of the Savior, Mary has a place that is in every way subordinate to and dependent upon that of her Son, who is the one mediator between God and humanity. The maternal role that Mary fulfills toward us as Mother of the Church "in no wise obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows His power." ³⁶

The Second Vatican Council explained very clearly that Mary can be said to fulfill a mediating role only in a secondary and derivative manner:

For no creature could ever be counted as equal with the Incarnate Word and Redeemer. Just as the priesthood of Christ is shared in various ways both by the ministers and by the faithful, and as the one goodness of God is really communicated in different ways to His creatures, so also the unique mediation

of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a sharing in this one source.³⁷

What Mary does for the salvation of the human family does not come from her own power, but from a gift of divine grace that is bestowed on her through her Son. All the salvific influence that she bestows on us is produced "not from some inner necessity, but from the divine pleasure. It flows forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rests on His mediation, depends entirely on it and draws all its power from it."³⁸ Mary in no way replaces Christ. Rather, her role is to bring us to Christ, as is illustrated in Mary's admonition at the wedding feast of Cana, "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5).

9. What is the difference between public Revelation and private revelations?

In some cases popular devotions are based on private revelations rather than public Revelation. The Church distinguishes between public Revelation, which God has given to the Church as a whole and to which all the faithful are bound, and private revelations, which God has given to a particular individual or group and which place no obligation on the rest of the Church. In its document *The Message of Fatima*, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith offers a theological commentary that explains the difference between public Revelation and private revelation.

The term *public revelation* refers to the revealing action of God directed to humanity as a whole and which finds its literary expression in the two parts of the Bible: the Old and New Testaments. It is called *revelation* because in it God gradually made himself known to men, to the point of becoming man himself, in order to draw to himself the whole world and unite it with himself through his incarnate Son, Jesus Christ.³⁹

Public Revelation has been transmitted in Sacred Scripture and in Sacred Tradition, which together "form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church."⁴⁰ This is the Revelation that was given to the entire Church and that must be received in faith by all the People of God. It is complete in itself and does not need to be supplemented by later revelations. "In Christ, God has said everything, that is, he has revealed himself completely, and therefore revelation came to an end with the fulfillment of the mystery of Christ as enunciated in the New Testament."⁴¹ The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council affirmed, "we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ."⁴²

Private revelations are different, for they refer "to all the visions and revelations which have taken place since the completion of the New Testament."⁴³ A vision or any other kind of miraculous communication from God or from Mary or another saint falls into this category. Private revelations are given to an individual or small group, not to the Church as a whole. Consequently, while specific commands may be directed to an individual or small group, no obligation of assent of Catholic faith is placed on the Church as a whole.⁴⁴ "Even when a 'private revelation' has spread to the entire world . . . and has been recognized in the liturgical calendar, the Church does not make mandatory the acceptance either of the original story or of particular forms of piety springing from it"⁴⁵ Private revelations do not have the same authority as public Revelation. Public Revelation "demands faith; in it in fact God himself speaks to us through human words and the mediation of the living community of the church."⁴⁶ Private revelations do not demand faith on the part of the Church as a whole because such revelations do not belong "to the

deposit of the faith. It is not their role to improve or complete Christ's definitive Revelation, but to help [people] live more fully by it in a certain period of history." ⁴⁷

The role of private revelations is to help people to enter more deeply into the faith that has been revealed publicly. Private revelations are thus in service to the faith, which is based on public Revelation. Private revelations are "a help to this faith and shows its credibility precisely by leading [one] back to the definitive public revelation." ⁴⁸

10. By what standard does the Church judge the genuineness of private revelations?

Private revelations are always to be judged by their conformity to public Revelation, particularly to the Sacred Scriptures, and not the other way around. As public Revelation is centered on Christ, any genuine private revelation will make Christ known and will help bring people to Christ.

The criterion for the truth and value of a private revelation is therefore its orientation to Christ himself. When it leads us away from him, when it becomes independent of him or even presents itself as another and better plan of salvation, more important than the Gospel, then it certainly does not come from the Holy Spirit, who guides us more deeply into the Gospel and not away from it. ⁴⁹

Similarly, although not every popular devotion has its origin in a private revelation, every popular devotion must likewise be in conformity with the faith of the Church based on public Revelation and must ultimately be centered on Christ.

11. Who has the responsibility to ensure that popular devotions are faithful to church teaching?

We all have a responsibility to be prudent and to do the best we can to ensure that the popular devotions we practice are faithful to church teaching and that we practice them in an appropriate way. As successors to the Apostles, however, bishops have a special responsibility both for their own dioceses and for the Church as a whole. Priests and deacons assist bishops in fulfilling this responsibility. With regard to the whole Church, all bishops have the obligation

to promote and to safeguard the unity of faith and the discipline common to the whole Church, to instruct the faithful in love for the whole mystical body of Christ, especially for its poor and sorrowing members and for those who are suffering persecution for justice's sake, and finally to promote every activity that is of interest to the whole Church, especially that the faith may take increase and the light of full truth appear to all men. ⁵⁰

In addition, bishops have the particular responsibility to exercise pastoral care over their dioceses, which includes overseeing the fostering of sound popular devotions and monitoring their appropriateness. ⁵¹ In some cases, the pope may grant approval to a popular devotion or express caution regarding a particular devotion, sometimes even forbidding its use. Ordinaries of the dioceses in which devotional materials are published and/or devotions are broadcast, even on the Internet, should exercise proper oversight to ensure that these materials are consistent with the theological and ecumenical developments of the contemporary Magisterium.

12. How do popular devotions relate to our responsibilities toward others in our world?

Many popular devotions have a public and social character. They are a constant reminder of the social dimension of the Gospel. God has created us as social beings by our very nature. We always live in a relationship of interdependence with others and always have a responsibility to work for the common good of our society. Furthermore, as this interdependence is not limited to those near to us but extends to all of humanity around the globe, our responsibility to promote the common good likewise extends to all of humanity. Pope John Paul II calls us to exercise the virtue of solidarity, which "is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a *firm and persevering determination* to commit oneself to the *common good*; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are *all* really responsible *for all*." ⁵²

Crucial to our duty to promote the welfare of others in our society and in our world is our duty to promote the welfare of the poor, for whom God shows special concern. The summit of Christian worship, the Eucharist, " *commits us to the poor*. To receive in truth the Body and Blood of Christ given up for us, we must recognize Christ in the poorest, his brethren." ⁵³ In the same way, all other Christian worship and prayer, including popular devotions, in bringing us closer to God should inspire us to share ever more fully in God's special love for the poor.

Conclusion

The Church has learned from experience that authentic popular devotions are an invaluable means of promoting an increased love of God. The important role of popular devotions was discussed at the Synod for America and received particular mention in Pope John Paul II's post-synodal apostolic exhortation *The Church in America (Ecclesia in America)*:

The Synod Fathers stressed the urgency of discovering the true spiritual values present in popular religiosity, so that, enriched by genuine Catholic doctrine, it might lead to a sincere conversion and a practical exercise of charity. If properly guided, popular piety also leads the faithful to a deeper sense of their membership of the Church, increasing the fervor of their attachment and thus offering an effective response to the challenges of today's secularization. ⁵⁴

As Pope Paul VI recognized, popular devotional practices can sometimes manifest certain limitations:

Popular religiosity of course certainly has its limits. It is often subject to penetration by many distortions of religion and even superstitions. It frequently remains at the level of forms of worship not involving a true acceptance by faith. It can even lead to the creation of sects and endanger the true ecclesial community.

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This should not obscure, however, the great benefits to be derived from the practice of sound popular devotions. Pope Paul VI went on to say that if popular religiosity

is well oriented, above all by a pedagogy of evangelization, it is rich in values. It manifests a thirst for God which only the simple and poor can know. It makes people capable of generosity and sacrifice even to the point of heroism, when it is a question of manifesting belief. It involves an acute awareness of profound

attributes of God: fatherhood, providence, loving and constant presence. It engenders interior attitudes rarely observed to the same degree elsewhere: patience, the sense of the Cross in daily life, detachment, openness to others, devotion. . . . When it is well oriented, this popular religiosity can be more and more for multitudes of our people a true encounter with God in Jesus Christ.⁵⁶