

Background for Veneration of Mary and the Saints

The veneration of the saints and of Mary as the Blessed Virgin Mother of God gained momentum and depth and the Church lived and worshipped in the Roman Empire. The general theology underlying the practice has two emphases. Firstly, the saints are close to God because of their holiness. Secondly, as human beings they are also close to, and identified with, all humanity. Hence they are able to intercede for the faithful on earth or in Purgatory (the place where Christians are further sanctified and purified, between earth and heaven). The veneration and invocation of the saints was not a peripheral part of the faith of the Church. It formed part of the liturgy for the Eucharist every Sunday.

To venerate the saints (or their icons - their images) might seem to be robbing God of the worship due to him as Lord, and the problem was recognized. The Second Council of Nicea (787) clearly distinguished between veneration due to the saints (Greek *doulia*, Latin *dulia* and *veneratio*), and genuine worship (Greek *latreia*, Latin *latria* and *adoratio*) due only to God himself. It became the practice, because Mary was regarded as being in a class by herself, to refer to veneration of Mary as 'hyperdulia' (from the Greek *hyper-doulia*, 'more than veneration'), but such veneration is still not the same as true worship.

These distinctions became firmly embedded in the theology of the medieval Western Church. However, the careful distinctions made by the theologians were not always reflected in the practice of the faithful. Popular devotion, in various ways, took on the nature of a cult, paying scant attention to official theology. Instead of a saint being regarded as a witness to the gospel and a model of holiness for others to follow, he or she was seen as a 'supernatural friend', who helped to overcome the many problems and difficulties of life. Far from veneration being restrained and controlled, the impulse was to worship the saint. Images and relics of saints were given divine status, and pilgrimages to shrines multiplied and became a feature of popular medieval religion.

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