WHY CATHOLICS HONOR, BUT DO NOT WORSHIP, MARY

Everything that the Catholic Church believes and teaches, about Mary and about everything else, is based upon the fundamental truth that Jesus Christ is truly God. He is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Son of God, a divine Person from all eternity. This only Son of God added a human nature to His divine nature when He was conceived as a human being in the womb of the Virgin Mary. He is one person, a divine person, with two natures, one divine and the other human.

Mary is Christ’s earthly mother -- His earthly mother. She had nothing whatever to do with the fact that He is truly God; she has much to do with the fact that He is truly human since His human nature began with His conception in her womb.

The Earthly Mother of a Divine Person

But Christ, although He has two natures, is only one Person and that Person is divine. Mary provided Christ the means to take on His human nature yet she gave birth, not to a nature, but to a Person and that Person is divine, is truly God. For that reason, and for that reason alone, Mary is entitled to be known as the Mother of God.

Mary is not on a par with God. She herself required redemption by her Son, Jesus Christ. “My spirit rejoices,” she said, “in God my Savior.” (Luke 1:47)

Furthermore, although Mary knew what the prophets had said concerning the Messiah, she did not know the details as to how all this would come about. She knew her Son was divine (in her request at Cana (John 2:3-5)) but she wondered about the things said about Him at the Presentation in the temple and was puzzled at His answer when she asked why He had left her and Joseph when he was twelve years old.

So we honor her, not for what she is not — she is merely human and not on a par with God — but for what she is, the perfect human being whom God Himself chose to be His earthly mother,
chosen because she is the human being who made perfect use of the human nature He gave her, especially her human will, which she conformed perfectly to God’s will for her.

**Selected Because of Her Sinlessness**

The reason why God the Son came into the world was to atone for the original offense against God by the first parents of the human race, so that He could remove the obstacle that prevented any of their descendants from coming to heaven at the end of life, as Adam and Eve would have done if they had not offended God.

That original sin places a heavy burden on every human being in the form of a greatly weakened will that makes it difficult for us to seek and to carry out the will of God. Mary was the only exception, since she overcame this weakness to such a degree that she lived a sinless life entirely in conformity with God’s will.

Because she alone was the perfect product of God’s creation, Mary was the woman God selected to have a role in our redemption as mother of the Redeemer. This role was foretold for her centuries before her birth. Immediately after the original fall God told the devil, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed.” (Gen 3:15)

And in the final book of Sacred Scripture, “a woman clothed with the sun . . . . brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron.” (Rev 12: 1,5) This comes close to the description of God Himself, “clothed with light as with a garment”. (Ps 104:2)

Her biological motherhood of Christ, her selection to be His mother, is the reward for her holiness. When Mary came to visit Jesus during His public life, but could not get close to Him because of the thickness of the crowd, as soon as He was told she was there He commented, “My mother and my brethren are those who hear the word of God and do it.” (Luke 8:38)

**Mary and the Will of God**

Carrying out His will is the very essence of
holiness; it’s what Christ wants in all of us, and what is found to the highest degree in Mary.

Mary’s life is a constant interplay of God’s gifts to her and her searching for, accepting and living by God’s will. Conformity with the will of God was true of Mary even before God asked her to be the mother of His Son. It enabled her to respond as she did to the angel, “I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38)

Throughout Mary’s life we can see her accepting the difficulties that came to her from following God’s will – being shut out of a decent lodging in Bethlehem; forced to depart from Bethlehem suddenly because Herod sought to kill her Son; living as an alien in Egypt; losing Him for three days when He was twelve years old and stayed behind in Jerusalem; seeing Him depart for His public life, which her prayer life helped her know better than anyone that it would end with His suffering and death.

Mary’s Role at Calvary and Gethsemane

Nowhere is that acceptance more evident than at Christ’s crucifixion. She suffered intensely as she beheld what He was undergoing, yet she remained committed to doing God’s will. She could accept the fact that He was suffering only because she knew that what He was enduring was what the Father wanted of Him. She could join her internal anguish with His, and for the same intention — the salvation of the world.

But the most poignant sufferings of Christ, in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross, were His foreknowledge of the indifference we would have to the suffering He was undergoing for us, plus the fact that He was taking on Himself the sins of the entire human race, a contradiction to His very nature. His awareness of Mary, the one human being who had responded adequately to God’s creation, who had no personal sin requiring atonement, and who was therefore the one most deserving of redemption, provided some mitigation of the suffering He endured.

Obviously, though, nothing she could ever do could accomplish the world’s redemption since it required a Person who was both divine and
human. But, just as we are invited to accept the suffering that comes to our life and to join our suffering with that of Christ and for His intentions, she is the one who did it to the highest degree. Mary, who is the perfect exemplar of this conformity, can be counted on to do everything in her power to help us to act as she did.

Mary's obedience, evidenced by her generous response at the Annunciation, continued even after Christ's death as she took on the role of being a mother to John, and thereby to all the Apostles, while she continued her very close relationship with Christ through prayer to Him and sacrifice offered for Him.

Special Gifts to Mary ---
Assumption and Immaculate Conception

God's Son came to earth in order to redeem the human race, to satisfy God's justice for the offense committed by our first parents, Adam and Eve. The thing most inconsistent with the presence of God is sin, the act or desire of offending Him or the willingness to offend Him.

Since Mary led a totally sinless life, totally dedicated to carrying out God's will, He gave her certain gifts of being exempt from the more important effects of original sin. At the end of her earthly life she was taken body and soul into heaven, as would have been the case for Adam and Eve if they had not offended God; and at the beginning of her life God, knowing she would lead a life of sinlessness, preserved her from the guilt of original sin itself, starting from the first moment of her existence, by her Immaculate Conception.

The Immaculate Conception has the effect of preventing contamination by sin in the one who would bear God's Son. God preserved His mother from that original sin. This gift is indicated by Gabriel's greeting to Mary, "Hail, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed are you among women." (Luke 1:28) "Full of grace" implies that she is full of the life that comes from God, full of the help He provides to live that life, help that she habitually sought, accepted and used.

Following from the Immaculate Conception is another gift, that Mary's body might not undergo
corruption, another effect of original sin. The event of Mary’s being taken to heaven at the close of her life is not recorded in Sacred Scripture but was firmly believed from very first century on the basis of Sacred Tradition. While the Church has been silent on the issue of whether Mary actually died before her body was taken up or whether she was taken up alive, no place on earth claims to be the resting place of Mary’s body.

Mary’s Assumption is not without precedent since there are two Scriptural references to Old Testament characters being taken up to heaven without dying — Enoch (Heb 11:5) & Elijah (2 Kings 2:11).

Perpetual Virginity

Also consistent with God’s keeping Mary wholly for Himself is her perpetual virginity, a Christian tradition from the earliest years. It is, of course, something that could be known only from the testimony of Mary herself.

When the angel Gabriel told Mary that she would give birth to a son, she immediately asked, “How can this be, since I have no husband?” (Luke 1:34) This question would have no meaning unless Mary was then a virgin and planning to remain so. Gabriel went on to explain, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.” (Luke 1:35)

A strong indication that Mary’s virginity was permanent is the fact that, when dying on Calvary, Christ entrusted her to John (John 19:27), which He would not have done if there had been other sons of Mary. This designation of Mary to be John’s mother was given even while John’s own mother, Salome, was there.

Arguments to disprove this are not at all convincing:
– Gospel references to ‘brothers’ of the Lord (Mark 6:3) fail to take into account the act that the Aramaic language has no word for ‘cousin’, and ‘brother’ was often used as a substitute;
– Referring to Jesus as Mary’s ‘first-born’ does not mean there were other children, since the
Semitic culture spoke this way about the first male child, regardless of whether there were other children born before or after;—Saying that Mary had no relations with Joseph ‘until’ Jesus was born (Matt 1:25) does not imply she had relations with others before that or with Joseph or others afterward.

**Imitation, Prayer and Other Means of Honoring Mary**

We honor Mary because God Himself has honored her and also because she is the one who perfectly accomplished the task that God assigns to all of us.

The principal way we honor her is by imitation — imitation of her holiness in pursuing the will of God for us, which implies imitation of her humility before God and obedience to His will. It requires also imitation of her courage and her patience in accepting the difficulties that followed from her acceptance of her role, plus her prayerfulness in communication with God and her spirit of sacrifice in offering herself to Him without reserve.

We can honor Mary by praying to her, seeking her intercession in obtaining from her Son the helps we need to accomplish our salvation, including the earthly favors we need to make that happen.

The strength of her influence with Christ can be seen in the marriage feast at Cana, where at her behest Christ worked His first public miracle to save the newly-wed couple the embarrassment of running out of wine at their celebration. (John 2:1-11)

Paintings and statues of Mary are made to strengthen the image we have of her, just as we do with members of our earthly family. It is not at all true that a Biblical prohibition exists against graven images, since God twice commanded such images to be made — the cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant (Ex 25:18) and the bronze serpents to cure the Israelites from the bites of poisonous snakes (Num 21:8). What is forbidden is bowing down and worshiping them as gods. (Ex 20:5)

It cannot be true, as some claim, that honoring Mary stands in the way of our worshiping Christ; in fact, she always promotes Him. In many of her
apparitions (such as Guadalupe, Lourdes, Fatima) she calls for the construction of a church to make possible the sacrifice of the Mass, the representation of her Son’s redemptive death on Calvary, and the consecration of the Eucharist, so that He may come personally to each of us.

John the Baptist once said of Christ, “He must increase and I must decrease”; the same is even more strongly true of Mary.

**Conclusion**

Mary is not the center of Catholic devotion and life. Her Son, Jesus Christ, is, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit. But Mary is very close to that center because of God’s gifts to her --- especially that of choosing her to have a role in our redemption as the earthly mother of His Son when He took on human nature in addition to His divine nature --- and because of her own response of conformity to His will. She is, in the words of the non-Catholic English poet, William Wordsworth, “our tainted nature’s solitary boast”.

Our responsibility is to carry out her direction to the waiters at Cana, “Do whatever He tells you.” (John 2:5)