

Feast of Our Lady of Knock - “The First Marian Devotion”

The Feast of Our Lady of Knock on August 17th celebrates the Marian apparition at Knock, Ireland, which occurred on August 21, 1879. The event underscores the intimate relationship between Mary and the Eucharist, highlighting her role in Christ's sacrifice and her guidance in Eucharistic devotion. Pope Francis elevated the Knock Shrine to an “International Shrine of Special Eucharistic and Marian

Devotion” in 2021, emphasising its significance.

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“For me, the first Marian devotion, for thus I like to see it, is the Holy Mass”.^[1] These words of St Josemaría can come to mind when we think of Our Lady of Knock. The Knock Apparition speaks volumes about the Eucharist and Mary, and about the intimate relationship between them. This awareness has been heightened with Pope Francis’ elevation, on 19th March 2021, of the Shrine of Our Lady of Knock, Queen of Ireland, to the status of “International Shrine of Special Eucharistic and Marian Devotion”.

A Eucharistic Catechesis

On a rainy evening on the 21st August 1879 a bright heavenly vision appeared outside the gable-end of the parish church in the isolated village of Knock, County Mayo, in the west of Ireland. The Mother of God appeared, flanked by St Joseph her spouse, and St John the Evangelist who was wearing a mitre and holding a book open in his hands. Near them was an altar on which stood the Lamb of God, with a cross at the back of the lamb.

“Around the lamb” recounts Patrick Hill, one of the witnesses, “I saw angels hovering during the whole time, for the space of one hour and a half or longer”.^[2] The same witness relates: “I distinctly beheld the Blessed Virgin Mary, life size, standing about two feet or so above the ground, clothed in white robes which were fastened at the neck. Her hands were raised to the height of

the shoulders, as if in prayer, with the palms facing each other".^[3]

The Knock apparition is profoundly Eucharistic. The Liturgy of the Word (St John with the Book of the Gospels open in his hand) and the Liturgy of the Eucharist (the Lamb on the altar of sacrifice) together form one single act of worship.^[4] The angels, saints and the local people - the entire Communion of Saints - are gathered around the altar of sacrifice. Mary's silent prayer is a model of Eucharistic adoration. It is an icon of the Church: the Eucharistic Body, the Lamb on the altar, is at the centre of the Mystical Body, God's holy People.

When he prayed at Knock in 1980, Blessed Alvaro del Portillo reflected that "this Marian Apparition, though a silent one, has a clear theological message: it speaks to us of the Eucharist, with the Lamb, the Altar and the Cross and of the home of

Mary, since St. Joseph and later St. John both looked after that home. St. John is also the High Priest, centred on the Eucharist and on Mary".^[5]

Contemplating the Knock apparition leads us to reflect on the relationship between Our Lady and the Eucharistic mystery. In his first encyclical, St John Paul II exclaimed that "the Eucharist is the ineffable sacrament!... It is at one and the same time a Sacrifice-Sacrament, a Communion-Sacrament and a Presence-Sacrament".^[6] Our Lady has an intimate relationship with the three dimensions of this sacrament, as "sacrifice, presence, banquet".^[7] Let us consider briefly the Marian aspect of each.

Sacrifice-Sacrament

Before all else the Eucharist is the sacrament of the Passion of Jesus. "When we go to Mass it is as if we were going to Calvary itself... The

Mass is experiencing Calvary".^[8] Just as Our Lady accompanied Jesus at the foot of the Cross (cf. Jn 19:25-27), so too she is by his side when that same sacrifice is made present anew on the altar.

Our Lady's participation in Christ's sacrifice is not purely passive. The offering she makes of her child in the temple (cf. Lk 2:22) is brought to its fullness in the offering she makes on Golgotha.^[9] Because she is his mother, Mary's free and generous participation in Christ's sacrifice is unique. Standing at the foot of the Cross, she actively cooperated with the redemption accomplished by her Son. She stood, as the Second Vatican Council states, "suffering deeply with her only-begotten Son and joining herself with her maternal spirit to his sacrifice, lovingly consenting to the immolation of the Victim to whom she had given birth; in this way Mary faithfully preserved her

union with her Son even to the Cross”.^[10]

Mary’s offering of her Son was not done only in the past, in the context of his earthly life. In the Mass, she continues to offer Jesus in union with the whole Church. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “To the offering of Christ are united not only the members still here on earth, but also those in the glory of heaven. In communion with and commemorating the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints, the Church offers the Eucharistic sacrifice. In the Eucharist the Church is as it were at the foot of the cross with Mary, united with the offering and intercession of Christ”.^[11]

Mary is at the heart of Christ’s Sacrifice, on Calvary and in the Mass.

Presence-Sacrament

The Body and Blood of Jesus Christ which become present on the altar under the appearances or “species” of bread and wine, are the Body and Blood the Lord received from Mary his ever-virgin mother. “Yes, the same Body!” In the “Eucharist is made present the mystery of the Incarnate Word, the Son who is of one being with the Father, who as a man ‘born of woman’ is the Son of the Virgin Mary”.^[12] As an ancient Christian adage has it: *Caro Christi, caro Mariae* (“the flesh of Christ, the flesh of Mary”).^[13] St John Paul II pointed out that Our Lady “bore in her womb the Word made flesh” and thus “became in a way a ‘tabernacle’ – the first ‘tabernacle’ in history”.^[14]

The profoundly Marian dimension of the Eucharist stems above all from that fact that the Blessed Virgin is the mother of Jesus. St Josemaría wrote: “Each day when Christ comes down into the priest’s hands, his real

presence among us is renewed, with his Body, his Blood, his Soul and his Divinity: the same Body and Blood that he took from Mary's flesh".^[15] It was this same consideration which lead Jean Charlier de Gerson (+1429), chancellor of the University of Paris, to name Mary as *Mater Eucharistiae* ("Mother of the Eucharist") while St Peter Julian Eymard (+1868) venerated her as "Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament".^[16]

Communion-Sacrament

Mary teaches us how to receive Christ into our body and soul in Holy Communion. At the moment of the Annunciation she welcomed the Saviour into her virginal womb. She freely embraced her vocation to become the Mother of God, and thus "the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us" (cf. Jn 1:14). St Teresa of Calcutta (+1997) referred to the

Annunciation as Mary's First Holy Communion day.

St Josemaría was prepared for his first holy Communion by a priest called Fr Manuel Laborda de la Virgen del Carmen, affectionately known as “Padre Manolé”. To help him prepare spiritually, Padre Manolé taught the young Josemaría a spiritual communion prayer: “I wish Lord to receive you, with the purity, humility and devotion, with which your most holy Mother received you, and with the spirit and fervour of the saints”.^[17]

This prayer is simple and very deep. It expresses the desire to welcome Jesus with the loving dispositions with which his mother Mary embraced him in body and soul. There is no better way to desire to receive Christ. Moreover, Mary teaches us to receive the Lord with a complete openness to his will,

trusting that it is always the very best for us. “When we receive Holy Communion, like Mary and united to her, we too clasp the wood that Jesus with his love transformed into an instrument of salvation, and pronounce our ‘Amen’, our ‘Yes’ to Love, crucified and risen”.^[18]

Our Lady can “lead us by the hand”, as it were, to the altar, and help us prepare for this great moment. She can carry our love for Jesus to him in a particular way, and she helps us give expression to our deepest prayers to Christ. Many saints, including St Alphonsus Liguori (+1787), St Thérèse of Lisieux (+1897) and St Maximilian Kolbe (+1941), have spoken of receiving Holy Communion with the help of and in the company of Mary. St Charles of St Andrew (+1893), a Passionist priest who spent most of his life in the monastery at Mount Argus in Dublin, would often write out prayers for

those who came to see him. These were simple texts, suited to those who would use them. He gave this prayer to a little girl in June 1877 for her first holy Communion: “Sweetest Mother of God, lend me your heart to place the little infant Jesus on it. Praise, adore and love him for me, as you can do it much better than I. Amen”.^[19]

An Eloquent Silence

The apparition of Our Lady of Knock is silent but extremely eloquent. Our Lady’s prayerful presence beside the altar speaks of how her whole being and mission are a sharing in that of her Son. St Josemaría observed that “in the sacrifice of the Altar, Our Lady’s participation evokes for us the silent reserve with which she accompanied her Son’s life when he travelled through the land of Palestine”.^[20]

Knock is a call to gratitude, wonder, joy and contemplation. All this is facilitated by the silence which characterises the apparition. As Pope Francis explains: “It is this silence in the face of mystery, which does not mean giving up on understanding, but understanding while aided and supported by the love of Jesus who offered himself for all of us as the Lamb sacrificed for the salvation of humanity”.^[21]

The Knock apparition highlights the fact that Mary can be understood and loved only in the light of Christ. Indeed, “Mary can guide us towards this most holy sacrament [of the Eucharist], because she herself has a profound relationship with it”.^[22] In this sense she is truly the “Woman of the Eucharist”.^[23]

^[1] St Josemaría, “La Virgen del Pilar”, in *Libro de Aragón*, Madrid 1976, p. 100.

^[2] Testimony of Patrick Hill, in *The Official Testimonies of the Fifteen Witnesses to the Knock Apparition on 21 August 1879*, <http://www.knockshrine.ie/history/witnesses-accounts/>

^[3] *Ibid.*

^[4] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1346.

^[5] Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, 4 August 1980, quoted by Archbishop Michael Neary, Homily at Mass of Thanksgiving for the Beatification of Alvaro del Portillo, Knock Shrine, 1st August, 2015.

^[6] St John Paul II, Encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, 4 March 1979, 20.

^[7] St John Paul II, Encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 17 April 2003, 61.

^[8] Francis, Audience, 22 November 2017.

^[9] Cf. St Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Marialis Cultus*, 2 February 1974, 20.

^[10] Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution, *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November 1964, 58.

^[11] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1370.

^[12] St John Paul II, Letter to Priests for Holy Thursday, 25 March 1988.

^[13] Cf. St John Paul II, Angelus [Seville, Spain], 13 June 1993.

^[14] St John Paul II, Encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 17 April 2003, 55. St John Paul II also calls Mary “the first monstrance” who by bearing the Incarnate Word within her can

introduce us to the love of Christ (cf. Homily, Montevideo, 7 May 1988).

[¹⁵] St Josemaría, “La Virgen del Pilar”, in *Libro de Aragón*, Madrid 1976, p. 100.

[¹⁶] Cf. St John XXIII, Homily at the Canonisation of St Peter Julian Eymard, 9 December 1962.

[¹⁷] A. Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei. The Life of Josemaría Escrivá*, Scepter Publishers, Princeton (NJ), 2001, vol. I, p. 33.

[¹⁸] Benedict XVI, Angelus, 11 September 2005.

[¹⁹] P.F. Spencer, C.P., *To Heal the Broken Hearted: The Life of Charles of Mount Argus*, Ovada, Glasgow 2007, pp. 54-55.

[²⁰] St Josemaría Escrivá, “La Virgen del Pilar”, in *Libro de Aragón*, Madrid 1976, p. 100.

[21] Francis, Video Message to Knock Shrine, 19 March 2021.

[22] St John Paul II, Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 17 April 2003, 53.

[23] The sixth and final chapter of St John Paul II's last encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 17 April 2003, is entitled: "At the school of Mary, 'Woman of the Eucharist'".

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