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"All generations shall call me blessed": Our Lady in the Liturgical Year

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“In celebrating this annual cycle of Christ’s mysteries, holy Church honours with especial love the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, who is joined by an inseparable bond to the saving work of her Son. In her the Church holds up and admires the most excellent fruit of the redemption, and joyfully contemplates, as in a faultless image, that which she herself desires and hopes wholly to be.”[1]

In brief but incisive words, Vatican Council II presents the meaning of the liturgical veneration of Our Lady. We have a simple yet profound way to understand it: by looking at the best Christian art, arising from the prayer of the Church. If we go to a church in the Byzantine tradition, for example, as soon as we enter the nave our gaze is drawn to the eyes of Christ Pantocrator, Ruler of All,

presiding in the dome of the apse. His loving face reminds us that the infinite God has taken on the finite features of the children of men. Below Him is portrayed Mary the all-holy, in imperial colours, escorted by archangels in rich liturgical vestments. And on a third level come apostles and saints, who with us—*communicantes*—offer the *sacrificium laudis*, the sacrifice of praise pleasing to God the Father.[2]

The first Marian devotion

This image helps us to understand the unique position of Mary in the life and liturgy of the Church. As Saint Josemaria liked to reflect, Mary is before all else the Mother of God, the *Theotokos*. This is “the root of all the perfections and privileges that adorn her.”[3] Therefore the oldest Marian prayer, apart from the angel’s greeting at the Annunciation, daringly calls her *Dei Genetrix*, the

woman who gave birth to God.[4]
And also therefore the liturgical
veneration of Mary developed
especially after the fifth-century
Council of Ephesus, when the Church
defined the dogma of her divine
Maternity.

In other representations, Our Lady
appears holding the veil of the
Eucharistic chalice or in the attitude
of “the virgin praying and offering.”
This expresses how Mary’s sharing in
the Paschal mystery of Our Lord is
the centre and source of her life. The
unique way in which Mary, as
Mother, is united with Our Lord’s
redemptive action is the foundation
for all Marian devotion: the Church
venerates Our Lady by proclaiming
the uniqueness of her role. This is
why there are references to the
Mother of God in the oldest
baptismal professions of faith and in
the early Eucharistic prayers. This
special presence of Mary also

explains why the most natural way of honouring her is to celebrate the mystery of her Son, especially in the Eucharist.

“For me, the first Marian devotion—I like to see it as that—is the Holy Mass . . . In the Sacrifice of the Altar, the participation of Our Lady evokes the silent modesty with which she accompanied our Lord as He walked the roads of Palestine. The Holy Mass is an action of the Blessed Trinity: through the will of the Father, and the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, the Son offers himself in redemptive oblation. In this unfathomable mystery we can discern, as through a veil, the most pure face of Mary.”[5] In celebrating the mystery of Christ, the Church meets Mary and, by contemplating her, discovers how to give expression to the divine mysteries. With her we listen to and meditate on the Word of God, and we echo her voice as she blesses, thanks

and praises Our Lord. With her we also take part in her Son's Passion and the joy of his Resurrection. With her we unceasingly implore the gift of the Holy Spirit.[6]

The beginnings of devotion to the Blessed Virgin

The most recent liturgical reforms of the Roman Liturgy have been directed towards stressing the centrality of the mystery of Christ and therefore have integrated the commemoration of the Mother of God within the annual cycle of the mysteries of her Son. Apart from two celebrations in which Mary is inseparably united to Christ (the Annunciation, March 25th, and the Presentation of Our Lord, February 2nd), Marian feasts in the present *General Roman Calendar* include three solemnities,[7] two feasts,[8] five obligatory memorials,[9] and six optional memorials.[10] At the same

time some liturgical periods such as Advent and Christmas include more references to Mary than before. Finally, the possibility of celebrating a Mass of Our Lady on Saturdays, together with some elements of the Liturgy of the Hours, are the weekly and daily basis of liturgical veneration of Mary. Learning about the origins and development of these devotions can help us to be better children of our Heavenly Mother.

The close connection between Marian devotions and feasts of Our Lord has led to some of these solemnities and feasts being written about in previous editorials. This is the case with the solemnity of Mary the Mother of God, celebrated on the octave of the Nativity, the first day of the year. This was the greatest feast of Our Lady until the arrival of four feasts from the East at the end of the seventh century: the Presentation of Our Lord, the Annunciation, the

Dormition (which we now celebrate as the Assumption) and the birth of Mary.

With the influx into the West of Christians from Palestine, Syria and Asia Minor, as a result of the Arab invasions in the seventh century, the Roman liturgy was enriched with the adoption of different liturgical traditions. Among them were four feasts linked to events in Our Lady's life and celebrated in the places where, according to tradition, they had taken place. Churches were built in those places between 300 and 600 AD, and mark a development of Marian devotion. There was, for example, the basilica in the Cedron Valley connected to Mary's Assumption, which in the sixth century became the feast of the Dormition; there was the basilica in Nazareth, built by command of the Empress Helena in memory of the Annunciation; the basilica built over

the Pool of Bethesda, which was connected with Our Lady's Immaculate Conception and birth; and the basilica of Saint Mary the New, built at the beginning of the sixth century near the site of the old Temple of Jerusalem, recalling the Presentation of Mary.

All these feasts introduce us into the shared memories of the great family of the People of God, who know that “history is not subject to blind forces, nor is it the result of chance; rather it is the manifestation of the mercies of God the Father.”[11] The Church's heart, like Mary's, has deep roots; she remembers her own origin, recalling specific places and faces. The progressive reception in other parts of the world of these commemorations of Our Lady testifies to this divine pedagogy.

From the periphery to Rome and from Rome to the periphery

At the same time, given that the Church is a Mother who takes to her bosom every culture, the veneration of Mary has developed according to the particular human, theological and spiritual tenor of each society. Hence, for example, the Byzantine-Constantinople tradition had a quite sober first phase, but over time generated rich poetic compositions in honour of the *Theotokos*. The hymn *Akathistos* is one of the most loved and widespread: “Rejoice, you through whom the curse will vanish; Rejoice, the Restoration of fallen Adam; Rejoice, the Redemption of the tears of Eve.” For its part, the Ethiopian tradition manifests its deep Marian piety in the Eucharistic prayers and in the institution of the greatest number of Marian feasts known, more than 30 throughout the year.

The Roman rite also has its own history. At the end of the seventh

century, Pope Sergius I enriched those four feasts recently arrived from the East by adding an element of Roman popular devotion: liturgical processions through the city. As time passed texts for the Mass and Office of *Sancta Maria in Sabbato* were composed and the custom of dedicating Saturdays to Our Lady spread through Europe. New antiphons were composed for the Liturgy of the Hours. Some of them are now the last prayer that the Church prays at night: the *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, the *Salve Regina*, the *Ave Regina Caelorum* and the *Regina Coeli Laetare*, all composed in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. Later, other Marian feasts emerged, for example the Visitation, first promoted by the Franciscans and then extended throughout the Latin Church.

Following the Council of Trent other feasts that until then had only been

celebrated in some places were extended to the entire Roman rite. For example Saint Pius V extended to the whole Latin Church the Roman feast of the dedication of Our Lady of the Snows (August 5th). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, various commemorations linked to the Marian piety of different religious orders became by various routes part of the general calendar. These include Our Lady of Mount Carmel (Carmelites), Our Lady of the Rosary (Dominicans), Our Lady of Sorrows (Servites), Our Lady of Ransom, (Mercedarians), etc.

This movement from the periphery to Rome and from Rome to the periphery[12] reflects the Church's maternal care. She encourages whatever creates unity, while being ready "to treat each child differently, with an 'unequal' justice, since each is different from the others." [13] This respect for local traditions persists in

the present liturgical calendar, which recognizes the existence of special Marian devotions, linked to the history and devotion of different members of the People of God. This explains the presence in the Prelature's calendar of the feast of Our Lady of Fair Love, celebrated on February 14th.

The twentieth century was a notable time for Marian devotion, with the incorporation of four new Marian feasts: Our Lady of Lourdes (Saint Pius X in 1907), the Maternity of Our Lady (Pius XI in 1931), the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Pius XII in 1954), and Our Lady Queen of Heaven (Pius XII in 1954). In addition to the memorial of the Holy Name of Mary (September 12th), the most recent edition of the Roman Missal now includes the optional memorials of Our Lady of Fatima (May 13th) and Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12th). The extension to the entire

Latin rite of celebrations linked to particular interventions of Our Lady shows the loving vigilance of the Church, who reminds her children of the discreet but firm intervention of Mary. Together with Saint Joseph, Mary journeys with us throughout history.

With our Mother's blessing

Many medieval church doors have an icon typical of the West: the Mother of God holds the Child in her arms, and her gaze and her smile welcome pilgrims as they arrive and bids them goodbye as they leave. This image, situated in a public space opening on to the town, speaks to us of Mary's warm, missionary style, which shapes the life of the Church through the liturgy; it reminds us that Our Lady is waiting for us as we go into a church or oratory to help us draw close to her Son. Knowing that Our Lady is expecting us helps us to

be recollected, to prepare well for the different ceremonies or services with the loving care of children: arriving in good time and preparing calmly whatever may be needed (decoration of the altar, candles, book), doing so with the calm and silence that our Mother, “woman of the Eucharist,”[14] showed as she prepared for the “Breaking of Bread” in the first days of the Church.[15]

The joy of the All-Beautiful one is found in “producing in the children the spiritual characteristics of the first-born Son.”[16] In Our Lady’s school “the Church learns to be daily ‘the Lord’s servant,’ to be ready to go out to meet situations of great need, to help the poorest and excluded.”[17] Hence, after inviting us to enter to be transformed by Him, our Mother then sends us out to the “beautiful war of peace,”[18] side by side with our brothers and sisters, our fellow men and women.

[1] Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 103.

[2] Cf. Roman Canon.

[3] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 276.

[4] Cf. Liturgy of the Hours, *Ad completorium*, Antiphon *Sub tuum praesidium*.

[5] Saint Josemaria, “La Virgen Maria”, in *Por las sendas de la fe*, Cristiandad 2013, pp. 170-171.

[6] See *Collectio Missarum de Beata Maria Virgine*, nos. 13 and 17.

[7] The Mother of God, January 1st; the Assumption, August 15th; the Immaculate Conception, December 8th.

[8] The Visitation, May 31st and the Birthday, September 8th.

[9] The Immaculate Heart of Mary, Saturday following the solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus; Our Lady Queen of Heaven, May 31st; Our Lady of Ransom, September 15th; Our Lady of the Rosary, October 7th; Presentation of Our Lady in the Temple, November 21st.

[10] Our Lady of Lourdes, February 11th; Our Lady of Fatima, May 13th; Our Lady of Mount Carmel, July 16th, Dedication of the Basilica of St Mary Major, August 5th; Holy Name of Mary, September 12th; Our Lady of Guadalupe, December 12th.

[11] Saint Josemaria, “Las riquezas de la fe,” in *Por las sendas de la fe*, Cristiandad 2013, p. 31.

[12] Cf. Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 638.

[13] *Friends of God*, no. 173.

[14] Saint John Paul II, Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, nos. 53-58.

[15] Cf. *Acts* 2:42.

[16] Bl. Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Mariialis Cultis*, no. 57.

[17] Pope Frances, Homily, 5 July 2014.

[18] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 76.

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