

## Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary August 15, 2010 C

### MARY THROUGH THE AGES

The following article by Thomas Craughwell was published in the June edition of the Irish magazine *Reality*. It is reprinted here with permission. Craughwell is also the author of *Saints Behaving Badly* which should be an interesting book. In his article *Mary Through the Ages*, Craughwell writes:

The Blessed Virgin Mary has always been at the heart of the church. At the Annunciation she became a living tabernacle, carrying in her womb Christ the Saviour. At the wedding at Cana it was through her intercession that Jesus began his public ministry with a miracle. From the cross Christ made Mary the Spiritual mother of all Christians. And after the Lord's ascension, in the upper room, the disciples gathered around Mary, praying and waiting for the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Once Mary had nurtured her son Jesus, now she would nurture his church.

#### Early Church

It is true that we find scant evidence of devotion to the Blessed Mother in the first century or so of the church's history. During the year of persecution, veneration of the martyrs dominated the devotional life of Christians, but there are hints that Mary was not overlooked. For example, there is a niche in the Catacomb of St. Priscilla in Rome that bears a dark, damaged mural of a woman with an infant sitting on her lap. Above them shines a star, and beside them stands an elderly man pointing to the star. Archeologists and art historians have identified the image as a painting of the Blessed Virgin and the Christ Child, with the prophet Balaam; the star is an allusion to Balaam's prophecy, "A Star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel" (Numbers 24:17). The painting dates from about 200 A.D., making it the oldest surviving image of the Mother of God

We also find Mary discussed in the works of the earliest theologians. St. Ignatius of Antioch (c.37-c.107) states plainly that Mary conceived Christ without loss of her virginity and remained a virgin after she had given birth to the Lord. St. Justin Martyr (100-167), St. Irenaeus (130-202), and Tertullian (160-240) believed in the Immaculate Conception, that from the first moment

Mary was conceived in the womb of her mother, she was free from original sin. St. Ephrem of Syria (died 373), one of the greatest theologian-poets of the early church, expressed it in a hymn to Christ: "Thou and Thy Mother are alone in this: you are wholly beautiful in every respect. There is in Thee, Lord, no stain, nor any spot in Thy Mother."

It is in the 4th century, after the persecutions have come to an end and the church has emerged from the catacombs, that we see a surge of interest in Mary. Churches such as St. Mary Major in Rome were dedicated to her throughout the Roman Empire. She appears in sculptures, mosaics, and paintings. Mary even became entangled in the controversies over the nature of Christ. The bishop Nestorius taught (and it is hard to grasp this distinction) that Mary gave birth to the human Jesus but not to God the Son. Therefore, Nestorius argued, Mary should be called "Mother of Christ" not "Mother of God." In 431 at the Council of Ephesus—which met in a church dedicated to Mary—the assembled bishops declared that the divine and human natures of Christ were fully united in him, that he was one person, not two, and therefore it was proper to address Mary as Mother of God.

#### Surprising Mysteries

Although the history of the development of devotion to the Blessed Mother is well documented, there are a few surprising mysteries. For example, we do not know when Christians began to pray the Hail Mary or when they began to pray the rosary. The earliest evidence for the Hail Mary dates to 1030 in England, and it is not the Hail Mary we know: the prayer stopped at the words, "and blessed is the fruit of thy womb." We do know that the Rosary was already in use about this time, because a document, also from England, dated 1075, bears witness that the famous Lady Godiva donated her rosary of precious stones to a monastery near her home in Coventry. By 1196 the Hail Mary must have become popular in that year. Eudes de Sully, Bishop of Paris, commanded his diocesan priests to teach the laypeople the prayer along with the Our Father and the Apostle's Creed. From that point we see the same decree repeated in other dioceses across Europe.

At the same time that bishops came to regard the Hail Mary as an essential prayer, the Rosary increased in

popularity. St. Dominic and his new order of friars were at the forefront of this movement to promote the Rosary.

### Surge in Devotion

The 12th and 13th century saw a tremendous surge in devotion to Mary. This was the age of the Gothic cathedrals, and in France virtually all of them were dedicated to Our Lady. But it was not just in grand architecture and great works of art that Mary was praised. Throughout the Middle Ages Catholics trusted her as a faithful, loving Mother. Among the most popular literature of the time were stories of Mary intervening personally to help one of her children. Sinners who feared the wrath of God were encouraged to seek refuge with Mary; in the 13th-century hymn, *Stabat Mater*, we find this verse:

*Christ, when you should call me hence.  
Be Your Mother my defense.*

This love for the Mother of God also found expression in poetry and music. Dante and Chaucer wrote poems in honour of Mary. Troubadours sang her praises. In Spain King Alfonso X encouraged musicians to compose popular songs in the vernacular in honour of Mary; the final collection, *Las Cantigas de Santa Maria*, numbers 420 songs. We know from a host of medieval sources that many lay folk, even those who could not read, could sing the four Marian Latin antiphons from the Divine Office—the *Ala Redemptoris Mater*, *Ave Regina Coelorum*, *Regina Coeli*, and *Salve Regina*.

It is interesting that at the very moment when devotion to Our Lady had reached a high water mark, she was also the focus of an intense theological dispute. In spite of the ancient faith in Mary's freedom from original sin, debate and argument raged around this point for centuries. St. Bernard (1090-1153), St. Albert the Great (1206-1280), St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), and St. Bonaventure (1217-1274)—all renowned for their devotion to the Blessed Virgin—had qualms about the Immaculate Conception. To put it briefly, opponents argued that an immaculate conception, even of the Mother of God, suggested that Christ's redemption was not universal, that Mary did not need to be saved. Blessed John Duns Scotus (c.1265-1308) replied that, just like everyone else, Mary had been saved from sin solely by the merits of Christ. But because of her unique status as "full of grace," Mary was redeemed before she had any contact whatsoever with sin. Pope Pius IX settled the issue in 1857 when he declared it a truth divinely revealed that from the moment of her conception Mary was free from every trace of sin.

### Iconoclasm of the Reformation

Given Catholics' intense love for Our Lady, the iconoclasm of the Reformation spread shock and pain among the faithful. Word of angry mobs breaking statues, shredding paintings, and shattering stained glass windows that depicted the Blessed Mother seemed incomprehensible. In England in 1538 the much-venerated wooden sculpture of Our Lady of Walsingham, along with four or five other beloved statues of Mary, were taken from their shrines and carried to London where they were all thrown on a bonfire and burned.

In response, the Council of Trent and the Counter-Reformation adopted what we would call an apologetics approach to the crisis, explaining, defending, and promoting Catholic doctrine and practices. It was a policy aimed as much at Catholics as Protestants. Rather than back away from veneration of Our Lady, leaders of the Counter-Reformation such as St. Ignatius Loyola, St. Robert Bellarmine, and St. Philip Neri defended and encouraged love for Mary, while missionaries made her known in China, Japan, the Philippines, and the Americas.

During the late 17th century and throughout the 18th century, the era known as the Enlightenment, skeptics mocked traditional religious expressions, including love for Our Lady. Even within the Catholic Church some bishops, superiors of religious orders, and seminary rectors felt that veneration of the Blessed Virgin and the saints was unsophisticated. An exception to this trend was St. Alphonsus Ligouri. In his book, *The Glories of Mary*, St. Alphonsus defended devotion to the Mother of God by citing the early Church Fathers and the Doctors of the Church.

The 19th century was the period of revival of Marian devotion. Spurred on by the apparitions of the Blessed Mother at La Salette, Lourdes, and Knock, as well as Pope Pius IX's declaration of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, veneration of Mary became a mainstay in Catholic parishes, schools, and homes. Pilgrimages to Marian shrines became popular again. Marian novenas held in the parish church routinely attracted large congregations, as did May Crowning. Tens of thousands of Catholics, mostly laity, joined parish organizations such as the Rosary Society, the Children of Mary, and the Legion of Mary. Devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help was spread by the Redemptorists, who housed the original icon in their church in Rome. Once again, Mary was at the heart of Catholic life.

The Marian revival lasted well into the 20th century, perhaps reaching its pinnacle in 1950 when Pope Pius XII solemnly proclaimed the dogma of the Assumption. When Cardinal John Henry Newman wrote, "Centuries

might pass without formal expression of a truth which had been all along the secret life of millions of souls," he might have had Our Lady's Assumption in mind.

Faith in Mary's Assumption is ancient. By the 4th century August 15 was celebrated in the East as the day of Mary's entrance into Heaven. By the year 650, we know that the feast was being celebrated in the West. The Assumption was disputed in the universities during the Middle Ages, but this time St. Bernard, St. Albert, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. Bonaventure joined with Blessed John Duns Scotus in supporting the doctrine. Pope Innocent IV (reigned 1243-1254) took a middle road: since the church had not spoken definitively on this point, he said the faithful were free to believe or not to believe in the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin.

As the centuries passed it became the consensus of opinion among Catholic theologians and a matter of faith among the Catholic faithful that Mary had been taken up to heaven, body and soul. It had become part of "the secret life of millions of souls." One could argue that in defining the Assumption as a truth revealed by God, Pius XII was stating what the church already believed.

### **After Vatican II**

The years after the Second Vatican Council were hard on devotion to Mary. Certainly the council documents do not undermine it, nor did Popes John XXIII and Paul VI intend any such thing, but in the upheaval and experimentation that followed the council it was widely believed that Vatican II marked a complete departure from the "old church," and virtually everything that was "old church" had to be swept away. Almost overnight public recitation of the Rosary, novenas, May Crownings, in some extreme cases even images of Our Lady, vanished from countless parishes.

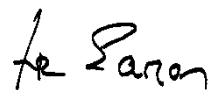
It was Pope John Paul II who reversed this trend. He made love for Mary a hallmark of his pontificate. For his coat of arms the new pope chose a blue shield—Mary's colour—with a large golden M, for Mary. His motto, *Totus Tuus*, Entirely Yours, is an allusion to the total consecration to Mary promoted by St. Louis de Montfort. John Paul II set the example for reviving devotion to Mary by his frequent pilgrimages to Marian shrines—Lourdes, Fatima, Knock, Guadalupe, Loreto, and of course Czestochowa in his native Poland. He spoke openly of his belief that when an assassin shot and wounded him in St. Peter's Square on May 13, 1980, his life had been spared through the intercession of Our Lady of Fatima (May 13 is her feast day). A year later the pope travelled to Fatima where he placed the bullet that struck him in the crown of the statue of Our Lady.

In 2002, in October, the traditional Month of the Rosary on the Catholic calendar, John Paul published an apostolic letter, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, encouraging the faithful to return to praying the Rosary. "Simple yet profound," he wrote, "[the Rosary] still remains, at the dawn of this third millennium, a prayer of great significance, destined to bring forth a harvest of holiness." At the same time, the pope proposed a new set of mysteries, the Luminous Mysteries, which focus on the years of Christ's public ministry: Christ's Baptism, the Miracle at Cana, Christ's Announcement of the Kingdom of God, the Transfiguration, and the Institution of the Eucharist.

John Paul II also encouraged the faithful to honor Mary under the title, "Mother of the Church." The title appears in a few medieval documents, but it received real impetus from Pope Paul VI who, at the Mass he offered at the conclusion of the third session of the Second Vatican Council in 1964 announced, "For the glory of the Blessed Virgin and our own consolation, we proclaim the Most Blessed Virgin Mary Mother of the Church, of the whole people of God, faithful and pastors, and we call her most loving Mother."

History tells us that devotion to saints is always in flux. Saints who centuries ago enjoyed enormous popularity are almost forgotten today. But love for Our Lady has been constant. It is an indispensable part of Catholic life because Mary plays an indispensable part in the story of our salvation. She is the most loving mother, the gentlest queen, the most powerful advocate, the most constant friend and helper. No wonder that all generations have called her blessed.

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Sean". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.