

Come into the Dance: Marian Devotion and Liturgical Life Today

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At the family picnic little Julie is sulking. One by one family members try to encourage Julie to come and play, to come and eat. Arms folded, face frowned, Julie pouts, determined not to join in the fun. The family caucuses: Who is the one who will find the right word, do the right thing to bring Julie into the party? Yes, of course . . . !

This familiar scene is not very different from the one God sees. The Trinity has a party going; but each of us is sulking, unwilling to drop our grudge or crankiness; and none of us really wants to admit our peevishness. But God always has a family member or friend, someone close to Them and, and almost as important, someone close to us to bring us out of our mood with a word, a gesture, a shared memory, or a trick up the sleeve. This person has the genius to help us forget ourselves long enough to be drawn into the Dance, long enough to come into Communion.

What Catholics mean by “devotion,” “having a devotion,” and “devotions” is contained in the foregoing story about Julie and us. **Devotion is for communion.** Starting with a person close to us, God slowly (or even quickly) moves us into communion, communion with the Trinity, with every Catholic living and gone before us marked with the sign of faith, with every Christian living and deceased, and ultimately with every woman and man who has ever lived on the planet.

This article is about the woman God regularly uses to draw us into the Dance of the Trinity. But before we can talk about her, we need to talk about God’s larger strategy and God’s overall objective. So this essay is in two parts: Part One (brief) is about devotion(s) and having devotion(s) and Part Two (much longer) is about devotion(s) to Mary in the liturgical life of the Church.

Part One: God’s Larger Strategy and God’s Overall Objective

A wealthy North African woman named Proba once wrote a letter to her bishop about her problems concerning prayer. In his long reply, Augustine laid out for her nearly a systematic theology about prayer which has been deeply influential in the Church ever since.

One thing he taught Proba was an answer to a question almost all Christians have at one time in their lives: If God knows everything, why do I have to tell him what I need in prayer? Augustine relied (in effect): “You’re right: God knows what we need but we don’t really. We only think we know. God gives us prayer to find out what we desire and to expand our hearts to receive what God desires for us.”¹

One teacher influenced by what Augustine wrote to Proba was Thomas Aquinas. He has Augustine’s understanding of the relationship between prayer and desire when he writes that “prayer is the interpreter of desire” and the “unfolding of one’s will before God.”² In the *Summa* Thomas discusses devotion before he discusses prayer because, according to the tradition he had received from Augustine and others down through the centuries, devotion is prior to prayer, either personal or liturgical. In order to have something to pray about, one must first discover and/or kindle desire by devotion.³

God’s *strategy* is to use the Saints and Sacred Activities and Holy Things — devotions — to move us away from our loneliness and sulkiness and narrowness into the fellowship, joy, and infinity of the Trinity — God’s *overall objective*. We can be distracted from ourselves and attracted to the Great Dance either in a transitory way (we can and should expect to

¹ The most convenient source for finding a copy of this extraordinary letter is the Office of Readings for the Twenty-ninth Week of Ordinary Time, Sunday through Friday. Augustine also teaches that “the entire life of a good Christian is in fact an exercise of holy desire” (Tractates on First John, also in the Office of Readings, Friday of the Sixth Week of Ordinary Time).

² *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 83, 1; III, 21, 1.

³ See the Second Part of the Second Part of the *Summa*, 82.

outgrow some devotions) or in a permanent way (there are some “sure-fire,” long-term, and indispensable devotions).

Examples of permanent devotions begin with devotion to *persons*, especially Mary, and devotion to *sacred activities*, especially prayer, fasting, and almsgiving,⁴ and devotion to *holy things*, such as blessed water. No Catholic should expect to outgrow these, though they may pass through particular devotions, like to St. Gerard Majella or to blessing oneself as an ambulance passes or to St. Anne’s oil. Some devotions like some kinds of prayer are designed to get us started in the spiritual life; others accompany us all the way to heaven. Sometimes we can tell the difference ourselves, as when the devotion has no more attraction for us or when a particular kind of prayer goes dry; other times we’re meant to persevere until new life springs from the seemingly barren soil of devotion or prayer. Sometimes it takes a spiritual director or friend to help us see the difference. But there’s always help from special “spiritual friends,” the tradition of the Church and its authentic interpreter, the teaching office of the Church. To these friends we now turn.

Part Two: Devotion(s), especially to Mary, in the Liturgical Life of the Church

On his first to Mexico, Pope John Paul underscored the trinitarian, christological, and ecclesial principles of the devotional life. In a sermon preached at the sanctuary of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of Zapopán on January 30, 1979, he said:

This sanctuary of Zapopán, and so many others scattered all over Mexico and Latin

⁴ In our spiritual lives these three are not unrelated options but a system of integrated necessities. See the new *Enchiridion of Indulgences* (New York: Catholic Book, 1969) for the reform of the doctrine and practice of indulgences; Pope Paul VI made three general grants of indulgences, for acts of prayer, of fasting, and of charity, as “inducements,” so to speak, out of the superabundance of God’s grace to us in Jesus and the Spirit (Romans 5:15–17). It is Peter Chrysologus who speaks of prayer, fasting, and mercy as a system of integrated necessities; see the Office of Readings for Tuesday in the Fourth Week of Lent.

America, where millions of pilgrims come every year with a deep sense of religiousness, can, and must, be privileged places to find an *increasingly purified faith* which will lead them to Christ.

For this reason, it will be necessary to take great and zealous care over the apostolate in Marian shrines: *by means of a suitable and living liturgy*; by means of assiduous preaching and sound catechesis; . . . by the prudent *purification* of any forms of religiousness that present less suitable elements.

It is necessary to take advantage pastorally of these opportunities . . . of meeting souls that are not always faithful to the whole program of a Christian life—but who come led by a vision of faith that is sometimes incomplete—in order to try to lead them to *the center of all piety, Christ Jesus, the Savior, Son of God*.

In this way popular religiousness will be perfected, when necessary, and Marian devotion will take on its full significance in a *Trinitarian, Christocentric and ecclesial direction* . . .

*Do not miss any opportunity to preach Christ, to enlighten the faith of the people and to strengthen it, helping the people on its way toward the Holy Trinity.*⁵

I have added emphasis to this important sermon not just to highlight significant points the Pope is making but also to draw the attention of all of us concerned with liturgy to passages which are applicable to our Southern California scene.

The Pope is here echoing the call for renewal of the liturgical and devotional life begun at the Second Vatican Council. A look at sections ten through thirteen of the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Liturgy* confirms that the teaching office of the Church sees an intimate and reciprocal connection between the renewal of how Catholics worship together (liturgy) and how they worship privately (devotions). Without a

⁵ *L'Osservatore Romano* (English Edition) 8:569 (February 19, 1979), pp. 3–4. It is interesting to note that this sermon, particularly the second paragraph cited here, became the foundation for Canon 1234 of the new Code. See the General Introduction to the *Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, §29.

devotional life, a life of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving (Matthew 6:1–18), liturgical life becomes evacuated of meaning; and a healthy liturgical life contributes to a healthy devotional life.

The new Code of Canon Law contains three canons which cover the devotional life of Catholics. Canon 214 states that the faithful have the right to follow their own spiritual life consonant with the teaching of the Church. Canon 392:2 underscores the bishop's duty to be watchful lest abuses creep into ecclesiastical discipline, especially concerning the ministry of the word, the celebration of the sacraments and sacramentals and the worship of God and devotion to the saints. Canon 839:1 states "The Church carries out the office of sanctification . . . by prayers by which God is asked that the Christian faithful be sanctified in truth, or by works of penance and charity which greatly help to root and strengthen the kingdom of Christ in souls and contribute to the salvation of the world." Finally Canon 839:2 says: "Local ordinaries are to see to it that prayers and other pious and sacred exercises are fully in harmony with the norms of the Church."

But what *are* the norms of the Church?

Norms for Devotions of Any Kind

The following six norms for devotions of any kind (A through F) are drawn from the teaching of Pope Paul VI in his apostolic exhortation of February 2, 1974, *Marialis Cultus (Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary)*⁶ except where noted. Numbers in parenthesis refer to paragraphs in *Marialis Cultus*.

A) Every form of worship should have a biblical imprint. Texts for prayer and chant should draw their inspiration and wording from the Bible and should be imbued with the great themes of the Christian message (30).

B) Devotions (especially those held in common⁷) should be in harmony with the divine liturgy, derive their inspiration from it, and should orient people toward it (31). Further, they should take into account the seasons of the liturgical year.⁸

C) There are ten attitudes and practices to be avoided (38):

1) a scornful attitude toward correct devotions which leaves them aside and doesn't fill the vacuum they leave.

2) hybridizing which mixes liturgy and devotions without wholesome liturgical pastoral criteria.

3) exaggeration of content and form which falsifies doctrine.⁹

4) small-mindedness which obscures the figure and mission of Mary¹⁰ [and, *mutatis mutandis*, of any saint, sacred activity, or sacred thing]

5) vain credulity which substitutes reliance on mere external practices for serious commitment¹¹

6) sterile and ephemeral sentimentality¹²

7) exaggerated search for novelties and extraordinary phenomena (the study of the sources of Revelation and attention to the doctrine of the Magisterium must prevail)

8) the obviously legendary or false (a devotion must be objective in its historical setting)

9) one-sidedness and overstressing single elements which compromise the overall picture given in the Gospel (a devotion must match its doctrinal content)

10) unworthy self-interest (a devotion must be clear in its motivation).

⁷ *Inter Oecumenici* (SC Bishops: On the Orderly Carrying Out of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*) 14 and 17, cited in *Documents on the Liturgy* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1982).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Lumen Gentium (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church)*, 67.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

⁶ Washington, DC: USCC Publications Office, 1974.

An eleventh item is to be offered by the General Introduction to the *Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary*:

“Priests and faithful should keep in mind that genuine Marian devotion [and therefore devotion of any kind] does not demand the multiplication of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary [and also multiplication of any kind], but that in their celebration everything—readings, songs, homily, general intercessions, the offering of the sacrifice—be done with propriety, care and a vital liturgical spirit (§37).¹³

In the same section there is a special admonition to priests which could also apply to all other devotions:

“The first concern of a priest celebrating with a congregation is the spiritual benefit of the faithful and he will be careful not to impose his personal preference on them. Above all he will make sure not to omit too often or needlessly the readings assigned for each day in the weekday Lectionary; the Church’s desire is to provide the faithful with a richer share at the table of the Lord’s word.”

D) Devotions should have “an ecumenical aspect,” at least in avoid[ing] any exaggeration which would mislead other Christian brethren about the true doctrine of the Catholic Church.” (32)

E) Devotions should pay “close attention to the human sciences.” (34)

F) There should be a “serene freedom” in regard to any devotion. (55)

Although each of these six norms deserves a commentary, it might be more helpful to see these norms in action by looking at recent developments, liturgical and devotional.

Recent Liturgical and Devotional Developments and New Resources

¹³ Op. cit., p. 16.

1. The New Marian Sacramentary and Lectionary

The most significant development and newest resource for Marian devotion and its relationship to our liturgical life is the new *Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary* already mentioned (consisting in two volumes: a Marian sacramentary and a Marian lectionary). Twelve of the forty-six Masses have been collected not just for use at Marian shrines (whose privileges are enumerated in §§29–33) but also for use by parishes and other groups on Saturdays in Ordinary Time when there is no obligatory memorial (§§21 and 34) and on days when the choice of Masses is left open (§§21 and 37).

The General Introduction to the sacramentary and the Introduction to the lectionary explain that the new Marian sacramentary and lectionary are arranged according to the liturgical year (thus, there are three Masses for Advent, six for the Christmas season, five for Lent, four for the Easter Season, and twenty-eight for Ordinary Time).

More importantly, these introductions are a compendium of the Church’s understanding about the place of Mary in the Church’s life. To read them and the seasonal notes and the notes on the new Masses is to be refreshed in the teaching of *Lumen Gentium* and in the letters of Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II. Among the most significant are the following two selections from these introductions, the first of which is from the new sacramentary, and the second, from the new lectionary:

17. The powerful example of Mary that shines out in the celebration of the liturgy impels the faithful to become like the Mother, in order that they might be fashioned more completely in the likeness of her Son. Her example also prompts the faithful to celebrate the mysteries of Christ with that same spirit of reverent devotion with which she took part in the birth of her Son, in his epiphanies, and in his death and resurrection. In particular, Mary’s example urges the faithful: to treasure the word of God in their hearts and dwell on it assiduously; to praise God exultantly and

thank him joyously; to serve God and neighbor faithfully and offer themselves generously; to pray with perseverance and make their petitions with confidence; to act in all things with mercy and humility; to cherish the law of God and embrace it with love; to love God in everything and above everything else; to be ready to meet Christ when he comes.¹⁴

10. To the faithful who visit shrines dedicated to the Mother of God or who take part in the memorial of the Blessed Virgin on Saturday pastors should teach *the most excellent homage of devotion they can offer the Blessed Virgin*: that in liturgical celebrations they proclaim the word of God rightly and revere it with a special love; that they listen to this word with faith and keep it in their hearts; that they dwell on it inwardly on have it on their lips to share it with others; that they carry it out faithfully and let it shape their entire lives.¹⁵

I have highlighted the words in preceding paragraph because they bring to a focus not just a Marian spirituality for priests (significant though that is) but the fact that this spirituality is to be imitated by the laity; isn't this what the word "teach" means in that paragraph?

2. The New Order of Crowning and the New Order of Blessings

Many new and renewed rites are contained in the new *Order of Crowning an Image of the Blessed Virgin Mary*¹⁶ and the new *Order of Blessings*.¹⁷ Both orders have tremendously helpful introductions. In addition, the former contains the rites for a bishop's or pastor's crowning an image of our Lady in three different settings: within Mass, within Evening Prayer, and within a celebration of the Word of God.

Such solemn liturgical settings are also richly in evidence in the new blessings of images of and

devotions to Our Lady. The new Book of Blessings provides as many as three different levels of blessings for images and such things as rosaries and scapulars: a long version, a short version, and a very simple version (to be committed to memory, it seems).

Catechists and others responsible for the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults will find much help in the mystagogical period in the new Book of Blessings, especially in General Introduction and in the long forms of the blessings. Neophytes will learn much from the longer rites themselves; but catechists will want to introduce them as well to the rich life of blessings which belong to the all the fully initiated whereby they perform their irreplaceable task of consecrating the world to God.

3. New Collections of Prayer Forms

The recent Marian Year produced many helpful volumes for the renewal of Marian devotional and liturgical life. The Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy of the United States Catholic Conference published the *Book of Mary*,¹⁸ a collection of prayers in honor of our Lady with a fine foreword which again teaches so much about the Trinitarian, Christological, and ecclesial focus of Marian devotion. Most notable in this collection are the renewed Litany of Loreto, the Novena in honor of the Immaculate Conception (especially important for American Catholics), fine prayers to St. Joseph, and a section of the "Akathist Hymn," the most important Marian prayer of the Eastern Churches and the prototype of all Marian Litanies.

Still very useful to liturgists is the collection of devotional celebrations in honor of our Lady called *Celebrating the Marian Year*.¹⁹ This volume contains celebrations of evening prayer, litanies, intercessions, and the rosary, as well as processions and crownings. It also lists biblical and non-biblical readings and musical resources.

4. A New Angelus

¹⁸ (Washington, DC: USCC Publications Office, 1987), Publication No. 155-5.

¹⁹ (Washington, DC: USCC Publications Office, 1987), Publication No. 152-0.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 11.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 74.

¹⁶ (Washington, DC: USCC Publications Office, 1987), Publication No. 167-9.

¹⁷ Available from various publishers in various formats.

The noted liturgist Fr. Charles Miller, C.M., has written an approved set of Angelus prayers which are harmonized with the liturgical seasons. Keeping the traditional Angelus prayer as the Marian devotion for Advent and the Regina Coeli for Easter Time, Fr. Miller has composed the Mater Pietatis for Ordinary Time, a Christmas Time prayer, and the Mater Dolorosa for the Lenten season. Currently these are available only in English and only in his book *Mother and Disciple: A Devout Discourse on the Blessed Virgin Mary*.²⁰ Here at the seminary all five of these prayers have been combined in a pocket leaflet; can we hope that such will soon become available from the Office of Worship, in the principal languages spoken in the archdiocese?

5. A New Rosary

Finally, Cardinal Suenens has adapted the traditional rosary as an alternative means of prayer, especially for those who have never prayed the rosary or who no longer do so. This new rosary is called the Fiat Rosary because it concentrates our attention on Jesus' yes to God and on Mary's yes. It is designed to help prepare for the year 2000 and the decade of evangelization called for by recent popes.

It is shortened into three sets of three Hail Marys for the three Joyful, Sorrowful, and Glorious mysteries. This design is especially suitable for family prayer because it explicitly unites and supports the intentions of each family (or group) member. It begins with the Sign of the Cross, then a prayer to the Holy Spirit, then the mention of intentions for Church, World, and self, then the nine Hail Marys divided into threes by Glory Be's, and ends by invoking St. Joseph, St. Michael, and All Angels and Saints; all then sing a brief hymn to Mary composed for this Fiat Rosary.

This new rosary was originally launched in Belgium and has gained enthusiastic reception worldwide. The new rosary and Cardinal Suenens's booklet (translated into over a dozen languages) are available from Fiat Rosary/USA, 4350 San Gabriel, Dallas, TX 75229.

Conclusion

All of these new resources (and there are many more than those just mentioned) have one principal aim. They are meant to renew our appreciation of God's Strategy and God's Objective which is the same in every age — to sweep us into the life of the Trinity not just in the future in heaven but here and now on earth. How does God normally accomplish this? God does it through a liturgy which is connected to all of life, a liturgy which arises from hearts turned away from sin and turned toward God and each other. These hearts are so changed by desires awakened and kindled by devotion.

Most often the Trinity uses the Blessed Virgin Mary to awaken these desires in us. They have no other purpose than to accomplish in all the followers of Jesus the following virtues of our Lady:

to treasure the word of God in their hearts and dwell on it assiduously; to praise God exultantly and thank him joyously; to serve God and neighbor faithfully and offer themselves generously; to pray with perseverance and make their petitions with confidence; to act in all things with mercy and humility; to cherish the law of God and embrace it with love; to love God in everything and above everything else; to be ready to meet Christ when he comes.²¹

²⁰ New York, Alba House, 1989.

²¹ General Introduction to the *Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, §29.