

Celebrating Mary

FEASTS OF OUR LADY



Kathleen M. Carroll

The Virgin Mary holds a special place in the Christian tradition. Of course we know her as the mother of Jesus and thus, the mother of God.

But those lofty depictions might make Mary seem like a far-off being, someone unrelatable to the average modern-day Catholic. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

Mary was a simple Jewish woman who allowed God to work through her to create the extraordinary. Her willingness to be open to God's plan rings true as an example for us today, regardless of our personal circumstances or whether we feel "holy" or "worthy."

Mary provides for us a model of faith, becoming the gentle mother who teaches us through her own life, showing us how to understand and practice what we believe.

Mary was, throughout the life of Jesus, an ordinary mother, concerned about her family. The mysteries of the rosary do a good job of blending the ordinary and the extraordinary, the human and the divine in the life of Mary. We share in her struggles to understand a teenage son lost in the Temple, preaching to the crowds, murdered in his prime. But we also share in her joy at the Resurrection and her own exaltation as Queen of Heaven.

Catholics around the world appreciate Mary for these reasons; no wonder there are countless prayers, shrines, and devotions to her all over the globe.

In this *Update*, we take a closer look at a few of the feast days the Church has dedicated to Mary, using them as a framework to understand the importance of the Blessed Mother in our lives.

The Madonna of the Roses, William-Adolphe Bouguereau

“Behold, Your Mother”

When she visited her cousin Elizabeth, Mary was greeted with the words: “Behold, the mother of my Lord!” The Church recognizes Mary on New Year’s Day with the solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God, a holy day of obligation. Because Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, the Council of Ephesus described Mary as “Theotokos,” meaning “God-bearer.” We realize that she was not just the mother of an extraordinary human being, but the mother of Jesus—God incarnate.

The tradition we have of thinking of Mary as our own mother comes from Jesus’s words from the cross to the Beloved Disciple, “Behold your mother.” Scripture scholars tell us that this disciple (usually identified as John) acted as a son to Mary from that day forward, taking her to live with him.

But the Church has always laid a wide interpretation on these words. Pope John Paul II said, “With these words Jesus gave the Blessed Virgin Mary a new mission and established a special relationship of love between her and all the disciples.” The Beloved Disciple stands in for all the disciples, and all the future followers of Christ. Jesus himself tells us that we should look to Mary as our mother.

Assumption

As recently as 1950, the pope (Pius XII) defined as dogma the teaching that Mary was “assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.” The Eastern Orthodox Church holds that Mary “died” first for a short time (called the “Dormition”); the Roman Catholic Church does not specifically say whether this occurred before Mary was taken up to heaven.

Much as we understand intuitively that there was something different about Mary that made her more open to doing the will of God than any other human beings after Adam and Eve, so we intuitively know that because of her intimate connection to Jesus, she would not suffer the same death that all humans endure before the promise of the resurrection.



The Immaculate Conception, Bartolome Estaban Murillo, Prado, Madrid.

Immaculate Conception

On December 8, we celebrate the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. This does not refer to Mary’s virginity at the birth of Christ (though that is also a cherished tenet of our faith), but to our belief that she was conceived without original sin. The Church understands Mary to play a special role in the history of salvation, but we know she was not a goddess, but simply a very good human woman.

In 1854 Pope Pius IX declared, “the Blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her conception, by a singular privilege and grace of the Omnipotent God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of mankind, was preserved immaculate from all stain of original sin.” It was not a new doctrine, but simply an articulation of one that had always been held by the faithful.

Nativity of Mary

Because Scripture does not tell us the date of Mary’s birth, the Church celebrates it on September 8, nine months past the feast of the Immaculate Conception.

Most of what we know of Mary’s birth and childhood comes from tradition rather than from the Bible. The Gospel writers, interested more in the theology of

Jesus than in a straightforward biography, were interested in his parentage for what it said about Jesus.

Only St. Luke’s Gospel mentions Mary by name and gives us some background into her life before Jesus was born.

Tradition and popular legend have filled in gaps such as the names of Mary’s parents (Joachim and Anne). Because we feel so close to Mary, we want to know these human details about her life. During the Renaissance and after, Mary was often depicted as reading or doing housework when the angel Gabriel appeared to announce Jesus’s birth.

Annunciation

The Feast of the Annunciation, on March 25 (exactly nine months before Christmas) recalls the angel’s visit to Mary with the Good News of the Incarnation. It recalls our debt to the young woman who had the courage to say yes to God’s plan for her.

It is from the angel Gabriel’s salutation, “Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with thee,” that we get the first words of the Hail Mary. Shortly after the Annunciation, St. Luke tells us, Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, whose welcome to Mary supplies the next lines: “Blessed are you among women.” ■

Kathleen M. Carroll is author of several books, including A Mary Christmas (2012, Franciscan Media).



The Annunciation, Paolo de Matteis

Apparitions and Devotions

The tradition of Mary as intercessor dates from the earliest hours of Christianity. We see an example of this in John's Gospel, at the Wedding Feast at Cana, when Mary appeals to Jesus to do something about the wine shortage for the good of the hosts.

It's not surprising, then, that Mary has appeared to a number of people, often common, peasant folk, throughout the ages, offering them support and courage in the face of oppressors, encouraging them to spread Jesus's message of peace and salvation.

The Church does not require the faithful to believe in Marian apparitions, but it promotes those that have been examined and approved if they're helpful to people's faith. These "approved" visitations are described as "worthy of pious belief," and inspire a special devotion to Our Lady.

The feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe dates from the sixteenth century when a poor Indian named Juan Diego was walking by a hill known as Tepeyac when a radiant cloud appeared and, within it, a young maiden dressed like an Aztec princess. The lady spoke to him in his own language and sent him to the bishop of Mexico, a Franciscan named Juan de Zumarraga. The skeptical bishop told Juan Diego to have the lady give him a sign.

When Mary next appeared, she filled Juan Diego's tilma (a traditional garment) with roses, though they were out of season. When Juan Diego opened his tilma in the bishop's presence, the roses fell to the ground and the bishop sank to his knees. On the tilma appeared an image of Mary exactly as she had appeared at the hill of Tepeyac. It was December 12, 1531.



The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, from the tilma of Juan Diego.

LOURDES

In 1858, a poor fourteen-year-old French girl named Bernadette Soubirous had a vision of Our Lady at a grotto known as Massabielle. Many of the townspeople thought she was crazy when she dug in the dirt with her hands as the apparition had instructed her.

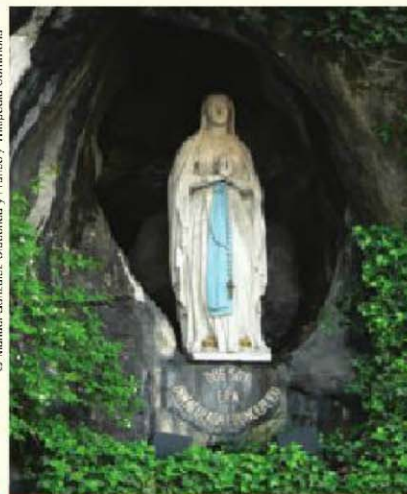
But her digging uncovered an underground spring, muddy at first, then flowing clear. About five million pilgrims a year now make the journey to Lourdes, praying for healing. The grotto around the statue of Mary is filled with canes, crutches, and other testaments to prayers answered.

FATIMA

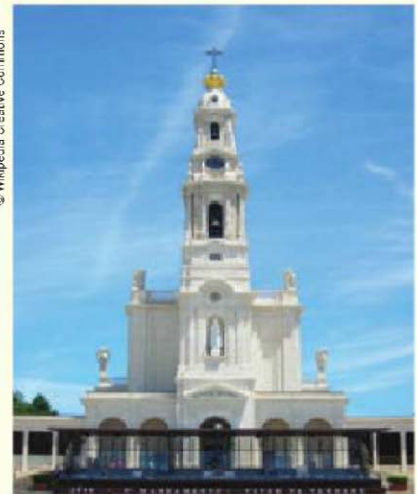
Perhaps the most famous apparition of Mary, Our Lady of Fatima appeared in Portugal in 1917 to three children—

Jacinta and Francisco Marto and Lucia dos Santos. Their visions occurred on the thirteenth of each following month and gained wide popularity.

In October, a crowd of seventy thousand witnessed what has been called the "Miracle of the Sun," in which the sun appeared to many to shine in many colors, to look like a wheel, or to dance. This vision is the source of the "Fatima prayer" often added to the recitation of the rosary.



The grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes, Massabielle, France.



The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal attracts over four million pilgrims annually.

Salve Regina

Hail, holy Queen, Mother of Mercy,
our life, our sweetness and our hope.

To thee do we cry, poor banished
children of Eve;

to thee do we send up our sighs,
mourning and weeping in this
valley of tears.

Turn then, most gracious advocate,
thine eyes of mercy toward us;
and after this our exile,
show unto us the blessed fruit
of thy womb, Jesus.

O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary.
Pray for us O holy Mother of God,
that we may be made worthy of
the promises of Christ.

Memorare

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary,
that never was it known
that anyone who fled to your protection,
implored your help,
or sought your intercession,
was left unaided.

Inspired with this confidence,
I fly to you, O Virgin of virgins, my Mother.
To you I come, before you I stand,
sinful and sorrowful.

O Mother of the Word Incarnate,
despise not my petitions,
but in your mercy, hear and answer me.
Amen.

Fatima Prayer

O Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from
the fires of hell and lead all souls to heaven,
especially those most in need of thy mercy.
Amen.

From *The Catholic Prayer Book*
(Cincinnati: Servant, 2013)

The Family Rosary

In *The Rosary of the Virgin Mary*, Pope
John Paul II pointed out the
significance of the rosary for families:

“As a prayer for peace, the rosary is also,
and always has been, a prayer of and for the
family. At one time this prayer was particularly dear
to Christian families, and it certainly brought them closer together.
It is important not to lose this precious inheritance. We need to
return to the practice of family prayer and prayer for families,
continuing to use the rosary.”



Here are ways your family can continue to use the rosary:

- Say the rosary together. Either pray for a special intention for the entire family, or have each person pray for his or her own individual intention.
- Encourage use of the rosary by giving it as a gift for special religious occasions, such as First Reconciliation, First Communion, or Confirmation. Include a small book or printed instructions on how to say the rosary.
- Pray the rosary while you go for a walk or watch a child's sporting event.
- Remember the rosary in times of stress, such as when you're worried about one of your children or keeping watch in the hospital with a family member.

ROSE IMAGE: © ELENATHEWISE - FOTOLIA

UPDATE

Question Box

- 1) What role has devotion to Mary played in your faith?
- 2) Which feast of Our Lady is your favorite?
- 3) Why is Mary so important to Catholics?

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