



THE FEASTS OF Mary

have visited Medjugorje where many believe Mary has been appearing since 1981. Though neither officially recognized nor rejected by the Vatican (the apparitions are under study), Medjugorje has been a source of healing and personal renewal for many. And it is only one of the many places where apparitions have been claimed. Some, including Pope John Paul II, also believe that Mary's intercession helped bring about the downfall of Communism.

This revival in Marian devotion has been cheered by some and greeted suspiciously by others. Regardless of what one thinks of these recent events (Catholics are not obliged to believe in apparitions or the private revelations claimed by others), this issue of *Catholic Update* offers an invitation to all of us to learn more about Mary through her feasts as celebrated in the liturgical calendar.

By Robert M. Hamma

What woman has appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine more than any other? Not Marilyn Monroe. Not the First Lady of the White House. Not even Madonna. The answer is the Blessed Virgin Mary.

A recent article (*Time*, December 1991) bore the title "Handmaid or Feminist?" While the headline was shocking to some, others saw the supposed opposition between these two words as false. The history of Christian devotion to the Blessed Mother encompasses many ways of seeing her—as handmaid, as model of liberation, as mother, as healer, as queen—to name but a few.

Today there is a renewed devotion to the Blessed Mother. As reported in the *Time* article, 10 million people

Celebrating Mary's life

The various celebrations of Mary are scattered throughout the year. Because these feast days do not occur within the calendar in the same order that the events actually happened in Mary's life, their relationship to the story of Jesus and Mary can sometimes be lost. When we read them in the "living" order in which they happened, we can more easily appreciate Mary's faith journey as well as the relationship of these feasts to Jesus' life.

As Vatican II reminded us, we honor Mary when we celebrate the cycle of Christ's saving mysteries. "Mary is joined by an inseparable bond to the saving work of her

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Celebrations of Mary Through the Year

JANUARY 1

Mary the Mother of God
(solemnity)

FEBRUARY 11

Our Lady of Lourdes
(memorial)

MARCH 25

Annunciation of Our Lord
(solemnity)

MAY 31

The Visitation
(feast)

JUNE

Immaculate Heart of Mary
(memorial)

JULY 16

Our Lady of Mt. Carmel
(memorial)

AUGUST 5

Dedication of St. Mary Major
(memorial)

AUGUST 15

The Assumption
(solemnity)

AUGUST 22

The Queenship of Mary
(memorial)

SEPTEMBER 8

The Birth of Mary
(feast)

SEPTEMBER 15

Our Lady of Sorrows
(memorial)

OCTOBER 7

Our Lady of the Rosary
(memorial)

NOVEMBER 21

Presentation of Mary
(memorial)

DECEMBER 8

The Immaculate Conception
(solemnity)

DECEMBER 12

Our Lady of Guadalupe
(feast)

Son" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, #107). The accompanying chart places Marian celebrations in calendar order. Their relative importance is also shown by the rankings—from highest to lowest—of *solemnity, feast, memorial*. This is best measured by their closeness to the saving events of Jesus' life.

◆ The Immaculate Conception:

December 8. This feast is not the commemoration of Jesus' conception (as is sometimes thought) but of Mary's. Although Joachim and Anne are not named in the Bible, an ancient tradition holds that they were Mary's parents. Their feast is on July 26. We believe that Mary was conceived by her parents in the natural human way, but that she was conceived without original sin.

This is a gift God gave her in anticipation of her Son's redemption. When Pope Pius IX defined this belief in 1854, he explained that God's grace was given to her "in such a wonderful manner that she would always be free from every stain of sin." Mary is revered as patroness of the United States under this title. The national shrine of the Immaculate Conception is located in Washington, D.C.

◆ The Birth of Mary: September 8.

Although we do not know the date of Mary's birth, Christians have celebrated it on this day since the seventh century. The date of the feast of the Immaculate Conception was determined by counting back nine months from this date, the time from conception to birth. Mary's birthday is one of only three celebrated in the Christian calendar. Along with the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, it celebrates the dawn of salvation.

◆ The Presentation of Mary in the Temple: November 21.

Once again, we have no biblical record of this event, but like all Jewish children, Mary would have been brought to the Temple on the 40th day after her birth. (The presentation of Jesus in the Temple is recorded

by Luke and celebrated on February 2.)

◆ **The Annunciation: March 25.** All of the most important feasts of Mary are really celebrations of Jesus. That is why the name of this feast was changed from the Annunciation of Mary to the Annunciation of Our Lord. It is the celebration of Jesus' conception by the Virgin Mary, accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Gospel for this feast, Luke 1:26-38, is the first time Mary appears in the Bible. The angel Gabriel greets her with the words that have become the first part of the Hail Mary. Mary is

deeply disturbed and fearful. Yet she places her trust in God, saying, "I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."

Once again we see that the feast of Jesus' conception occurs exactly nine months before the celebration of his birth. When March 25 falls during Holy Week, the Annunciation is celebrated after Easter.

◆ **The Visitation: May 31.** Luke's account of the Annunciation is immediately followed by his story of Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth, who despite her advanced age was soon to be the mother of John the Baptist (Lk 1:39-56). This date is after the Annunciation but before the celebration of John's birth on June 24 so that the order of these days in our liturgy follows the actual order of the events.

Elizabeth greets Mary with the words that are the second part of the Hail Mary: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Lk 1:42). In response, Mary offers a prayer which is known today as the Magnificat: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord...." The full prayer is found in Luke 1:46-55. The name of the prayer comes from the Latin word *magnificat*, which is the first word of the prayer. It is sometimes translated, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

◆ **The Birth of Jesus: December 25 (Advent).** Advent presents Mary, along with Isaiah and John the Baptist, as models for our preparation for the coming of Jesus. The Gospel for the fourth Sunday of Advent particularly focuses on Mary's role in God's plan of salvation. While the celebration of Christmas naturally focuses on Jesus, we reflect also on Mary's part in giving him life and upon her vital link to the whole mystery of the Incarnation.

◆ The Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God:

January 1. This is the oldest and most important feast of Mary. Coming one week after Christmas, it is a second celebration of Jesus' birth with a special focus on Mary as the Mother of God.

The title "Mother of God" was given to Mary at the Council of Ephesus in 431. In the early Church some claimed that Mary should only be called the mother of the human Jesus and not the mother of God. The council taught, however, that the humanity and divinity of Jesus could not be separated and that they exist in the one person—with the momentous implication that we can rightly give Mary the title of Mother of God. Again we see that a celebration of Mary is a celebration of her Son.

◆ **The Presentation of the Lord: February 2.** The feast of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple was previously called the Purification of Mary, but its name was changed to place the focus more clearly on Jesus. Yet because of Mary's role in these events, it is still a day to reflect on her. In the Gospel we hear the prophecy of Simeon spoken to her: "You yourself shall be pierced with a sword—so that the thoughts of many hearts may be laid bare" (Lk 2:35). Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical letter, *Mother of the Redeemer* (1987), reflected on the meaning of these words: "Simeon's words seem like a *second Annunciation to Mary*, for they tell her the actual historical situation in which the Son is to accomplish his mission, namely, in misunderstanding and sorrow. This announcement...

reveals to her that she will have to live her obedience of faith in suffering, at the side of the suffering Savior, and that her motherhood will be mysterious and sorrowful.”

Mary in the life of Jesus. While there are no specific celebrations of Mary to highlight her role in Jesus’ life after his birth, we do encounter her at various times throughout the Church’s year. On the feast of the Holy Family we hear the Gospel account of Mary and Joseph *finding Jesus in the Temple*. On the Second Sunday of the Year we see her with Jesus *at the wedding feast of Cana*, urging him to do something to help the couple whose wine has run out. On Passion Sunday and Good Friday we find *Mary at the foot of the cross*, fulfilling the prophecy that Simeon spoke when Jesus was just an infant. And on Pentecost Luke reminds us that Mary was *with the apostles in the upper room* when the Holy Spirit came upon them.

♦ **The Assumption: August 15.** We do not know anything about Mary’s life after the day of Pentecost. Christian tradition holds that Mary spent the last years of her life in Ephesus (in present-day Turkey) with the apostle John. There is also a church in Jerusalem called the Church of the Dormition (meaning the “falling asleep” of Mary) at the legendary place of her death. In some parts of the Church there was once a commemoration of her death.

Six Marian celebrations of special interest

In addition to the celebrations of Mary’s life, there are six other celebrations of her in the liturgical calendar for the United States. Although there are many other titles by which we venerate Mary, we focus here only on those which we celebrate in the liturgy.

♦ **The Immaculate Heart of Mary: Date varies.** This feast was extended to the universal Church by Pius XII in 1944. In our times, the celebration of this day varies according to the date of Easter. It usually takes place in June on the Saturday after the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

The hearts of Jesus and Mary are often depicted together as an expression of their union in love and their love for us. This day reminds us of Mary’s sinlessness, of the prayerful way she pondered the mystery of Jesus in her heart and of her unceasing love for us.

♦ **Our Lady of Mt. Carmel: July 16.** Mt. Carmel is located on the coast of Israel just north of the city of Haifa. Tradition holds that it was the place where the prophet Elijah confronted the pagan prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18:19-46). It is an ancient shrine of Mary and it was here that the Order of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel was founded



Celebrating Mary in May

Although the association of the word “May” with Mary is a natural one, the two names were not originally related. The Romans named the month after the goddess Maia, the daughter of Atlas and the wife of Jupiter. The pre-Christian European peoples celebrated the coming of spring with rituals such as the Maypole and the May Queen. These rituals celebrated the cycle of the seasons and return of life in the spring.

Christians replaced these celebrations by making May a month of devotion to the Blessed Mother. When we see Mary as the New Eve, as the Mother of the life-giving Savior and of the Church, we see why Catholic tradition easily associates her with the new life of spring.

During May, processions, devotions and the communal recitation of the rosary were a regular part of parish life. Sermons at Mass, especially on Mother’s Day, often focused on Mary. On May 31, which used to be the feast of the Queenship of Mary, a procession and a May crowning were held. The month’s celebration came to an end when a young girl would place a wreath of flowers on the head of a statue of the Blessed Mother.

In some places these devotions continue to take place today. Following the guidelines of Vatican II, they no longer take place within the context of the Mass. Contemporary Marian devotions also try to express Mary’s relationship to Jesus, drawing from the wealth of scriptural references to her. Many Catholics celebrate Mary by placing an image of her in their homes during May.

Since the seventh century this celebration has been called the Assumption. In 1950 Pope Pius XII defined as a dogma of our faith that Mary was assumed into heaven “body and soul,” without specifying whether or not Mary actually experienced physical death.

Although this question has been debated for centuries, the stronger tradition seems to be that Mary underwent actual death—like Jesus and all other Christians—before she was assumed into heaven. Whatever the details of her passing, she enjoys now the fullness of salvation that we will all share at the resurrection of the dead. She shared in the fullness of Jesus’ redemption from the moment of her conception to the completion of her earthly pilgrimage.

about 1154. This contemplative Order, known as the Carmelites, began to celebrate its patronal feast on July 16 because, according to its tradition, it was on this day in 1251 that Mary appeared to the Carmelite St. Simon Stock in England and gave him the brown scapular as a sign of her love and protection. Our Lady of Mt. Carmel is especially revered in Italy and by Italian-Americans.

♦ **The Dedication of St. Mary Major: August 5.** The Basilica of St. Mary Major is located in Rome on one of the seven hills of the city. It is one of the most ancient churches in Rome and the first among the churches dedicated to our Lady. On this day we celebrate Mary as Mother and Model of the Church.

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♦ **The Queenship of Mary: August 22.** Following the establishment of the feast of Christ the King, Pope Pius XII created this feast in 1954 on May 31. The new calendar moved it to August 22 to emphasize its connection with the Assumption. We venerate Mary as queen for two reasons: because of her unique part in redemption and because she is first among the saints. Pius XII said of her: "Like her Son before her, she conquered death and was raised body and soul into heaven, where as queen, she sits in splendor at the right hand of her Son."

♦ **Our Lady of Sorrows: September 15.** One aspect of Mary's life that is being appreciated anew today is her suffering. The poor, especially in Latin America, find in her one who walks with them: as a refugee, as a mother whose son is unjustly murdered, as a widow. The Gospels give us ample record of the suffering Mary endured. The circumstances of Jesus' birth were harsh, even by the standards of the day. Afterward the Holy Family fled to Egypt to escape persecution by Herod. The loss of Jesus in the Temple signaled the new challenge of understanding his ministry. "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's work?" he said to Mary (Lk 2:49). Ultimately, his passion and death were her greatest trial.

♦ **Our Lady of the Rosary: October 7.** The origins of this feast lie in the 16th century when the Christian armies of Europe won a number of victories over the Muslim Turks. While the battles raged, the people of Rome prayed the rosary. In thanksgiving for the victory of the Christian navies at Lepanto, October 7, 1571, the day was dedicated to Our Lady of Victory. The name was soon changed to Our Lady of the Rosary. Catholics today do not celebrate this victory, but rather give thanks for the gift of the rosary. Because of this feast, the month of October has been dedicated to the rosary.

Two feasts linked with apparitions

Two more days exist in our calendar of Marian celebrations: Our Lady of Lourdes and Our Lady of Guadalupe. These commemorate only two of the many reported apparitions of Mary to be found in the liturgical calendar for the United States. Although devotion to Our Lady of Fatima is popular among many groups in this country, the Fatima (Portugal) apparitions of 1917, though recognized by the universal Church, are not celebrated as an official, nationwide feast in the U.S. liturgical calendar.

There are many other apparitions that enjoy the Church's approval, but they are celebrated, for the most part, only in those areas of the world where they occurred. Immigrants and their descendants often continue to celebrate those feast days in their new land. For example, in the United States the immigrant peoples of Latin America, Poland, and elsewhere celebrate the apparitions of Mary which occurred in their native lands.

The remembrance of an apparition during the liturgical year is an expression of the Church's recognition of its validity and that the message received from the Virgin is in harmony with Catholic belief. The Church stops short, however, of insisting that the apparition be accepted as part of the faith that all must accept. As the U.S. bishops said in

1973: "Even when a 'private revelation' has spread to the entire world, as in the case of Our Lady of Lourdes, and has been recognized in the liturgical calendar, the Church does not make mandatory the acceptance either of the original story or of particular forms of piety springing from it" (*Behold Your Mother: Woman of Faith*, #100, A Pastoral Letter on the Blessed Virgin Mary).

♦ **Our Lady of Lourdes: February 11.** On this date in 1858, the Blessed Mother appeared to a 14-year-old girl named Bernadette Soubirous. This was the first of 18 apparitions. When Bernadette was pressed by the local abbot to learn the name of the woman who was appearing to her, Mary identified herself as "the Immaculate Conception." Since the dogma had only recently been proclaimed and was unknown to Bernadette, the message was convincing. The apparitions were given the Church's approval in 1862. In the years that followed many came to this small French town in the Pyrenees and were healed in the waters flowing from a spring that welled up in the grotto where the apparitions took place. The pilgrimages and the healings continue today.

♦ **Our Lady of Guadalupe: December 12.** In December of 1531 Our Lady appeared to an Aztec farmer named Juan Diego near a native Aztec shrine in Tepeyac, near present-day Mexico City. She told Juan to go to the bishop and ask that a church be built in that place. When the bishop demanded a sign, Mary instructed Juan to take with him the roses that were blooming there, even though it was December. Returning to the bishop's house, Juan removed his coarse cloak and found that the image of Our Lady was emblazoned upon it. The cloak with its image is still viewed today inside the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe by pilgrims from around the world. Our Lady of Guadalupe, who was declared "Patroness of the Americas" by Pope Pius XII in 1954, is widely revered throughout our hemisphere and receives special affection from Native American and Hispanic communities.

Devotion to Mary

The People of God through the ages have shown Mary veneration and love. They have called upon her in prayer and they imitate her. All these ways of praising Mary draw us closer to Christ. When Mary is honored, her Son is duly acknowledged, loved and glorified, and his commandments are observed. To venerate Mary correctly means to acknowledge her Son, for she is the Mother of God. To love her means to love Jesus, for she is always the Mother of Jesus.

To pray to Our Lady means not to substitute her for Christ, but to glorify her Son who desires us to have loving confidence in his saints, especially in his Mother. ■

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