

The Memorial of Mary “Mother of the Church”

With a Decree dated 11 February 2018, the 160th anniversary of the first apparition of the Virgin at Lourdes, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments implements the decision of Pope Francis, requiring that the Memorial of the “Blessed Virgin Mary Mother of the Church” be inscribed in the General Roman Calendar. Attached to the Decree are the relevant liturgical texts in Latin for the Mass, the Liturgy of the Hours and the Roman Martyrology. The Episcopal Conferences will approve the translation of the texts they need and, after receiving their confirmation, will publish them in the liturgical books for their jurisdiction.

The new celebration is briefly described in the Decree itself which recalls the eventual maturation of liturgical veneration given to Mary following a better understanding of her presence “in the mystery of Christ and of the Church”, as explained in Chapter 7 of Vatican II’s *Lumen gentium*. Indeed, with good reason, in promulgating this Conciliar Constitution on 21 November 1964, Blessed Paul VI wished to solemnly bestow the title “Mother of the Church” upon Mary. The feeling of Christian people through two millennia of history has cultivated the filial bond which inseparably binds the disciples of Christ to his Blessed Mother in various ways. John the Evangelist gives explicit witness to such a bond when he reports the testament of Jesus dying on the Cross (cf. Jn 19:26-27). Having given his Mother to the disciples and the disciples to his Mother, “knowing that all was now finished”, the dying Jesus “gave up his spirit” for the life of the Church, his Mystical Body: indeed it was “from the side of Christ as He slept the sleep of death upon the Cross that there came forth the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n.5).

The water and blood which flowed from the heart of Christ on the Cross as a sign of the totality of his redemptive offering, continue to give life to the Church sacramentally through Baptism and the Eucharist. In this wonderful communion between the Redeemer and the redeemed, which always needs to be nourished, Blessed Mary has her maternal mission to carry out. This is recalled in the gospel passage of John 19:25-31 which is recommended for the Mass of the new Memorial, which had already been indicated, together with readings from Genesis 3 and Acts 1, in the Votive Mass “de sancta Maria Ecclesiæ Matre”, approved by the Congregation for Divine Worship in 1973 in view of the upcoming Holy Year of Reconciliation of 1975 (cf. *Notitiae* 1973, pp. 382-383).

The liturgical commemoration of the ecclesial motherhood of Mary had thus already found a place among the Votive Masses of the *editio altera* of the *Missale Romanum* of 1975. Then, during the pontificate of Saint John Paul II, the possibility was granted to Episcopal Conferences of adding the title “Mother of the Church” to the Litany of Loreto (cf. *Notitiae* 1980, p. 159); and on the occasion of the Marian Year the Congregation for Divine Worship published other Mass

formularies for Votive Masses under the title of “Mary, Mother and Image of the Church” in the *Collectio missarum de Beata Maria Virgine*. In the course of the years the insertion of the celebration “Mother of the Church” into the proper calendars of some countries, such as Poland and Argentina, on the Monday after Pentecost was also approved. In other cases the celebration was inscribed in particular places such as Saint Peter’s Basilica, where Blessed Paul VI proclaimed the title, as well as in the Propers of Religious Orders and Congregations.

Given the importance of the mystery of Mary’s spiritual motherhood, which from the awaiting of the Spirit at Pentecost has never ceased to take motherly care of the pilgrim Church on earth, Pope Francis has decreed that on the Monday after Pentecost the Memorial of Mary Mother of the Church should be obligatory for the whole Church of the Roman Rite. The connection between the vitality of the Church of Pentecost and the maternal care of Mary towards it is evident. In the texts of the Mass and Office the text of Acts 1:12-14 throws light on the liturgical celebration, as does Genesis 3:9-15,20, read in the light of the typology of the New Eve, who became the “Mater omnium viventium” under the Cross of her Son, the Redeemer of the world.

The hope is that the extension of this celebration to the whole Church will remind all Christ’s disciples that, if we want to grow and to be filled with the love of God, it is necessary to plant our life firmly on three great realities: the Cross, the Eucharist, and the Mother of God. These are three mysteries that God gave to the world in order to structure, fructify, and sanctify our interior life and lead us to Jesus. These three mysteries are to be contemplated in silence. (cf. R. Sarah, *The Power of Silence*, n.57).

Robert Card. Sarah

Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments