



Mary, Mother of Religious

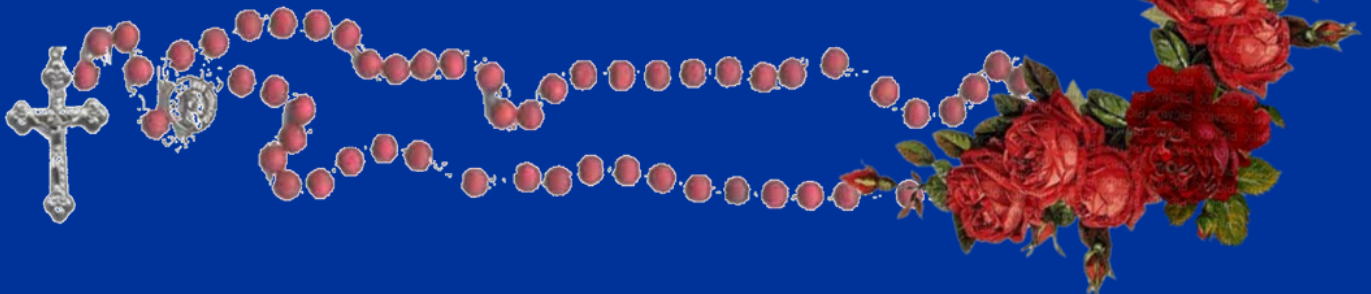
I have found that I understand and know individual Sisters much better once I've met and become more acquainted with their mothers.

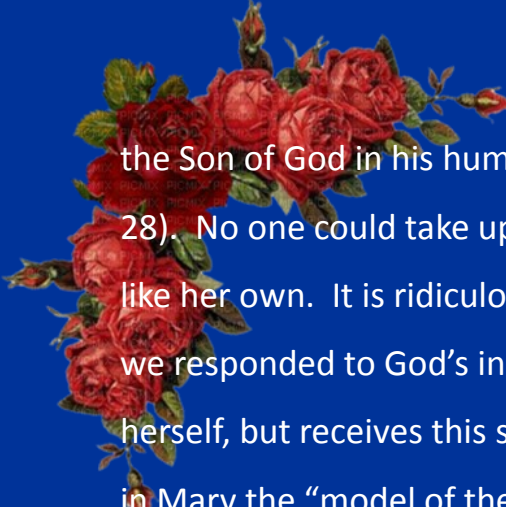
Physical realities often teach us about spiritual realities. And so ...

The same is true of religious: the better we know and understand the Mother of Religious, the better we can know and understand the religious vocation. At the foot of the Cross through the dying words of Jesus, "Behold your Mother," Mary was given to each and every Christian as their mother. However, religious, whose vocation has a specifically Marian character, find in her a "Mother who is altogether unique"; the Church teaches us that her Motherhood has a "specific value for those who have completely consecrated their lives to Christ" (*Vita Consecrata*, 28).

We have inherited our vocation from her and as her daughters we hope to "take after her," to look like her, to act like her and to take on her mannerisms. In fact, this is even the mind of the Church. John Paul II enunciated this truth when he wrote, "your vocation [is] like a reflection of her presence" (John Paul II, *Marian Year Letter to All Consecrated Persons*, 1988, page 6), and again, "The consecrated life has always been seen primarily in terms of Mary" (VC 34). Finally, "If the entire Church finds in Mary her first model, all the more reason do you find her so" (*Redemptionis Donum*, 17).

First, to know the Mother. Mary, "among all persons consecrated unreservedly to God, ... is the first" (RD 17). Chosen from all eternity for a wholly unique mission – to give birth to





the Son of God in his humanity – she teaches us of the “primacy of God’s initiative” (VC 28). No one could take upon herself the responsibility of giving God a human nature, one like her own. It is ridiculous to ponder that possibility, rather, that impossibility. Like Mary, we responded to God’s initiative, to His invitation. No one rightly takes this vocation upon herself, but receives this supernatural vocation as a gift, and thus doing so also recognizes in Mary the “model of the acceptance of grace by human creatures” (VC 28). The supernatural vocation requires supernatural means for fidelity and when God gives the vocation He also gives the grace to respond. Moreover, He will never abandon us, for God’s grace will not lead us where God’s grace cannot keep us.

Throughout her life, Mary set the stage for religious. She is the first in time and in totality, the “most fully consecrated to God, consecrated in the most perfect way” and “fulfills in the most perfect way His call” (RD 17). For what better teacher, what better model, could we ever hope?

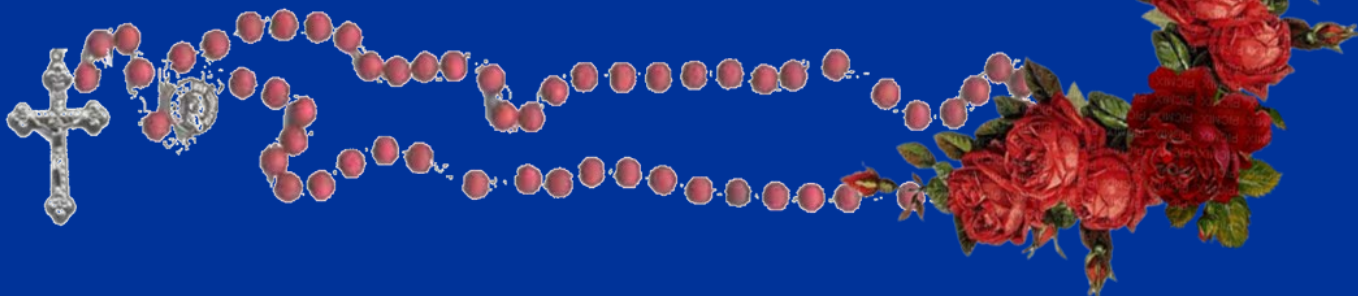
Mary “showed throughout her life all the values to which religious consecration is directed” (*Essential Elements in the Church’s Teaching on Religious Life*, 53). The very foundational, essential elements of religious life were first lived by Jesus, but this was also the life He chose for His Mother, His First Disciple. Mary lived

in chastity, a virginal life

in poverty, just think of Bethlehem and the occupation of Joseph

in obedience, her life was a continual “fiat”, “yes”, to the Lord from the Annunciation to Calvary and beyond

a deep prayer life, pondering the Word in her Heart and interceding for others as at the





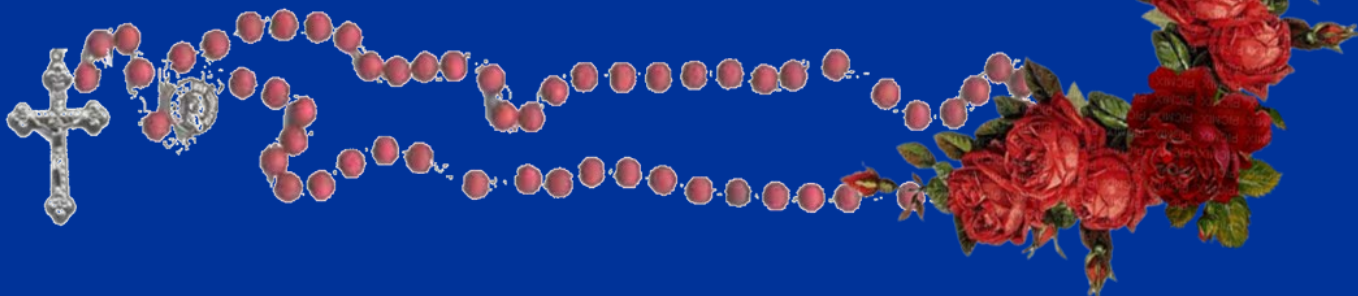
wedding feast in Cana

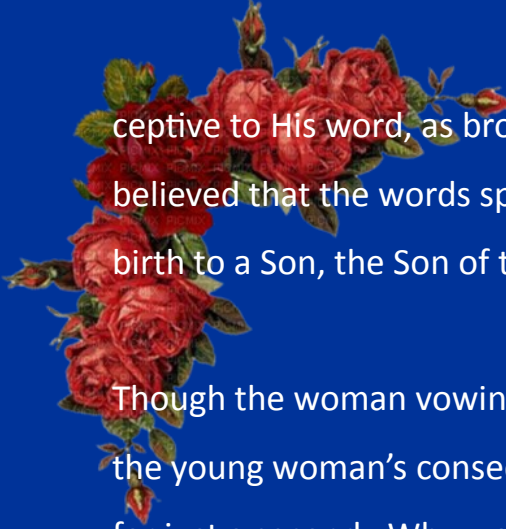
an apostolic life, as when she was a missionary to Elizabeth even before anyone else knew of the Incarnation and she assisted Jesus in His public life and, especially after the Ascension, she was the center of unity for the infant Church, drawing them together in community, keeping them united as they awaited the Spirit

Mary undoubtedly lived all the elements of religious life. She followed Jesus – she, the Mother – as her Teacher. “In her, religious life comes to understand itself most deeply” (EE, 53) and so religious have been instructed by the Church, “Learn your vocation from her” (John Paul II, Marian Year Letter, 13). We all learn from our mothers!

One aspect of Mary’s life and vocation that deserves special attention in a talk entitled “Mary, Mother of religious” is Mary’s motherhood. Mary’s motherhood is both physical and spiritual. At first glance, it may seem that her physical maternity is rather obvious, but upon reflection, we have to acknowledge a huge difference between the physical aspect of Mary’s motherhood and natural motherhood.

Mary **alone** is Virgin and Mother. The Church has always insisted on the fact that Mary was virgin before the birth of Jesus, during the birth of Jesus and remained a virgin after the birth of Jesus. Jesus’ virginal conception in the womb of Mary proclaims the identity of the Child. Jesus has no human father, thus it was precisely Mary’s virginity that enabled her to become the Mother of God. Her fruitfulness is the result of her virginity, of her giving herself – body and soul – unreservedly to God. She placed herself totally at God’s disposal and service and desired only that His will be fulfilled in her. She was re-



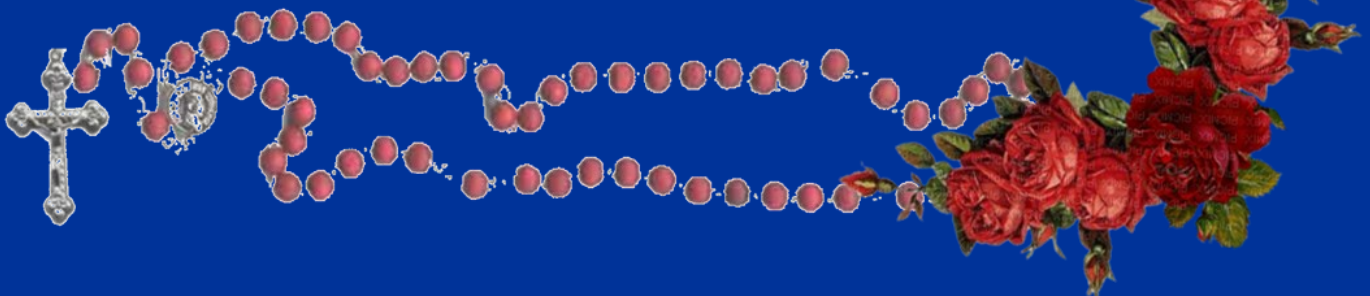


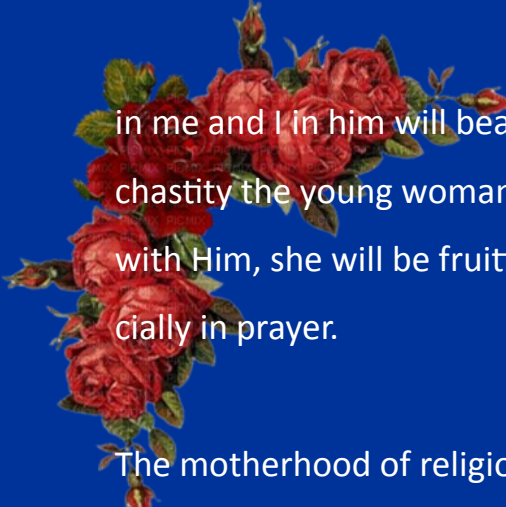
ceptive to His word, as brought to her by the angel, and in her humility, docility and trust believed that the words spoken to her would be fulfilled ... that she as a virgin would give birth to a Son, the Son of the Most High.

Though the woman vowing chastity will never be a physical mother, like Mary's virginity, the young woman's consecrated chastity **enables** her to become a mother. Let's back up for just a second. Why would a healthy, happy young woman decide to sacrifice her physical motherhood? Not because of what she is giving up, but because of what, or to whom, she is saying "yes". She is saying "yes" and recognizing that will also mean saying "no"; however, not until the seed has died can it flower to life and be multiplied!

Consecrated chastity is about love, about being loved in a special way and responding to that love in a special way. It is about giving oneself – body and soul, as did Mary – unreservedly to God, placing oneself at the disposal and service of God, desiring only that God's will be fulfilled in her. The young woman receives the invitation and in humility, docility and trust accepts the Lord's promise: "Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God who will not receive [back] an overabundant return in this present age and eternal life in the age to come" (Luke 18:29-30).

Consecrated chastity is not directed against something or someone, but towards Someone. Consequent to giving herself to this Someone, she, too becomes a mother. Jesus was very clear, "Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains





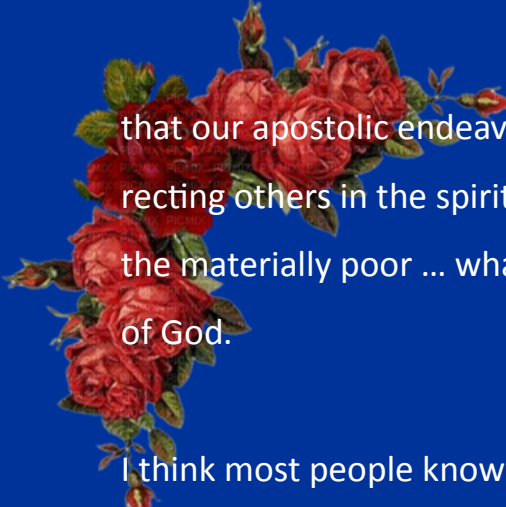
in me and I in him will bear much fruit” (John 15:4-5). In and through her consecrated chastity the young woman desires to “remain in,” be united with Jesus, and subsequently, with Him, she will be fruitful. Her whole life is directed to being united with Jesus, especially in prayer.

The motherhood of religious flows from the primary and principal duty of all religious as stated in the Law of the Church: “the contemplation of divine realities and constant unions with God in prayer” (Code of Canon Law, 663.1). Union with God, primarily through prayer, is our primary purpose **and** our primary service ... and this is what **enables** the consecrated woman to become a mother. In fact, the Church teaches that consecrated chastity “is a singular source of spiritual fertility in the world” (*Lumen Gentium*, 42). To bear fruit for the Kingdom we must be receptive to the Word, pondering it in our hearts, as did Mary.

Pope John Paul added in his Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, “Virginal love is the **source** of a particular fruitfulness which fosters the birth and growth of divine life in people’s hearts” (VC 34). It is mystery. A mystery is not something we cannot understand or explain; a mystery is something that we can never **fully** understand or explain. Somehow, the gift of self of a young woman to God, who lovingly receives God’s gifts in prayer and ponders them in her heart, bears spiritual fruit in the world.

In fact, St. Pope John Paul the Great once said, “Every [woman professing consecrated chastity] is destined to receive from the Lord a gift which ... reproduces the features of universality and spiritual fruitfulness of Mary’s Motherhood” (John Paul II, General Audience, 15 March 1995). That is quite a statement! If we live our vocation faithfully, then we can help restore and increase supernatural life in the hearts of God’s people. We are promised





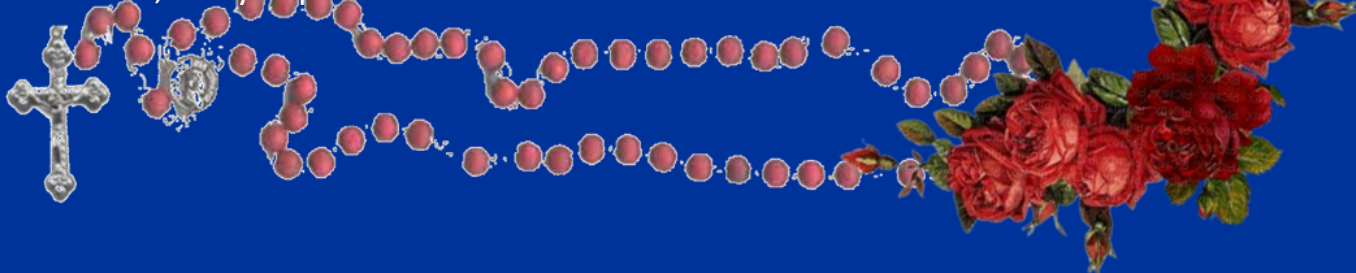
that our apostolic endeavors – be they our prayers, our teaching, our forming and directing others in the spiritual life, or in the case of other communities, nursing, serving the materially poor ... whatever their apostolate may be ... will bear fruit for the Kingdom of God.

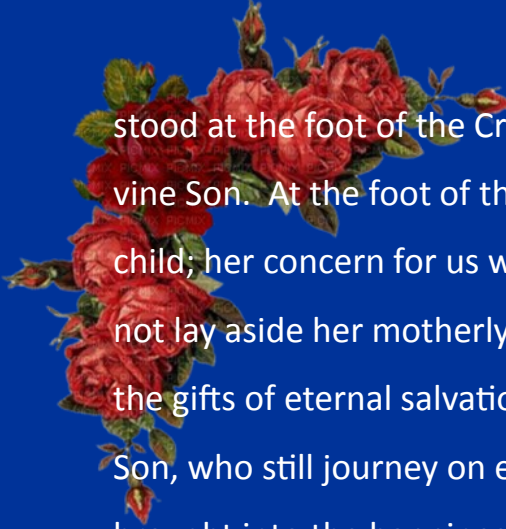
I think most people know that instinctively. Some even express it culturally. In the Hispanic culture religious are referred to as “mother” not “sister”.

If not, then why is it that we often hear questions or statements like, “When will you come to our parish and teach in our school?” “We were so disappointed when we realized that our child won’t have a Sister in school this year.” “We wish there were Sisters in every school!” (By the way, so do we!) I think it is precisely because religious do remind all the faithful of Mary, the Mother, and because our life, patterned after her example does witness to her motherly love. This is all grace and we often are in awe of it ourselves. God often uses the most unusual instruments to display the power of His grace and the immensity of the love He has for His people. Only with Him can we bear fruit in our apostolic endeavors, in our consecrated service.

Returning now to Mary. As I was saying Mary’s motherhood was physical **and spiritual**. Now let us consider the spiritual motherhood of Mary. The Church teaches us that in a “singular way she cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the work of the Savior in giving back supernatural life to souls. Wherefore she is our mother in the order of grace” (LG 61).

As I said earlier, Mary’s spiritual and universal motherhood was revealed to us as she



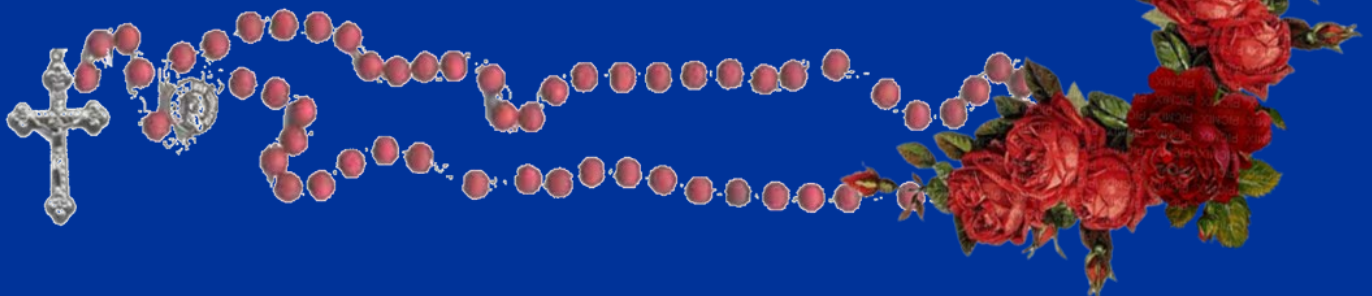


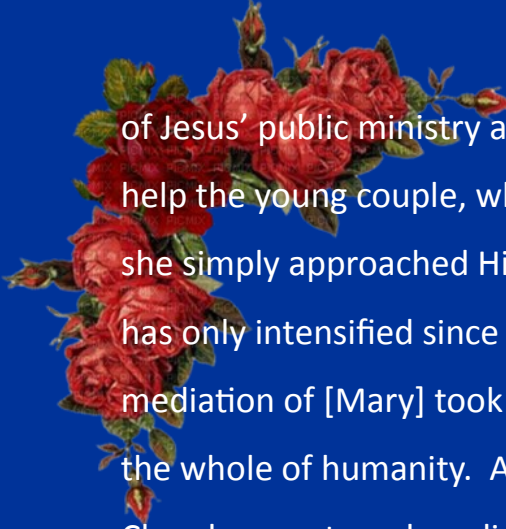
stood at the foot of the Cross and received the Beloved Disciple, John, in place of her Divine Son. At the foot of the Cross, Mary received and accepted **each one** of us as her child; her concern for us will last until we are all in heaven. “Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside her motherly concern, but by her constant intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation. By her maternal charity, she cares for the brethren of her Son, who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and difficulties, until we are brought into the happiness of our heavenly home (LG 62). As a true mother, she is concerned for our salvation and all our needs and worries; she is constantly leading us, guiding us, encouraging us, and supporting us with her prayers along the way of holiness.

In essence, Mary is our spiritual mother because she participated with Jesus in obtaining the graces of redemption, and as a **result**, received from Jesus the **privileged role of distributing the graces** of redemption to her earthly children. Thus the Mother of Jesus participates in the mothering actions of interceding, ... of nourishing, and of protecting humanity in the supernatural order through sanctifying grace (Dr. Mark Miravalle, “How is Mary the ‘Spiritual Mother of Humanity’?”, June 4, 2012, [General Mariology](#)).

Thus, not only did Mary physically bring Christ into world, but she also participated in His redeeming mission of saving souls, and now in heaven continues the maternal role of interceding for us, guiding, protecting, nurturing and forming us into the likeness of her Son. In her motherly love, “she still sees her children's needs and is ready to come to [our] aid, especially when [our] eternal salvation is at stake” (Pope John Paul II, General Audience, 24 September 1997).

In Pope John Paul II’s encyclical on Mary, he stated that Mary’s primary maternal role is mediation (*Redemptoris Mater*, 38), a role that she began to exercise at the very beginning

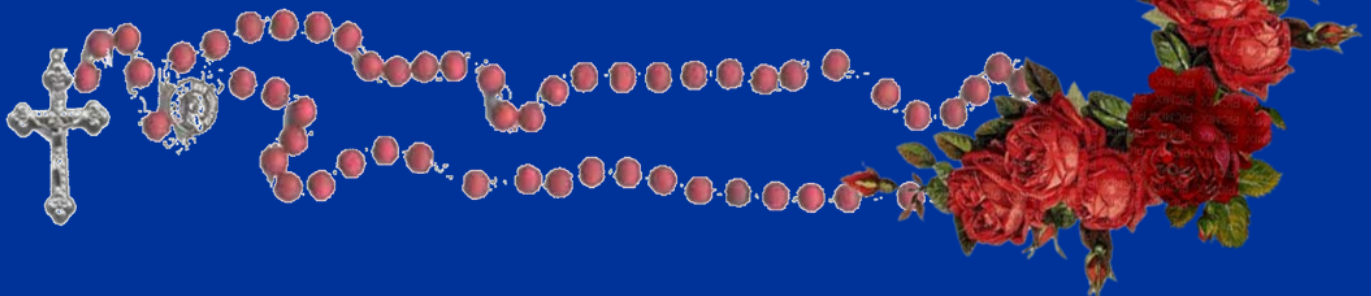


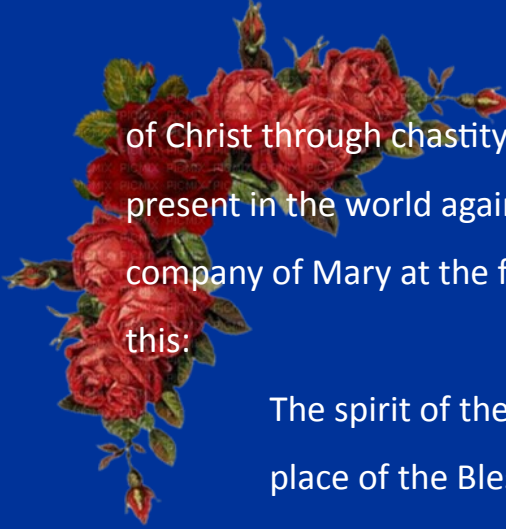


of Jesus' public ministry at the Wedding Feast of Cana. Trusting in His ability and desire to help the young couple, who didn't even yet know that they were in a precarious position, she simply approached Him and stated their need, "They have no wine." Her mediation has only intensified since then and "with the redeeming death of her Son, the maternal mediation of [Mary] took on a universal dimension, for the work of redemption embraces the whole of humanity. After her Son's [Ascension], her motherhood remains in the Church as maternal mediation: interceding for all her children, the Mother cooperates in the saving work of her Son, the Redeemer of the world" (RM, 40).

"[She] places herself between her Son and mankind in the reality of their wants, needs and sufferings. She puts herself 'in the middle,' that is to say she [mediates] not as an outsider, but in her position as mother. She knows that as such she can point out to her Son the needs of mankind, and in fact, she 'has the right' to do so. Her mediation is thus in the nature of intercession: Mary 'intercedes' for mankind" (RM 21). How beautifully God has arranged that Mary undo the knot of Eve. Eve led Adam, the head of the human race, to his – and our – downfall. Mary is the perfect handmaid, the perfect helpmate. She presents our desires, petitions and needs – perhaps before we even know them ourselves – to Christ, the One Mediator between God and man, and then He allows her to fulfill the role He has given her and she distributes the graces He won for us and thus helps restore what was lost through the sin of Adam and Eve. Pope Francis expressed this perfectly when he wrote in *The Joy of the Gospel*, "As a true mother, she walks at our side, she shares our struggles and she constantly surrounds us with God's love" (EG 286).

The consecrated chastity of the religious enables her to be a spiritual mother; it is not a rejection or avoidance of motherhood, but its fulfillment on a higher plane. By living the life





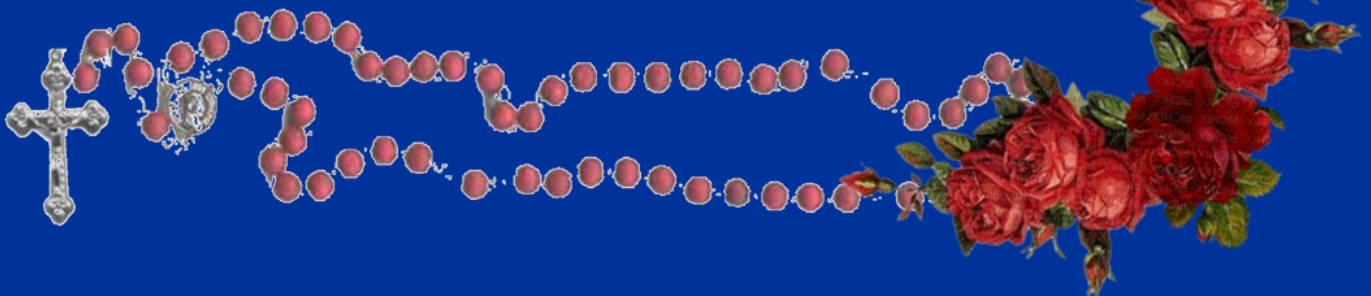
of Christ through chastity, poverty and obedience we not only make the mystery of Christ present in the world again and thus, in that sense, are His mother, but we also, in the company of Mary at the foot of the Cross, help save souls. Our own Constitutions embody this:

The spirit of the Institute springs from the Church's doctrine concerning the place of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the economy of redemption. ...

In union with Mary the Sisters pray for the Church, especially for the conversion of sinners and the sanctification of priests.

IHM constitutions #6, #7

One of the messages in particular of Our Lady of Fatima resonates deeply in the heart of every Sister of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. In the August apparition, she told the children, "Pray, pray a great deal and make many sacrifices, for many souls go to Hell because they have no one to make sacrifices and to pray for them." We were founded in 1848 for that purpose: to transform society through the formation of the young in the faith and **to pray for the conversion of sinners**. Mary does not want any of her children to go to hell, and we don't either! If prayer and sacrifice can save souls from hell, then it is prayer and sacrifice that we must do. God wants our cooperation; "the choice of a person by God is for the sake of others: the consecrated person is one who is sent to do the work of God in the power of God" (EE 23). Jesus' redemptive work was for all, but in some mysterious way, the number of those who will benefit from it will depend upon our cooperation and participation in His Passion. How could any mother say no to this? We have been "called for others: wholly turned in love to the Father and, by that very fact, entirely given to

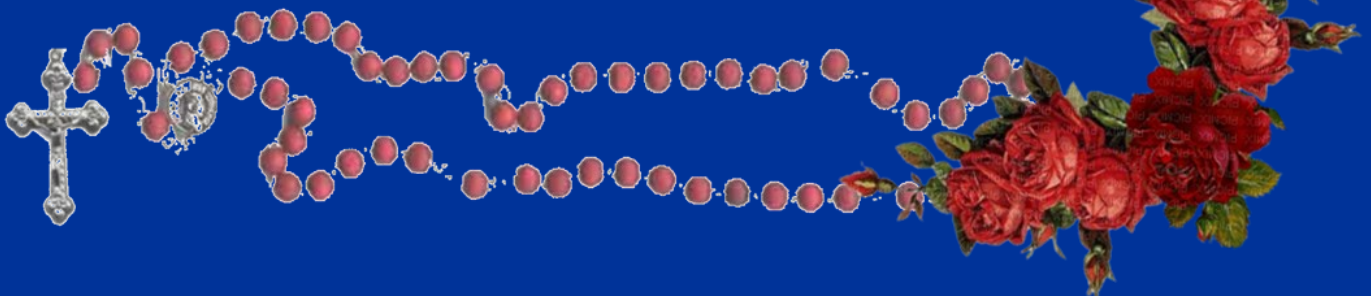




Christ's saving service of our brothers and sisters" (EE 24).

We share in this work of redemption in a variety of ways, first and essentially, through our prayer and sacrifices. Through mediation and intercession we bring souls to Christ. Like the friends of the paralytic who lowered their sick friend through the roof because he was too sick to approach Christ himself, we bring to the Divine Physician, often through the intercession of Mary, those who find themselves so far from Christ they don't know how to return. We pray for our families, friends, students (past, present and future), for those recommended and entrusted to us, for the forgotten, for those who have no one to pray for them. We pray for people we don't know, for intentions given to us *by people we don't know* in grocery stores, parking lots, airports, and yes, even restrooms! Through our website, on the phone, letters from all over the country, prayer requests for the wandering, the sick, the addict, the criminal ... for all those only a mother could love. Some have been called to this life for the sake of all. Mediation and intercession are our primary means for assisting in the salvation of souls. If nothing else, we can pray.

We, however, are not limited to prayer. St. Augustine said, "Pray as if all depends upon God and work as if all depends upon you." Therefore, we **work** for the salvation of souls. Looking at Mary's life we see her "unconditional discipleship and diligent service" (VC 28). And seeking to follow her example in all things we in our "unconditional discipleship" seek to be diligent in our service. Called for others we **want** to be "entirely given to Christ's saving service of [our] brothers and sisters" and we share in this "by means of concrete services mandated by the Church in the approval of [our] constitutions" (EE 24). For us that primarily means teaching, forming, and directing in prayer. We desperately



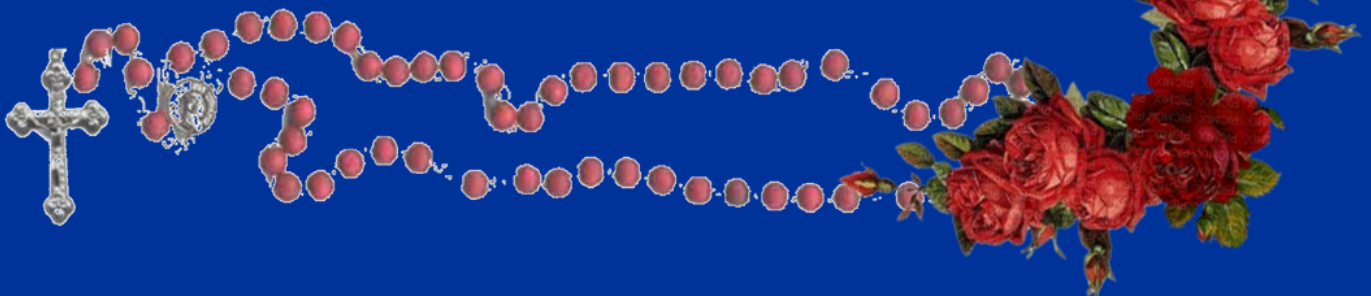


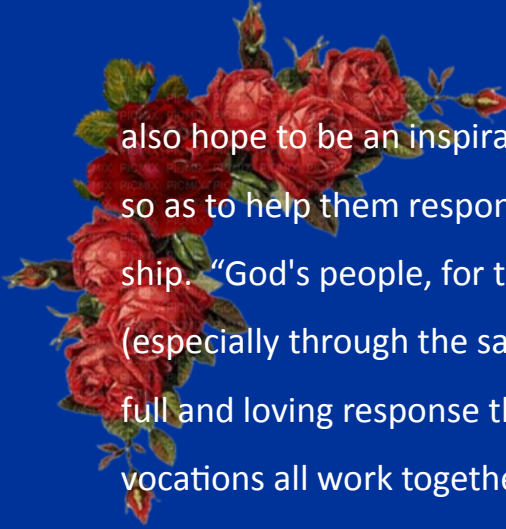
want to bring Christ to souls and souls to Christ.

We are not only attentive to **what** we do for the salvation of souls, in the cooperation with Christ's saving work, but as religious, **how** we do it matters. For instance, our primary active apostolate is teaching, usually in the diocesan schools. There may be teachers in those schools who are more educated than we are, they may have more experience, they may be able to design award winning lesson plans, they may give hours above and beyond that which is required. But we are different. We don't measure our success or accomplishment in any of those ways – in fact, we don't measure any success or accomplishments, because they are not ours, but the Lord's who accomplishes in us all that is good (Isaiah 26:12) and we sing with the Psalmist, "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Your name give the glory" (Psalm 115:1). Our apostolic work is a consecrated service, not a job or a career, but a consecrated service that cannot be purchased or rewarded in this life.

I haven't taught high school for many years now, but I have a few vivid memories of one class in particular. One day was particularly trying for my students and myself, and I must admit I was probably showing it. At one point a young man in the back said, "Sister, they don't pay you enough!" I looked him straight in the eye and said, "They don't pay me anything for this! I am here because I want you to go to heaven." I meant it. That is why we do everything. Every mother wants her child to be happy for all eternity. Money, payment, has nothing to do with mothering.

Though our total gift of self to God stands on its own and is a good in and of itself, we



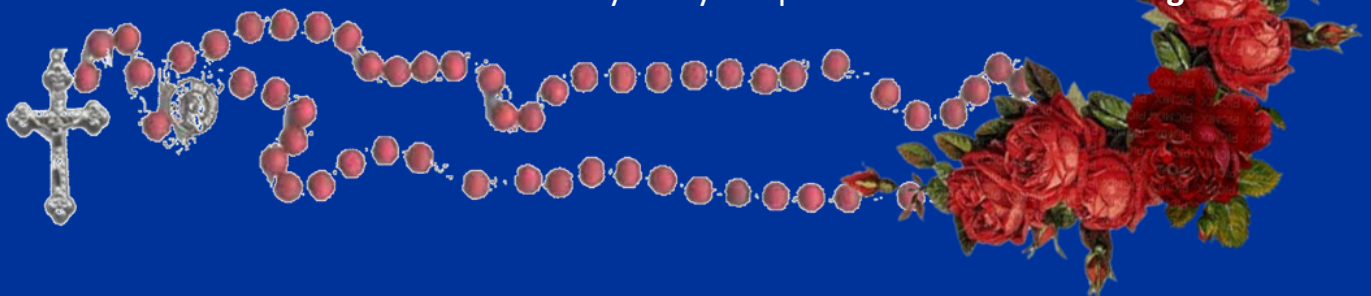


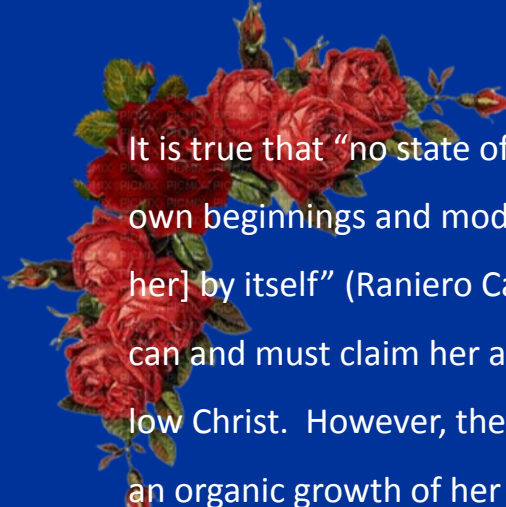
also hope to be an inspiration to others, to witness to the absoluteness of God in our lives, so as to help them respond likewise, in a sense, mothering them along the way of discipleship. “God's people, for their part, find in the ordained ministry the means of salvation (especially through the sacraments), and in the consecrated life the incentive to make a full and loving response through all the different forms of Christian service” (VC 34). The vocations all work together and all are a way to communion with the Triune God; in God’s design they are different, distinct, diverse, but complementary. The priest is “another Christ”; the religious, analogous to the relationship between Jesus and Mary, is the help-mate, the Marian influence.

There are two additional points that I would be remiss if I did not mention. These points, though they speak to the **very essence** of our topic, would require two more chapters to explore in detail, but they need at least a head nod, an acknowledgement.

I have spoken about our spiritual motherhood as a fruit of our consecrated chastity, but there is yet another way that we share in the motherhood of Mary, that we “mother Christ”. We read in the Gospel of Matthew, “ ‘Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?’ And stretching out his hand toward his disciples Jesus said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother’ (Matthew 12: 48-50). Through the faithful living of our vow of obedience we know that we are doing the will of the Father. How reassuring! By doing the will of the Father, by living our “fiat,” we are again bringing Christ into the world and we, again, are His mother!

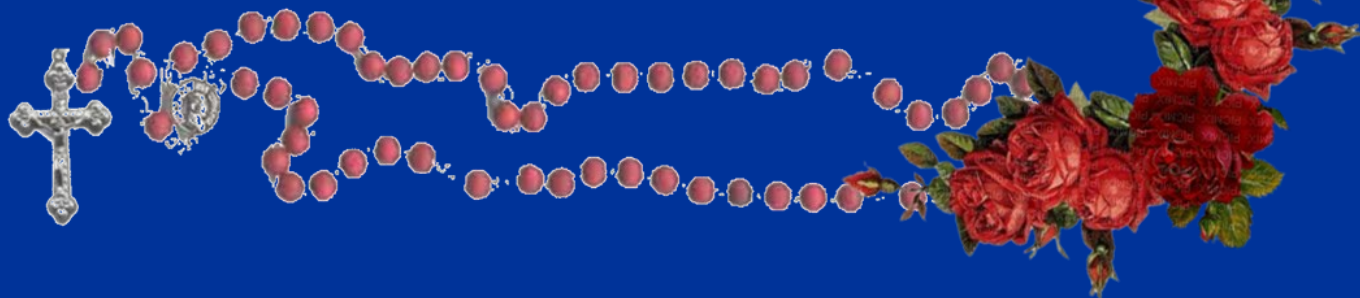
The second addendum concerns most directly Mary’s explicit and direct **mothering of us**.

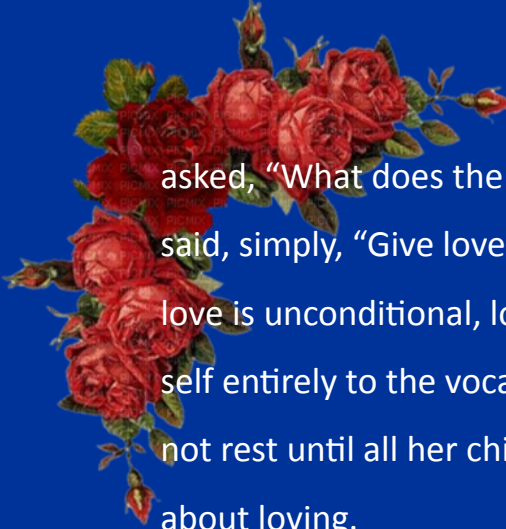




It is true that “no state of life in the Church is deprived of the glory of having, in Mary, its own beginnings and model and no state of life can boast of [being the sole imitators of her] by itself” (Raniero Cantalamessa, *Virginity*, Alba House, 1995, page 91). All vocations can and must claim her as their primary model for she shows every Christian how to follow Christ. However, the religious vocation is not just an exterior imitation of her life, but an organic growth of her vocation. Because of this, she lays special claim on us. She is not only the model for us, but our “ ‘advocate’ and protector ... She does not confine herself to pointing out the way, but helps [us] to live it by her intercession and watchful care” (Cantalamessa, 90) and for this we are immensely grateful. She is our support and our encouragement and as one holy person once said, “The Rosary is our daily meeting which neither I nor the Blessed Virgin Mary neglect” (St. John Paul II). She is very involved in our lives and she should be. Our Constitutions instruct us to turn “to her in all things to beg her maternal protection and guidance as [we] seek to imitate the life of her Son” (IHM Constitution #4). We are called, like St. John at the foot of the Cross, to take the Blessed Virgin Mary to ourselves, loving her and imitating her in the radical manner which befits our vocation, and experiencing in return her special motherly love. The Blessed Virgin shares with us the love which enables us to offer our lives every day for Christ and to cooperate with him in the salvation of the world. Hence a filial relationship to Mary is the royal road to fidelity to our vocation and a most effective help for advancing in our vocation and living it fully (VC 28).

A few years ago, I was privileged to be in a group of Sisters enjoying a friendly interchange with Justin Cardinal Rigali, a close, personal friend of Pope John Paul II and who was, at that time, the cardinal of Philadelphia. He was fielding questions from the Sisters and one





asked, "What does the Church want from us right now, right here?" He paused and said, simply, "Give love a face." I think that is what it means to be a mother. A mother's love is unconditional, loving those faces "only a mother could love." Having given herself entirely to the vocation of love, the love of a religious is a mother's love. Mary will not rest until all her children are in heaven, and neither will we. Being a mother is all about loving.

