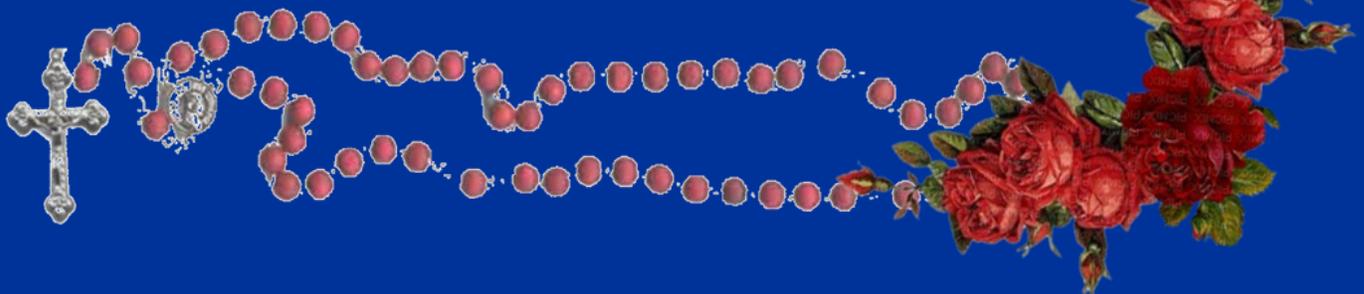
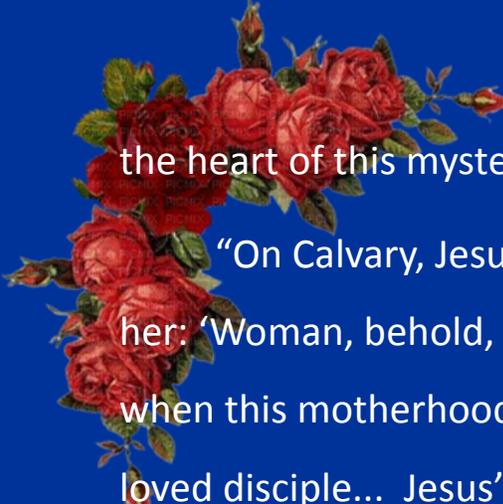




Immaculate Heart of Mary, Mother of Priests

We could go through many aspects of the priestly life and the life of Our Lady to see the beautiful ways in which Our Lady's life and special intercession provide strength, growth and comfort for the priest. Whole books have been written on the topic, several of which I read with delight when preparing for this talk. For our limited time tonight, we will focus in general on the major moments of Our Lady's life as expressed in some of the mysteries of the Rosary and apply these mysteries to the life of the priest as a special son of Our Lady. While all of us can claim the Immaculate Heart as our Mother, priests do so in a singular way. They are configured to her Son the great High Priest through their ordination, and when Our Lady sees one's soul bearing such a likeness to that of her Son, we can be sure that she loves him exceptionally. Pope Pius XI wrote, "The priest even more than the faithful should have devotion to Our Lady, for the relation of the priest to Christ is more deeply and truly like that which Mary bears to her Divine Son" (Ad Catholici Sacerdotii). In papal documents I found Mary invoked as Mother of Priests, Queen of the Clergy, and even Mother of Seminarians and Mother of the Priesthood. Several sources which referred to Mary as Mother of the Priesthood explained that it was Mary who gave the Son his Flesh and thus enabled Him to become the High-Priest, offering to the Father the sacrifice of His own life for the salvation of the world. "Sacrifice, priesthood and Incarnation go together and Mary is at





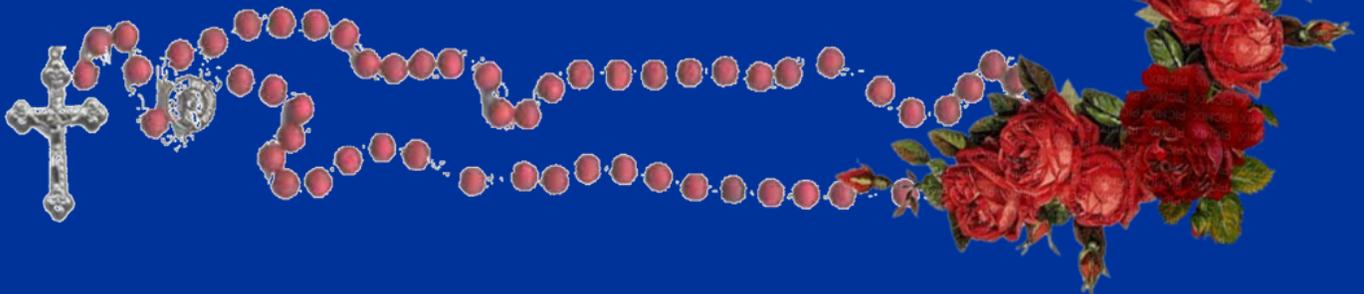
the heart of this mystery” (Benedict XVI, General Audience, August 12, 2009).

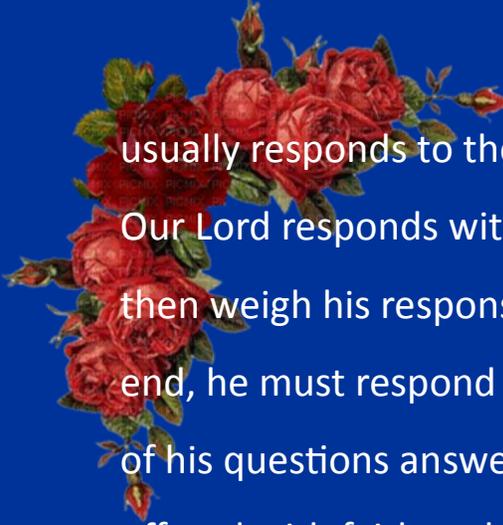
“On Calvary, Jesus entrusted a new motherhood to Mary when He said to her: ‘Woman, behold, your son’ (Jn 19:26). We cannot overlook the fact that when this motherhood was proclaimed, it was in regard to a ‘priest,’ the beloved disciple... Jesus’ gaze extended beyond John to the long series of his priests in every age until the end of the world. As he did for the beloved disciple, he made that entrustment to Mary’s motherhood for them in particular, taken one by one” (John Paul II, General Audience, June 30, 1993). This particular love Our Lady has for her priest-sons can be seen in many ways as enumerated by the priest Ronald Knox, “We priests have a special claim, in more ways than one, to the patronage of our Blessed Lady. Our hands are privileged to touch his Eucharistic Body as hers were to hold and tend his natural Body. When we consecrate, he is born anew by a kind of sacramental birth; when we offer the bloodless sacrifice of the Mass, we associate ourselves with it as she associated herself with the sacrifice of Calvary” (The Priestly Life, 149).

The Joyful Mysteries

Annunciation and Nativity

We Sisters have been privileged to witness many of our students discover that they are called to the priesthood. While all of their stories are unique, there is a common thread that runs through them all. Each of the young men



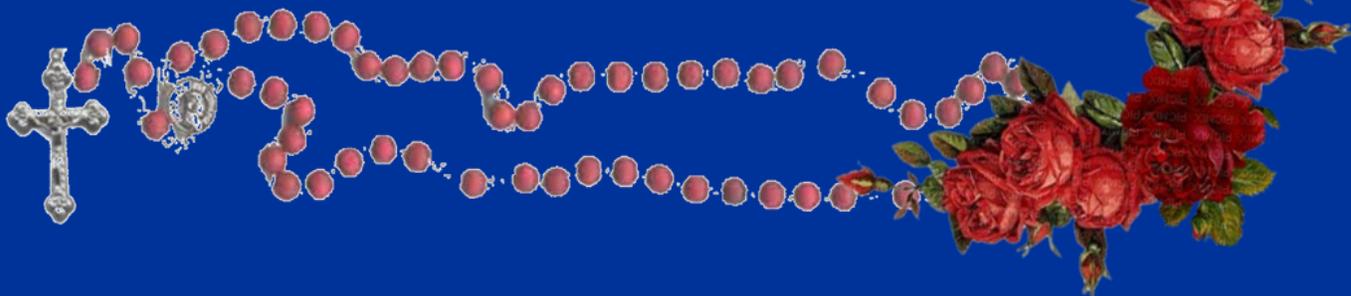


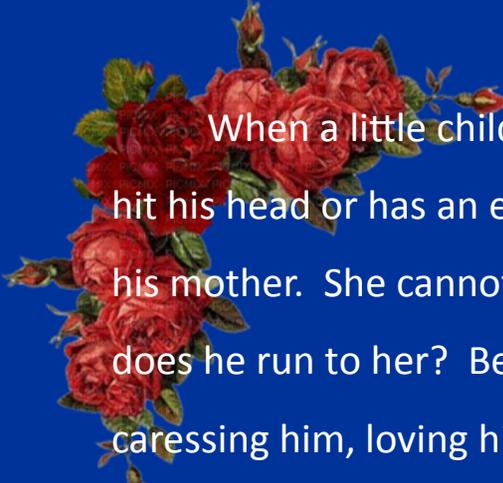
usually responds to the initial call with two questions, “Really?! Me?!” As Our Lord responds with “Yes, really!” and “Yes, you!” the young man must then weigh his response. He has many how and why questions, but in the end, he must respond with an act of tremendous faith and trust without all of his questions answered. In fact, it seems to be essential that any *fiat* be offered with faith and trust. It is truly beautiful to witness.

The parallels between the priest’s fiat and that of Our Lady’s are numerous. This fiat of the priest is his spiritual inheritance from his heavenly Mother, whose fiat gives him the grace to respond so generously and with such great trust. As she joined her fiat to her divine Son’s, her priest son now joins his life-long fiat to hers. As her fiat ushered in the Word made Flesh, the priest’s fiat bears spiritual fruit, bringing Christ into the world at every Mass and celebration of the Sacraments, as well as in his own person configured to our Savior. A diocesan priest wrote, “This is what I do as a priest. I carry Christ in my womb of faith, and I seek to communicate the joy of redemption. I preach a Magnificat of praise by allowing the Lord to use my life as an example for God’s people” (Rossetti, Behold Your Mother: Priests Speak About Mary, 38).

The Luminous Mysteries

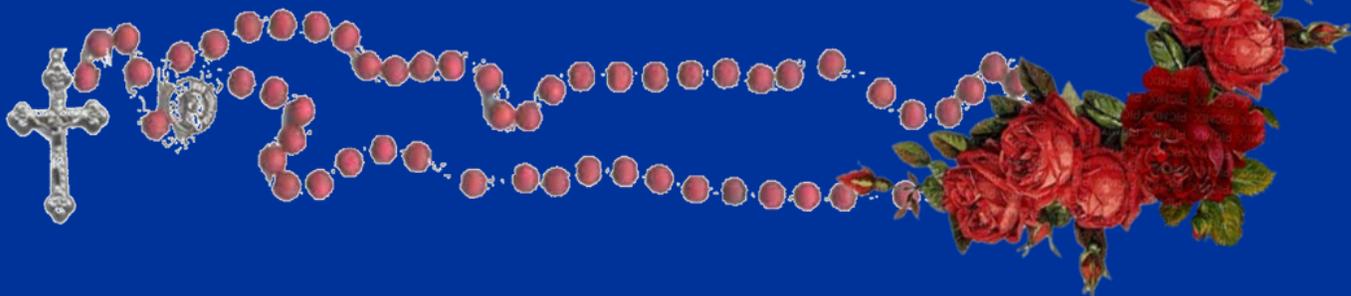
Public Ministry

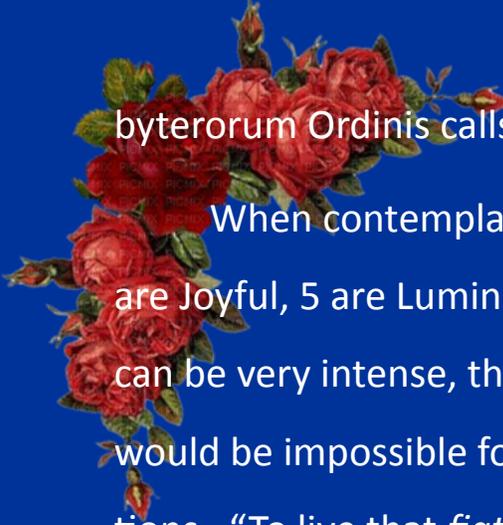




When a little child is in pain, his instinct is to run to his mother. If he has hit his head or has an earache or any number of pains, he seeks the comfort of his mother. She cannot take away his pain, and he doesn't expect her to. Why does he run to her? Because her love makes the pain bearable. Holding him, caressing him, loving him gives him what he needs. The pain is the same, but a mother's love makes all the difference in the world.

The daily life of the average priest is filled with incredible joys, near unbearable sorrows, tedious tasks and exciting days. In all of this the priest needs a woman as his companion, especially when he would otherwise give in to loneliness or self-doubt. His Mother can work miracles for him, and this can be expected. Msgr. William Schaeffers, a priest from our diocese who died in the 1970's wrote of the special need priests have of their Heavenly Mother, "What is there that she will not do for her priests? We need her gracious help so badly" (Keepers of the Eucharist, 105). Sometimes, however, there is no escape from hardship. This is when the love of our Lady's Immaculate Heart is especially necessary in the life of the priest. Like the little child, he can bear the pain because the love of his mother makes the pain bearable. "The presbyter must always remember that in the difficulties of life he will meet he can count on Mary's help. In her and to her he confides and entrusts himself and his pastoral ministry, asking her to make it yield abundant fruit. Finally, he looks to her as the perfect model of his life and ministry" (John Paul II, June 30, 1993). Pres-





byterorum Ordinis calls Mary the “protector of [the priest’s] own ministry”.

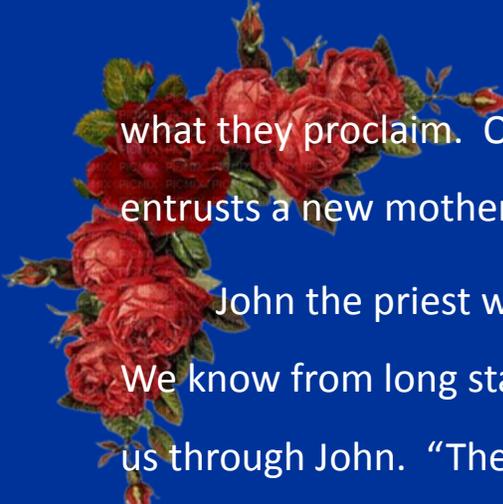
When contemplating Our Lady’s life, we must remember that 5 mysteries are Joyful, 5 are Luminous, 5 Glorious, and only 5 are Sorrowful. While sorrows can be very intense, the joys are even more so. If this were not the case it would be impossible for us to have so many joyful priests fulfilled in their vocations. “To live that *fiat* will unloosen a torrent of graces so immense that there may be times when the true priest will feel inclined to cry out, like Xavier, and beg God to withhold his joys lest the intensity of them cause him death” (Nash, The Priest and His Prie-Dieu, 266).

The Sorrowful Mysteries

At the Foot of the Cross

The scriptures say that when Jesus was arrested, all of Jesus’ disciples fled. Later we see John at the Foot of the Cross... with Mary. The Scriptures don’t explicitly state how John turned around from fleeing to arrive at the Cross. What we can reasonably deduce is that when he fled, he fled to Mary, and she led him where the new priest needed to be, at the Cross. It is there that John, his priesthood only hours old, hears Jesus say, “Behold your Mother.” Mary was undoubtedly already a mother figure to all of the Apostles and disciples of Jesus, but here her motherhood takes on a new dimension. Instead of thinking of Mary as a mother figure, she becomes John’s mother in reality. “Let there be light... This is My Body... Behold your Mother.” Our Lord’s words affect





what they proclaim. On the Cross He creates us as true children of Mary and entrusts a new motherhood to her.

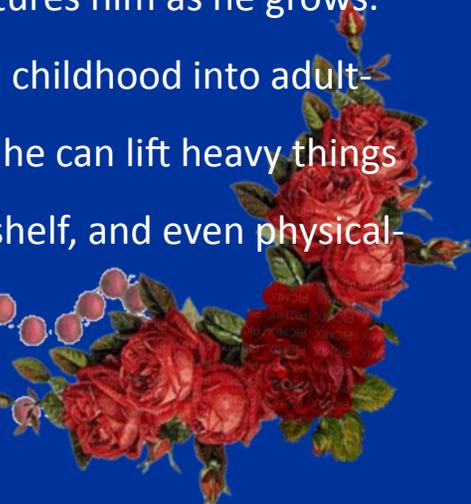
John the priest was the first to receive Mary as his mother from Jesus. We know from long standing tradition that this entrustment was given to all of us through John. "These words are the origin of Marian devotion; the fact that they were addressed to a priest is significant. Can we not then draw the conclusion that the priest is charged with promoting and developing this devotion and that he is the one primarily responsible for it?" (John Paul II, June 30, 1993)

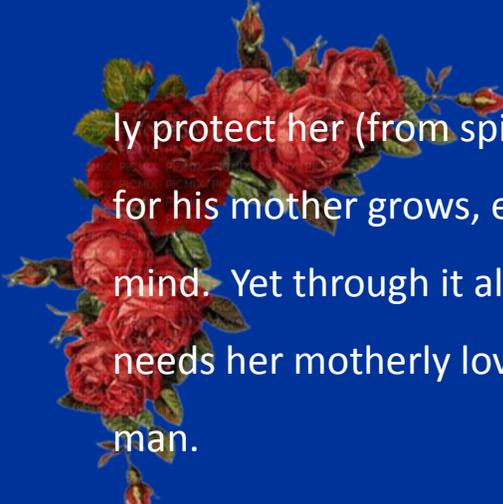
The Glorious Mysteries

Post-resurrection life in Ephesus

From the Foot of the Cross we transition into the resurrected life in which we see Mary living with John the priest. Here we get a glimpse of the living out of Christ's gift from the Cross, a gift we all share, but a gift given first to St. John the priest.

The family sees a beautiful paradox play itself out from generation to generation. A little boy needs his mom to comfort and protect him. She is stronger and wiser than he is in every way, and she nurtures him as he grows. He is wholly dependent on her. Then as he moves from childhood into adulthood his strength in certain areas surpasses hers. Now he can lift heavy things for his mother, open pickle jars, reach things on a high shelf, and even physical-

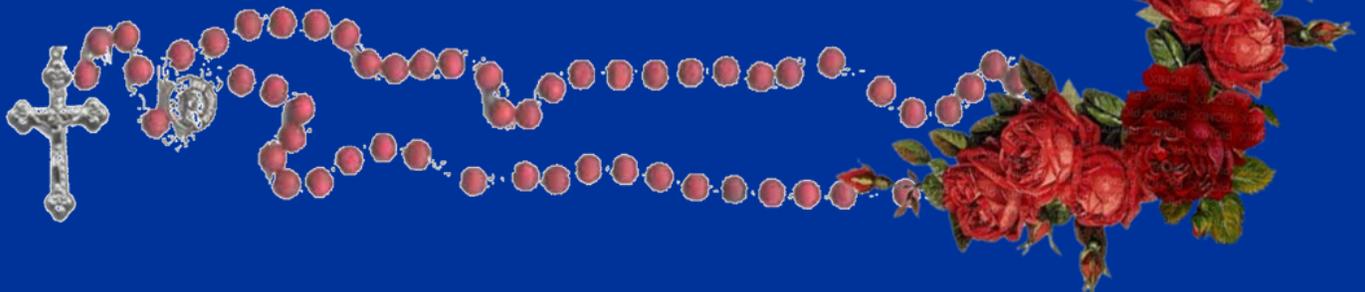


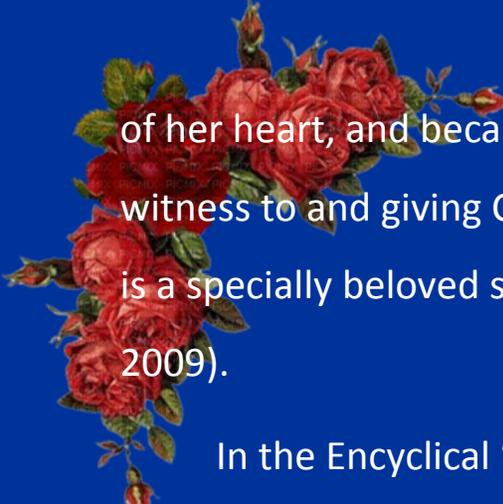


ly protect her (from spiders!). As he grows into adulthood, his ability to care for his mother grows, especially as age weakens her body and perhaps her mind. Yet through it all, he is still her son. Whether he admits it or not, he needs her motherly love, and she still guides him in becoming a more perfect man.

Keeping all this in mind, let's contemplate the life of John the priest as he cares for Mary in Ephesus. Their daily life together would have had a profound effect on John and his priesthood. He would have gained insight from her words and actions, helping him to grow in his understanding and living of faith, hope and love. From her he could learn how to better contemplate the Word and share the fruits of his contemplation with others. Every aspect of discipleship and the spiritual life would take on deeper meaning. This is what Our Lord intended when He gave Mary to John the priest at Calvary.

Pope Benedict XVI, in a general audience, said that while we commonly read that John the Beloved took Mary into his own home, "the Greek text is far deeper, far richer. We could translate it: he took Mary into his inner life, his inner being... into the depths of his being... It seems to me that one can, therefore, understand how the special relationship of motherhood that exists between Mary and priests may constitute the primary source, the fundamental reason for her special love for each of them. In fact, Mary loves them with predilection for two reasons: because they are more like Jesus, the supreme love

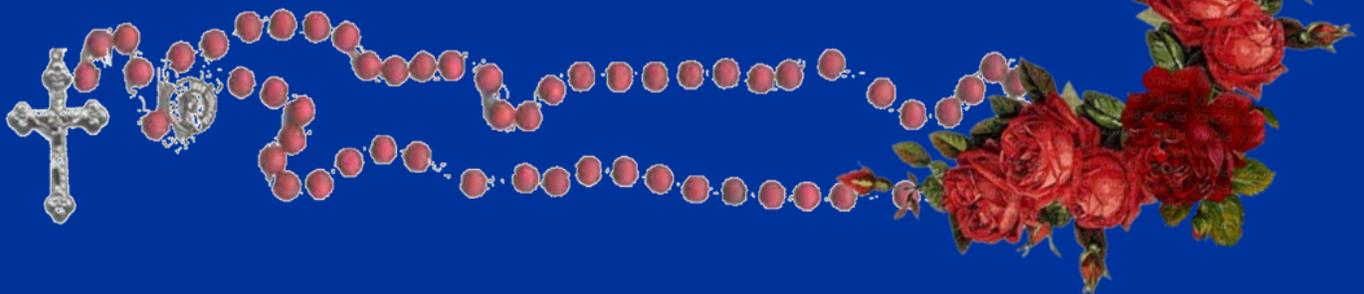


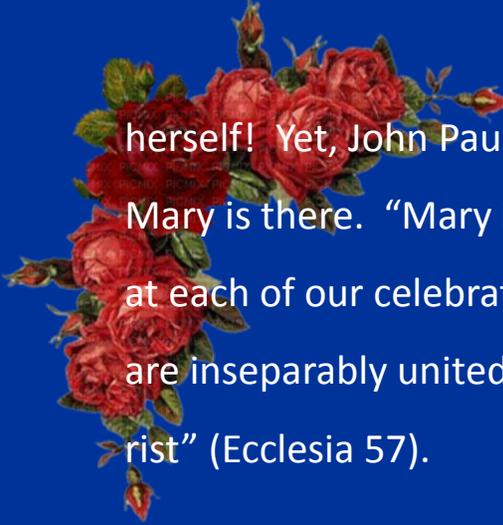


of her heart, and because, like her, they are committed to proclaiming, bearing witness to and giving Christ to the world... Every priest must feel that he really is a specially beloved son of this loftiest and humblest of Mothers” (August 12, 2009).

In the Encyclical “Ecclesia de Eucharistia” John Paul wrote, “Certainly Mary must have been present at the Eucharistic celebrations of the first generation of Christians, who were devoted to the ‘breaking of the bread’ (Acts 2:42)” (para. 53). During the years she lived in Ephesus under John’s care, he was most likely the one who regularly celebrated the Mass for her. It goes beyond our imagining to contemplate how great was her longing to receive her Son in the Eucharist, how attentively she would have prayed during the Eucharistic celebration, and how devoutly she would have given thanks after receiving Holy Communion. John Paul II encouraged priests to reflect on this with him. “Who more than Mary can help us taste the greatness of the Eucharistic mystery? She more than anyone can teach us how to celebrate the sacred mysteries with due fervor and to commune with her Son, hidden in the Eucharist... I gladly repeat to each of you the gentle and consoling words of Jesus: Behold your Mother” (Audience, March 13, 2005).

Her fervor and devotion would have assisted John in his celebration of the Eucharist and would have helped his faith in Our Lord’s Eucharistic presence to grow. Imagine what it would have been like to celebrate Mass for Our Lady

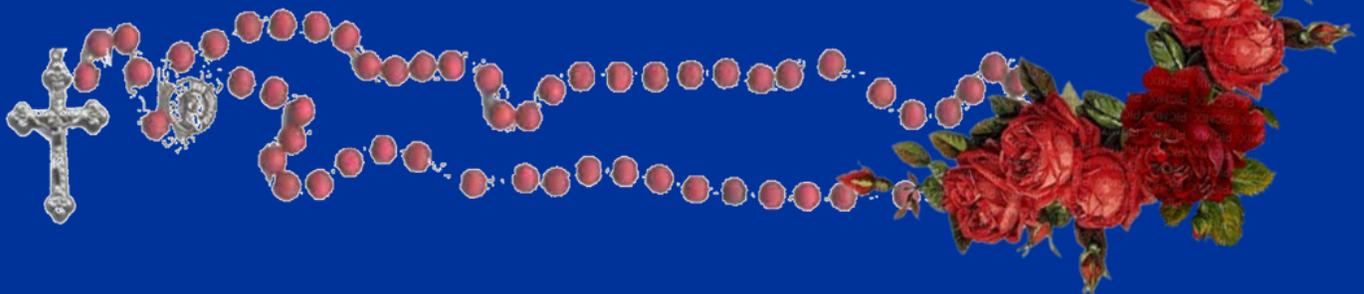


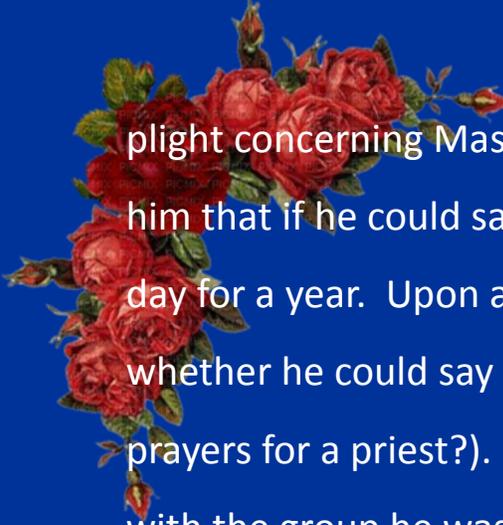


herself! Yet, John Paul II wrote that this is exactly what happens at every Mass. Mary is there. “Mary is present, with the Church and as Mother of the Church, at each of our celebrations of the Eucharist. If the Church and the Eucharist are inseparably united, the same ought to be said of Mary and the Eucharist” (Ecclesia 57).

The scene of Mass in Ephesus is present once more at our Masses. The priest, like John, is providing the Eucharist for those spiritually hungry for him. We, like Mary, receive gratefully from the priest what we could never have on our own. Like Mary, our fervor can augment the devotion of the priest. The priest experiences this mystical giving and receiving throughout his priestly life. The Church needs his service; Our Lady takes care of his well-being. I experienced this giving and receiving a few years ago in Fatima.

While on pilgrimage in Fatima in 2011, my Sisters and I were distressed to find that our flight home was too early to allow us to attend the first scheduled Mass at the Shrine. All week we petitioned Our Lady to somehow (and we couldn't see how) provide an opportunity for us to attend Mass and receive Holy Communion. Two evenings before our departure, in the crowded square in Fatima, just after the evening procession, a priest approached us to ask about our Community. Just after he left, a Sister and I locked eyes, thinking the same thing, “He is a priest and he speaks English!” In unison, we both said, “Mass!” I told her to pray while I chased down the priest. I told him of our

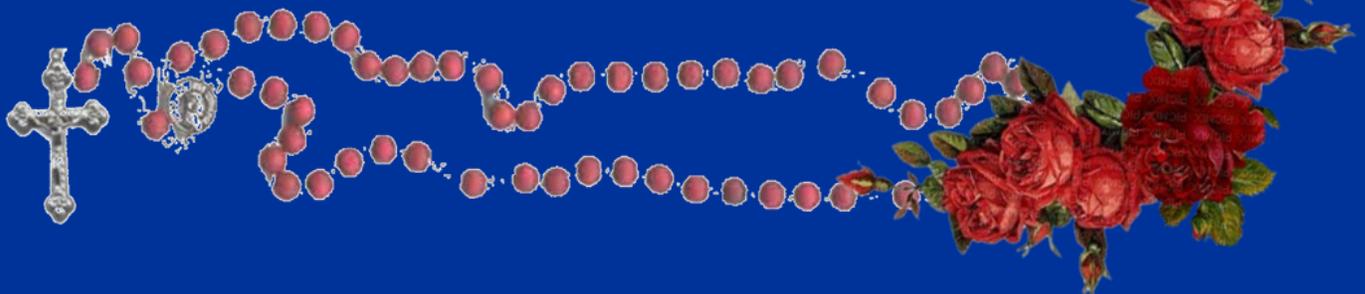


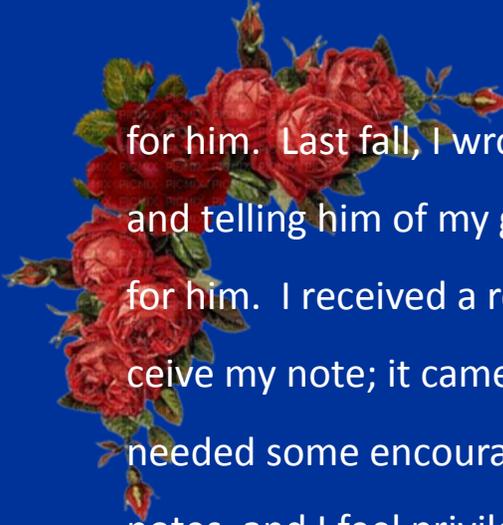


plight concerning Mass, and he was eager to do what he could. I promised him that if he could say Mass for us, in thanksgiving I would pray for him every day for a year. Upon a few seconds of thought, I told him that regardless of whether he could say Mass for us, I would pray for him (who am I to refuse prayers for a priest?). We agreed to meet the following day after he checked with the group he was leading.

The next morning, he said it would work, but please I only had to pray for him for one month, not a whole year. He felt badly at exacting such a steep reward for saying Mass. We were elated! He said a beautiful Mass and heard our Confessions. It was a very blessed end to a wonderful pilgrimage. The entire time, we gave thanks to Our Lady for providing for us. It made me realize in a deeper way just how dependent we are on our priests to bring Jesus to us in the Eucharist. We cannot have Him without them. We Sisters, with all our prayers and service were helpless to receive our Eucharistic Lord until Our Lady sent one of her sons our way, and even she was helpless to assist us without the assistance of one of her priest-sons. "*Fiat mihi*. What tremendous issues were hanging in the balance before Mary spoke those two words! What an incalculable difference it makes in the world of souls, whether the priest pronounces his *fiat* and lives it, or fails to do so!" (Nash, 267).

I still pray every day for this priest from Lincoln. His name brings back such a beautiful memory of Our Lady's care that I simply cannot cease praying





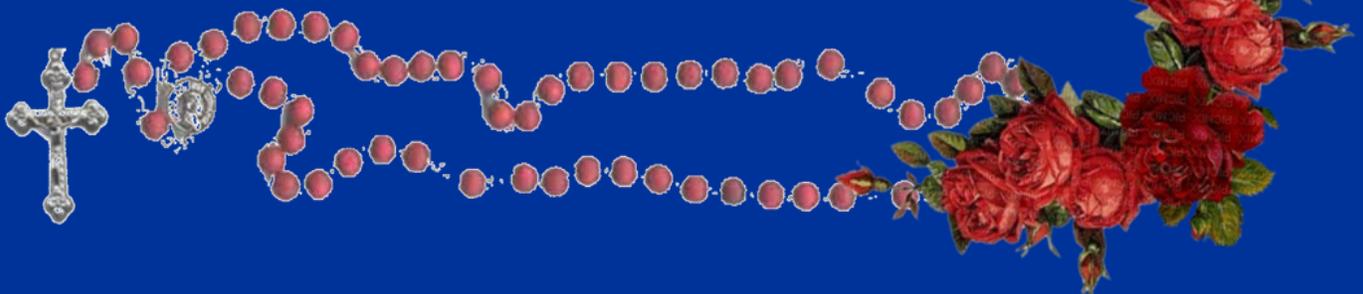
for him. Last fall, I wrote him a note, reminding him of the event in Fatima and telling him of my gratitude for that single Mass and my continued prayers for him. I received a reply from him in which he said that he needed to receive my note; it came when he was in somewhat of a spiritual slump and needed some encouragement. Since then, we have exchanged additional notes, and I feel privileged to pray for his requests. His last note said that he prays for me and for our Community daily. What a gift!

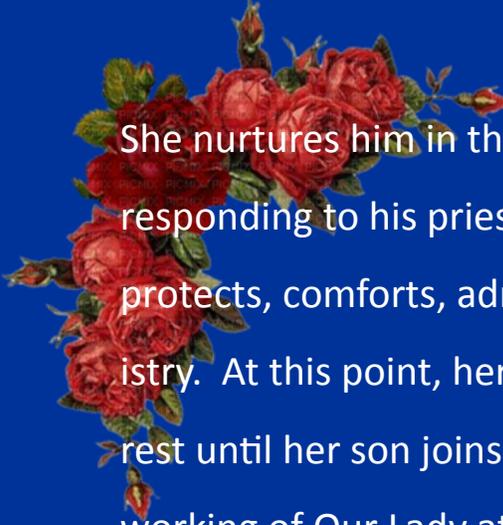
We can see Mary's motherly presence in all of this. She provided for us by sending us one of her sons when we desperately prayed for a priest. She also provided for him to say Mass and hear Confessions for Sisters who were so grateful for his priestly ministry. It is truly a match made in Heaven, and I am grateful to join Our Lady in mothering with prayer and spiritual friendship one of her beloved sons. She is taking care of him with such tenderness. In this story we can perhaps see a similar exchange as John had at the Foot of the Cross. This priest from Lincoln exercised in a beautiful way the entrustment passed on to him from St. John the Beloved, to care for his Mother Mary, and his Mother the Church, of which we are members.

The Glorious Mysteries

The Assumption

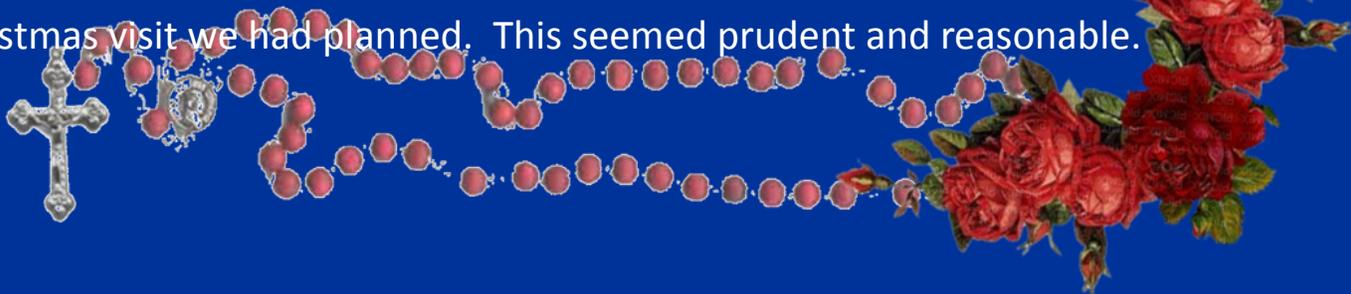
The Immaculate Heart of Mary burns with love for each of her priests.





She nurtures him in the beginning of his life. She assists him in discerning and responding to his priestly call. She guides his seminary formation. She directs, protects, comforts, admonishes and loves him tenderly during his priestly ministry. At this point, her work as his Mother is not yet complete. She will not rest until her son joins her for all eternity in Heaven. To illustrate the beautiful working of Our Lady at the end of her priest-son's life, I offer the example of a priest who is very dear to me.

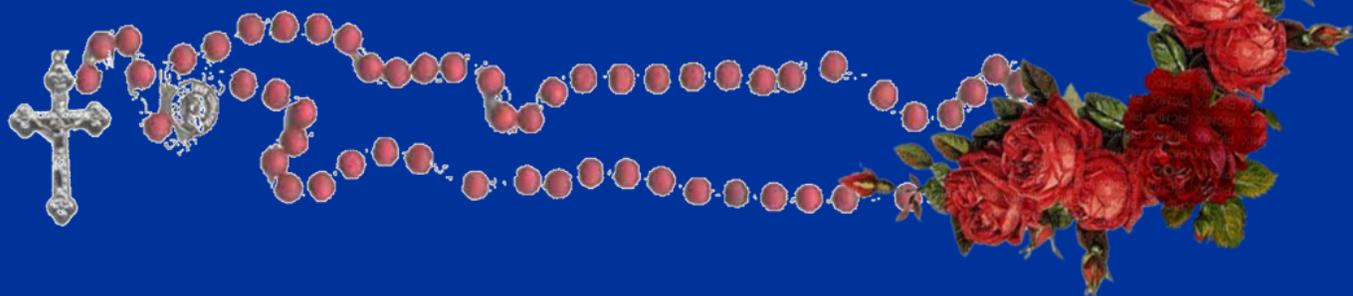
I had the privilege to be raised in the faith by priests who grew up in Ireland. One of these is Fr. Francis Cox. Those of you who know the old Irish priests know that Our Lady is very dear to their heart. They truly embrace her as their Mother. Fr. Cox prayed the daily Rosary... at a rapid pace! His love for Our Lady of Knock and Our Lady of Guadalupe was very tender. Last December I received a phone call from my mom while I was at school to tell me that Father wasn't doing well. This is extraordinary for several reasons. A fellow parishioner had visited Father and was moved to let my mom know that he didn't look good. This wasn't a surprise; it was common knowledge that his health was failing. My mom, who had received similar updates of late, for some reason took this one quite seriously. She would typically have called me with that type of news in the evening after school, but she was moved to call during the school day. She happened to reach me during a pocket of free time. We discussed the situation and agreed to visit him that weekend, sooner than the Christmas visit we had planned. This seemed prudent and reasonable.

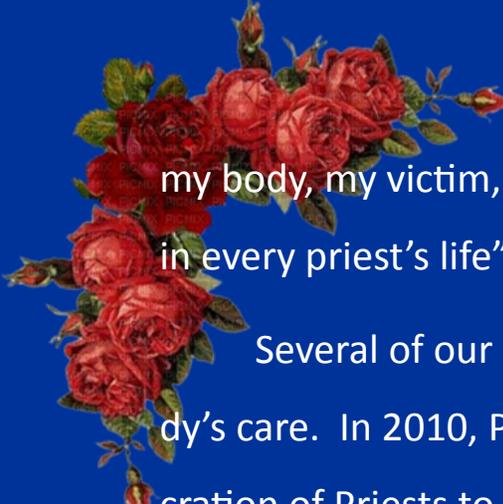




Yet when I hung up the phone I was not at peace. As the minutes passed, I felt an urgency, a prodding, to go pray with him. I called Mother and received permission to leave immediately after school to make the hour drive south to the Catholic Care Center in Wichita. My mom also rearranged her evening plans to drive an hour north to meet me at the Center. Beside his bed, his two spiritual daughters prayed the Rosary aloud, told him of their love for him, then departed. He died less than an hour later, most likely with Hail Mary's resonating in his soul.

Looking back at the experience, I can clearly discern a Motherly presence prodding me and my mom to go pray with him. In fact, all the details from the message my mom received to the drive to Wichita all seemed to be orchestrated with Motherly care. How many Rosaries had he prayed through his long, devoted life? Our Lady took special care of her priest-son at the hour of his death. I am convinced that she cares for all of her priest-sons in a special way at the end of their lives. I would imagine that in most cases, such as Fr. Cox's story, this gift is a private gift, known to few, if any, besides the priest himself, but we can be confident in her final assistance to our beloved priests. "Every priest at death wants to be laid in Mary's arms as was the Christ, Whose representative he is. As Mary said after the Crucifixion over her Son Who was laid in her arms: 'This is my Body,' so she will say at the death of every priest: 'This is

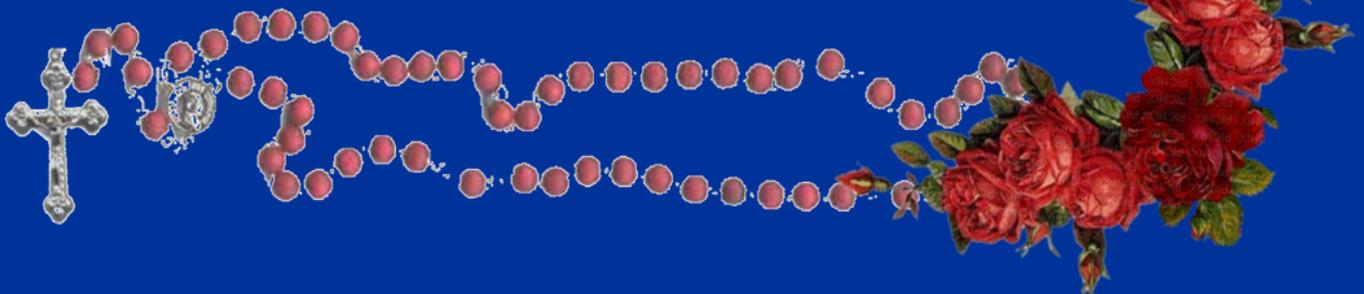


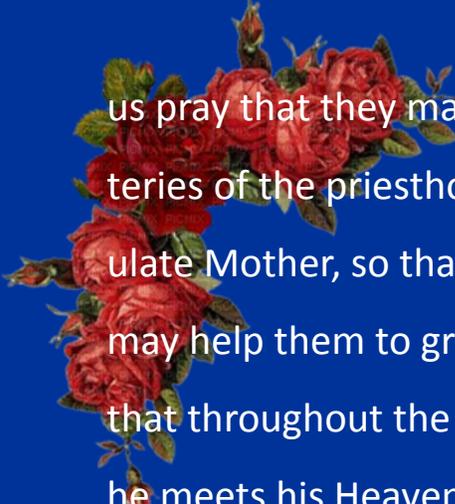


my body, my victim, my host...' Is it any wonder, then, that she is the Woman in every priest's life" (Sheen, The Priest Is Not His Own, 248).

Several of our popes have entrusted the priests of the world to Our Lady's care. In 2010, Pope Benedict prayed an Act of Entrustment and Consecration of Priests to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. He consecrated all priests of the world to her maternal Heart. He prayed, "Our Mother of all time, do not tire of 'visiting us', consoling us, sustaining us... With this act of entrustment and consecration, we wish to welcome you more deeply, more radically, for ever and totally into our human and priestly lives. Let your presence cause new blooms to burst forth in the desert of our loneliness, let it cause the sun to shine on our darkness, let it restore calm after the tempest, so that all mankind shall see the salvation of the Lord, who has the name and the face of Jesus, who is reflected in our hearts forever united to yours! Amen!" (Benedict XVI, "Act of Entrustment...", May 12, 2010).

As Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, we have a special love for priests. Every day we offer prayers and sacrifices for our priests, and our fasting and night-time adoration every Friday is offered for their sanctification. Tonight, I invite you to join me in offering fervent prayers for priests. Let us pray for our beloved priests, that they may surrender their hearts more and more to be molded by the Heart of their Immaculate Mother. Let





us pray that they may unite their hearts to hers as they live the profound mysteries of the priesthood. May we mother our priests, in imitation of our Immaculate Mother, so that our piety and fervor in receiving their priestly ministry may help them to grow in devotion as well. We pray that all this may be so, so that throughout the life of the priest, and especially at the end of his life, when he meets his Heavenly Mother at last, he can “point to himself while looking at her and say, ‘Behold thy son!’” (Nash, 268).

