

Mary, Mother of the Church

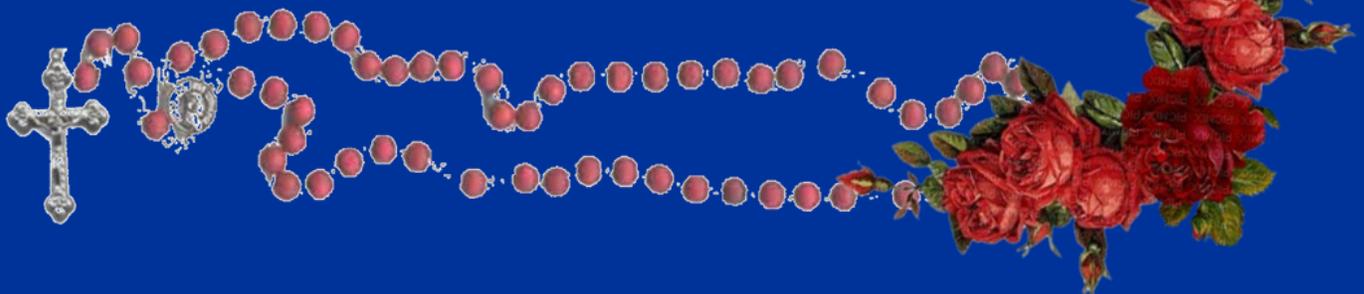
When we go to celebrate a particular feast day in the Church or invoke a particular title of our Lord or our Lady, we take it for granted that it has always been in use. Sometimes we may be interested in its history or development but it may go no further than a passing thought.

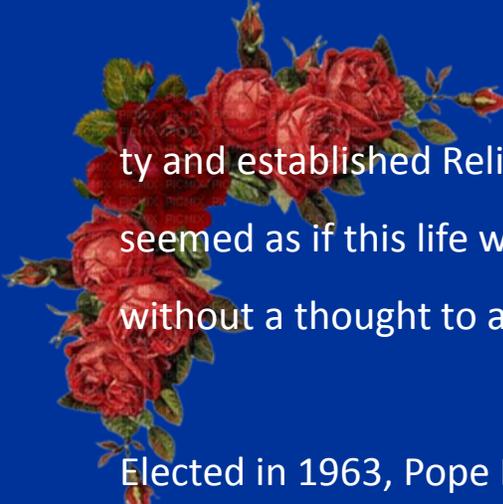
Did you know that the feast of the Holy Family which is celebrated during the octave of Christmas was instituted with Pope Leo XIII in only 1893 (Kiefer, 169)?

For this feast, we can see that the Church desired to give a greater emphasis to her beautiful teaching on the family as an encouragement to the Christian faithful. Also, this was a time when attacks against the family were becoming more frequent and it was apparent that an appeal to Heaven needed to be made (Knox, 454).

So then, in 1964, at the close of the third session of the Second Vatican Council, why did Pope Paul VI declare Mary as the Mother of the Church (Anderson, 303-307)?

For those who lived during the 1960's, I don't need to remind you that these were tumultuous times. Certain sectors in society looked down upon authori-



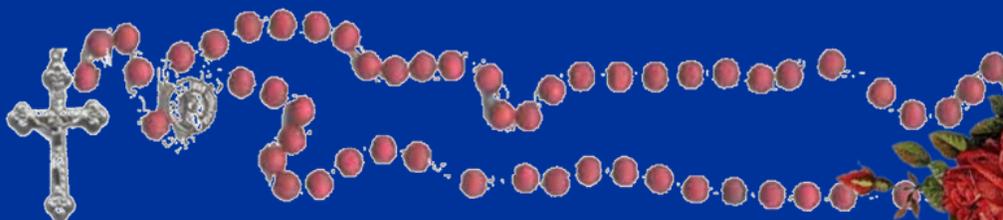
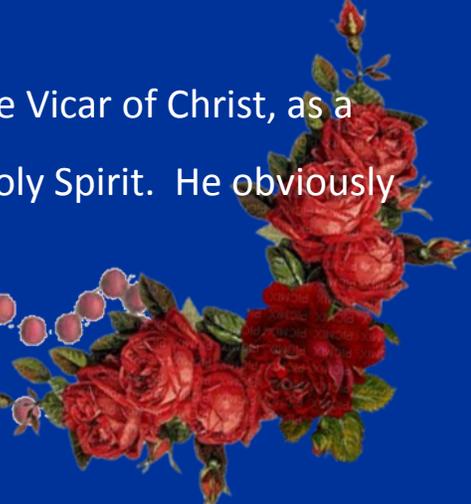


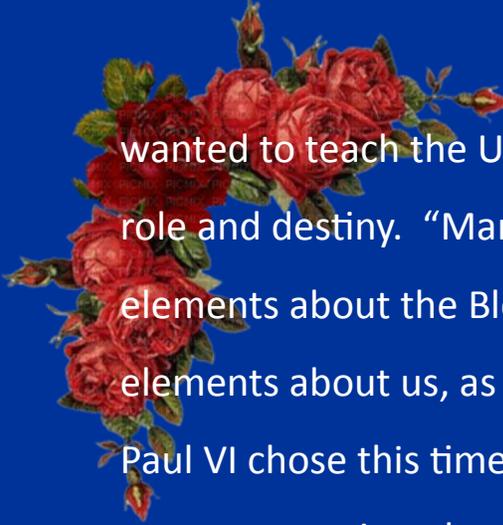
ty and established Religion. Faithfully held mores were being overturned. It seemed as if this life was all there was and that one should make the most of it without a thought to any moral standard.

Elected in 1963, Pope Paul VI came into his role as the Supreme Pontiff at a very difficult time. Blessed Pope Paul VI allowed himself to be guided by the Holy Spirit through these rough waters as a helmsman steers his course through a violent storm. He had the insight to stay calm when many might have wanted to abandon ship. Enduring the attacks of the devil on the Church, he brought the Church to harbor ready to hand over the wheel to other faithful shepherds.

What did Pope Paul VI see that led him to give Mary another title? If you are familiar with the “Litany of Loretto”, Mary has well over forty titles in that litany alone. How is the universal Church going to benefit from yet another title? Some theologians did not agree with this new title (Sheen, 4B). Why would he wish to go against their recommendation at a time when the Church was experiencing division?

Again, Pope Paul VI was blessed with great insight as the Vicar of Christ, as a prophet for our times and as a saintly man led by the Holy Spirit. He obviously





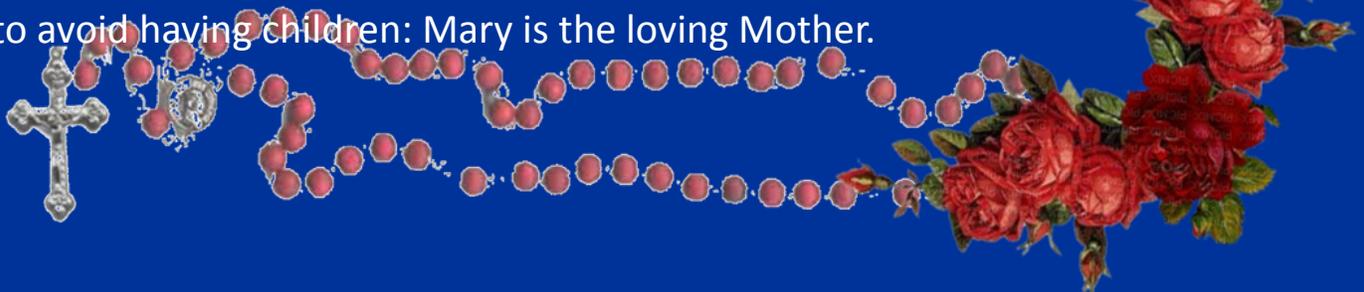
wanted to teach the Universal Church something to help her understand her role and destiny. “Mary, Mother of the Church” expresses some important elements about the Blessed Virgin Mary; it also expresses some important elements about us, as members of the Church. So to go back to why Pope Paul VI chose this time to give Mary the title “Mother of the Church”, it is important to review the turbulent decade of the sixties and how Mary responds to each of the issues in question.

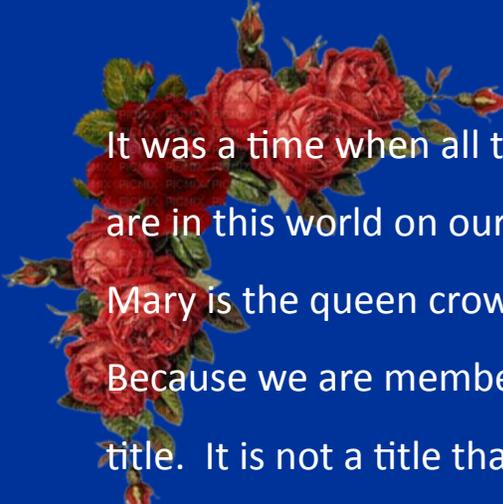
It was a time when nonconformists questioned the establishment; young people rioted and joined in demonstrations. In contrast, the Pope presented Mary, the Mother of the Church, as the perfect disciple.

It was a time when free love was being declared; purity was becoming the lost virtue: Mary is put forth as the pure Virgin.

It was a time when many did not see the need to make a lifelong commitment of love to another; the institution of marriage was being attacked as antiquated: Mary is the faithful Bride.

It was a time when science was making discoveries for more ways to separate the unitive and procreative elements of marriage; the Pill made it possible to avoid having children: Mary is the loving Mother.





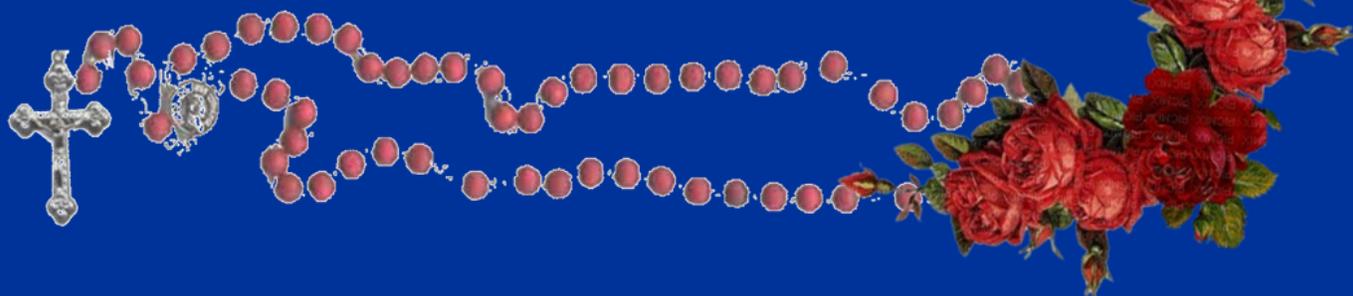
It was a time when all thought of an afterlife was thrown out of the window; we are in this world on our own without any guidance or anyone to answer to:

Mary is the queen crowned in glory who cares for her children on earth.

Because we are members of the Church we are called to a participation in this title. It is not a title that is removed from our daily life for we are called to imitate Mary as the perfect disciple, as the pure Virgin, as the faithful Bride, as the loving Mother, and as the one who is in heavenly glory. Whereas other titles call us to see Mary as primarily our helper, this title shows us that we have a model to whom we can imitate as well as turn to in our need.

Lex orandi, lex credendi – the law of prayer is the law of belief. The prayers of the Mass teach us about what we believe. In the Mass in honor of Mary, image and Mother of the Church, the celebrant prays in the preface:

“You have given the Blessed Virgin Mary to your Church as the perfect image of its role as mother and of its future glory. She is a virgin unsurpassed in purity of faith, a bride joined to Christ in an unbreakable bond of love and united with him in his suffering. She is a mother by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, filled with loving concern for all her children. She is a queen adorned with the jewels of grace, robed with the sun and crowned with stars, sharing eternally in the glory of her Lord” (ICEL, 213).



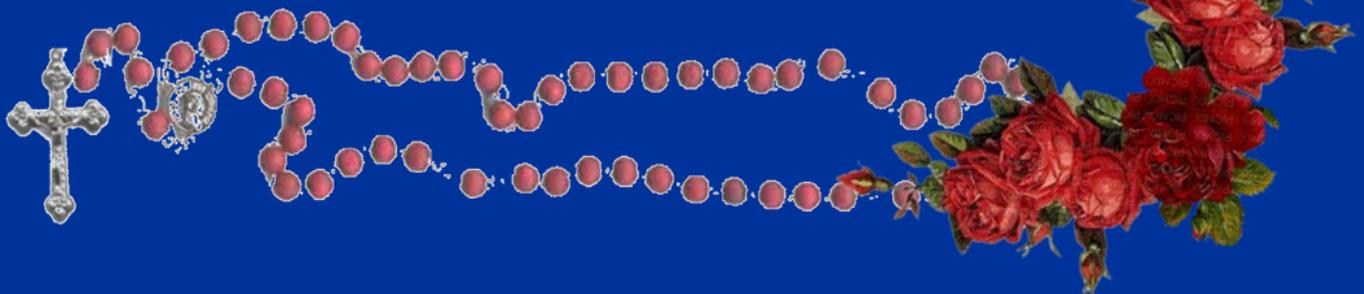


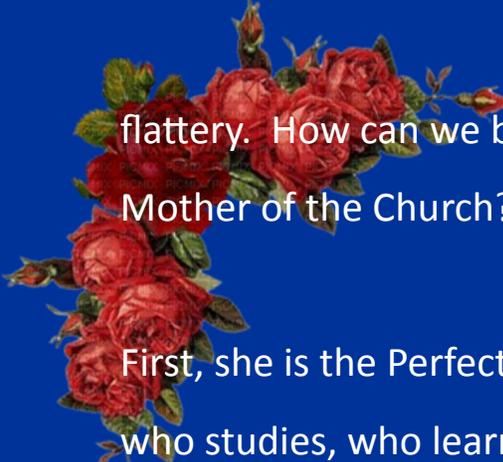
Let us see how we can imitate Mary as Mother of the Church.

First it will be important to review what the Church is. The Church is the mystical Body of Christ. Jesus makes this clear when he appears to Saul who is on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians. Saul is blinded and hears Jesus (who has already ascended into Heaven) say, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4). Saul realized very quickly the mystery of the Church: in persecuting the followers of Christ, the members of His Church, he was persecuting Christ himself. St. Joan of Arc, a simple peasant girl, understood this great mystery as well. When she was on trial, she could not see there being any separation between Christ and His Church: “Christ and the Church are one”.

Now if Christ and His Church are one, then we, the members, can call Mary, the Mother of the Church for she gave birth to the Head, Christ. We also have the scene at Calvary that has been mentioned already. Christ gave us Mary to be our Mother when he was dying on the Cross. John, the beloved disciple, does not give his name as he wants us to understand this great event that affected each Christian; he was merely the representative for us (John 19:25-27).

If she is our Mother, how are we best to honor her? Yes, we can pray Rosaries, adorn her altar with flowers, wear her medals, sing her hymns. These are all very good and honorable but as the cliché goes: imitation is the best form of

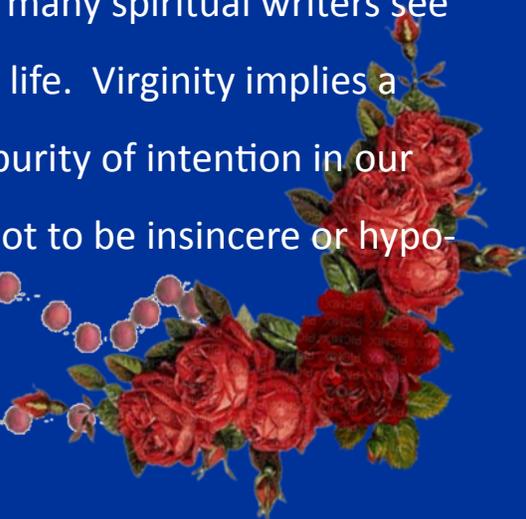
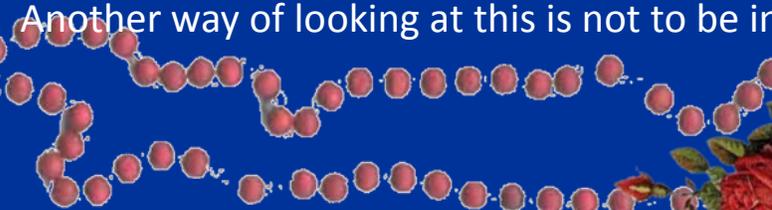


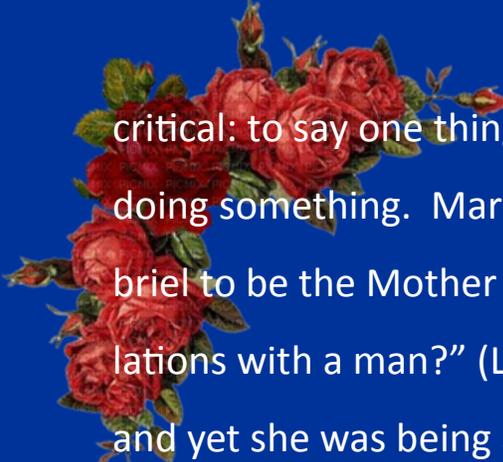


flattery. How can we best imitate our Lady? What does she teach us as the Mother of the Church?

First, she is the Perfect Disciple. What is a disciple? A disciple is a student, one who studies, who learns from another. Mary was always seeking to know God's will. From the Annunciation to the Presentation, from Calvary to Pentecost, hers was an active pursuit. In Luke 2:19, we have a quote that expresses this attitude: "And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart." Mary took the events of her life, reflected on them and was obedient to God's plan in every stage. She was praised by Jesus when He said, "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it" (Luke 11:28). We are called to be faithful disciples of Christ. This is not always easy in today's world. We are bombarded by so many influences but we will only find true happiness by being faithful to God's command. Many people experience difficulties at home or work; it is a temptation to take the easier road. However, Mary calls us to do what is right, even if it means that we will suffer for it.

Next, Mary is the Pure Virgin. It is easy to have a limited view of virginity and only see it as applied to physical integrity. However, many spiritual writers see it as a necessary component of an attentive spiritual life. Virginity implies a single-minded devotion, an attentiveness to God, a purity of intention in our daily encounters. Another way of looking at this is not to be insincere or hypo-

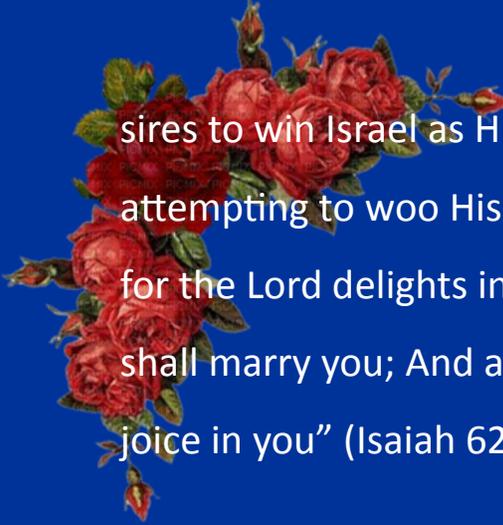




critical: to say one thing and do another or to have an impure motive for why doing something. Mary was always genuine; when asked by the archangel Gabriel to be the Mother of God, she stated, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" (Luke 1:34). She had made this vow of virginity to God and yet she was being asked to be a mother; she was sincere in her request and truly wanted to do God's will. The answer came, "The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God" (Luke 1:34, 35). God desires our sincerity, our humility. When we have this openness, we can be ready to greet the bridegroom when he comes as did the five faithful virgins. What is important about the parable of the ten virgins is what the five wise virgins did with their lives! They had prepared for His coming with good works whereas the foolish virgins did not; this tells us that there is more to virginity than just the physical aspect (Matthew 25:1-13). St. Paul states it in this way to the Corinthians, "For I am jealous of you with the jealousy of God, since I betrothed you to one husband to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts may be corrupted from a sincere and pure commitment to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:2-3). Christ wants each one of us completely!

Additionally, Mary is the Faithful Bride. The Old Testament abounds in bridal imagery. It does not take long to realize that God is the Bridegroom who de-

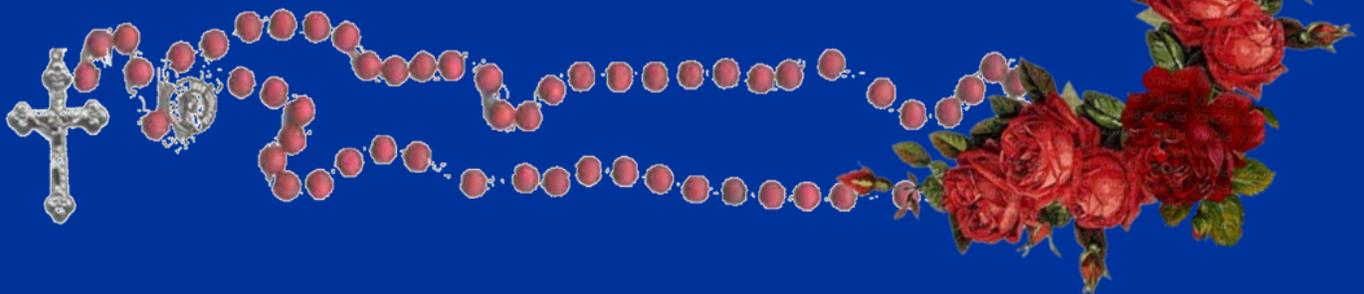




sires to win Israel as His Bride. Throughout the pages of Sacred Scripture, He is attempting to woo His people. Isaiah states, “You shall be called ‘My Delight’... for the Lord delights in you,... As a young man marries a virgin, your Builder shall marry you; And as a bridegroom rejoices in his bride so shall your God rejoice in you” (Isaiah 62:4-5).

Mary gives us the image of what a faithful Bride is to be. Israel failed time and again to respond to God’s love. Mary shows the Church what her response is to be: one of faithful love. A bride is totally committed to the bridegroom; nothing passes her notice and nothing is too great to give her beloved. God wants us to be totally responsive to Him and the gifts He wishes to give us. It is only He who can make us so beautiful and radiant.

Importantly, Mary is a Loving Mother. Yes, Mary is our loving Mother. In Isaiah we read, “As nurslings, you shall be carried in her arms, and fondled in her lap; As a mother comforts her son, so will I comfort you” (Isaiah 66:12-13). God promises us the comfort of a mother; He gives us Mary as our mother. Mary, then, teaches us what it means to be a mother: to bring the life of Christ to souls. Pope Francis in *The Joy of the Gospel*, writes, “She is the Mother of the Church which evangelizes, and without her we could never truly understand the spirit of the new evangelization” (284).





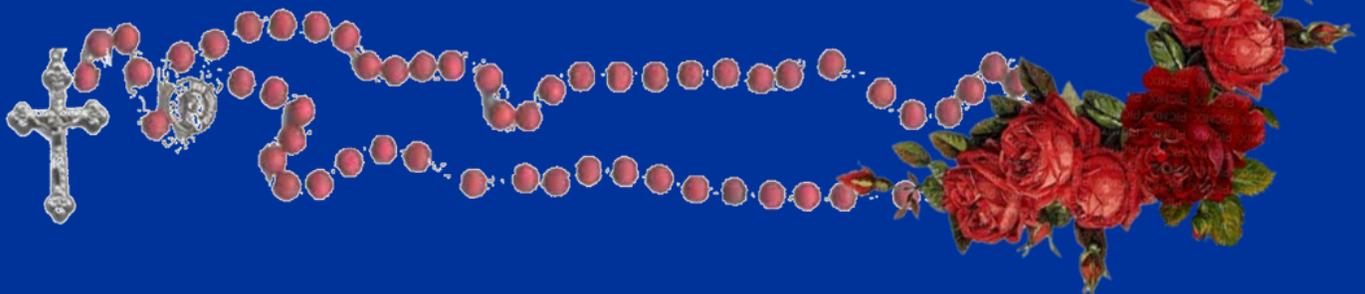
When we share the Gospel with others, we share with them everlasting life.

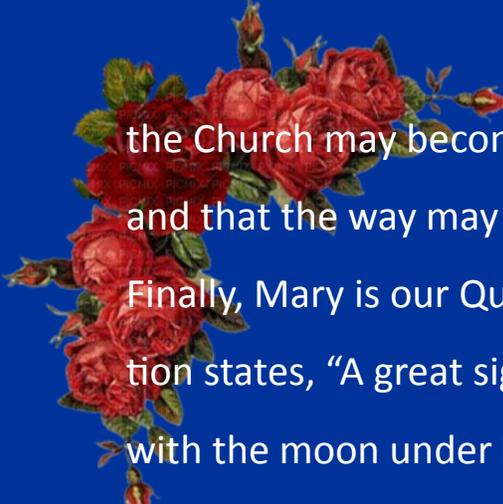
This is so important! We have an important duty as Christians. St. Paul expresses it in this way, “My children, for whom I am again in labor until Christ be formed in you!” (Galatians 4:19). Having a truly apostolic, Marian mind means that we will give ourselves continually in order to bring Christ to others, just as a mother tends to the needs of her children – without thought for self.

Pope Francis expresses it thus,

“The close connection between Mary, the Church, and each member of the faithful, based on the fact that each in his or her own way brings forth Christ, has been beautifully expressed by Blessed Isaac of Stella: ‘In the inspired Scriptures, what is said in a universal sense of the virgin mother, the Church, is understood in an individual sense of the Virgin Mary....In a way, every Christian is also believed to be a bride of God’s word, a mother of Christ, his daughter and sister, as once virginal and fruitful....Christ dwelt for nine months in the tabernacle of Mary’s womb. He dwells until the end of the ages in the tabernacle of the Church’s faith. He will dwell forever in the knowledge and love of each faithful soul” (285).

By allowing Christ to dwell in our souls and by bringing Him to others, Pope Francis continues his thoughts, “We implore her maternal intercession that

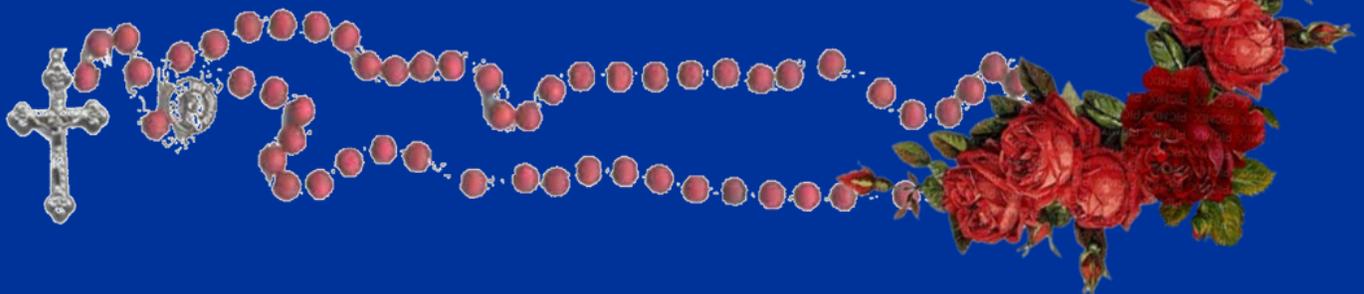




the Church may become a home for many peoples, a mother for all peoples, and that the way may be opened to the birth of a new world” (288).

Finally, Mary is our Queen Crowned in Glory in Heaven. The book of Revelation states, “A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars” (Revelation 12:1). We all understand that Mary is our Mother who reigns in Heaven who desires to help us along our pilgrim journey. I am sure that we have all experienced her maternal care. Yet this mystery of Mary in Heaven has another element to express for us. When we celebrate Mary’s Assumption into Heaven, yes, we are celebrating the fact that Mary is in Heaven. But don’t we understand that the Saints are in Heaven as well, whenever we have the canonization of a Saint? However, this is different. Mary is body and soul in Heaven just like her Son. So as a creature she shows us that we have a chance to be in Heaven body and soul; she gives us that hope which is why she is called an eschatological icon. At the resurrection of the body, our body and soul will be reunited and we will get to enjoy Heaven, the beatific vision, both in soul and in body. Mary gives us this hope.

It is interesting to note that Pope Paul VI had a vision for the Church, one that included presenting Mary as our model: disciple, virgin, bride, mother and queen. He did encounter some resistance from certain theologians but the





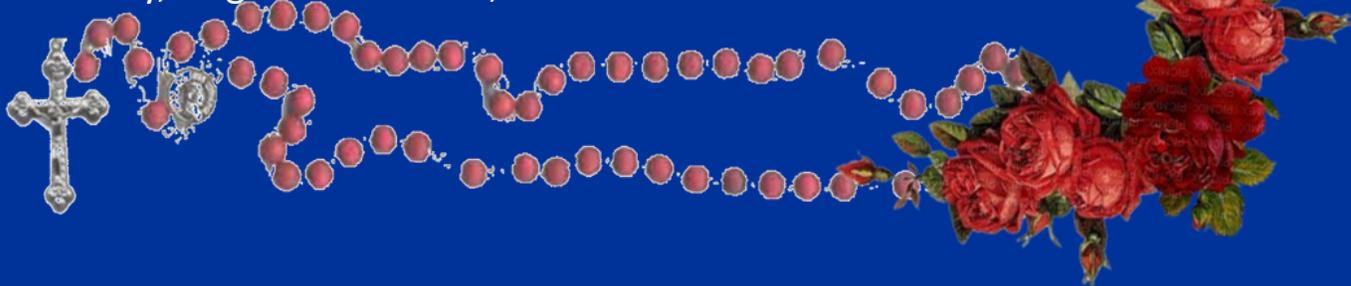
response of the Bishops when he made the announcement was fascinating. Bishop Fulton Sheen, the great evangelist of the 20th century, was present and comments,

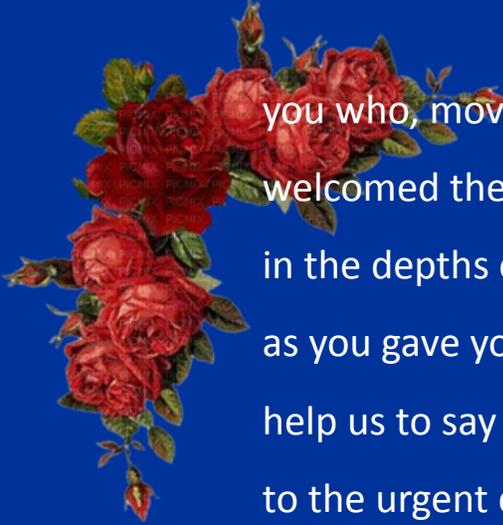
“Then the Holy Father came down and spoke of the votes and announced that it was overwhelmingly in favor of including the treatise of the Blessed Mother in the Church as the Mother of the Church and the Bishops stood up and for ten minutes, I am sure there was never in the history of St. Peter’s such loud, continued, vociferous applause as went up from the heart of the Bishops that Mary was the Mother of the Church....this is what she is, the Mother of the Church and she is our Mother” (Sheen, 4B).

So, let us never fear Christ’s guidance and protection of His Church. He is in charge and is leading us safely to our heavenly homeland. He has shown Himself to be so solicitous in providing us with holy Shepherds and faithful members but especially He has given us His mother to be our mother and we know that she will not rest until all her children are in Heaven.

I would like to conclude with a prayer from Pope Francis found in his apostolic exhortation, The Joy of the Gospel (288):

Mary, Virgin and Mother,





you who, moved by the Holy Spirit,
welcomed the word of life

in the depths of your humble faith:

as you gave yourself completely to the Eternal One,

help us to say our own “yes”

to the urgent call, as pressing as ever,

to proclaim the good news of Jesus.

Filled with Christ’s presence,

you brought joy to John the Baptist,

making him exult in the womb of his mother.

Brimming over with joy,

you sang of the great things done by God.

Standing at the foot of the cross

with unyielding faith,

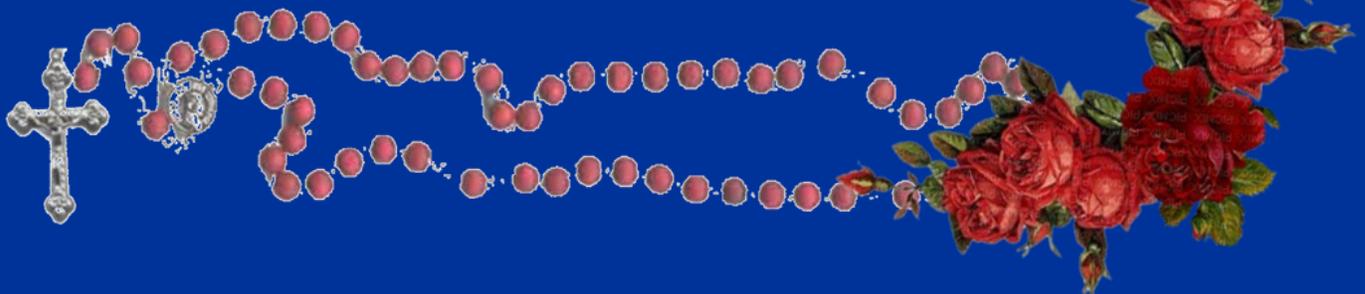
you received the joyful comfort of the resurrection,

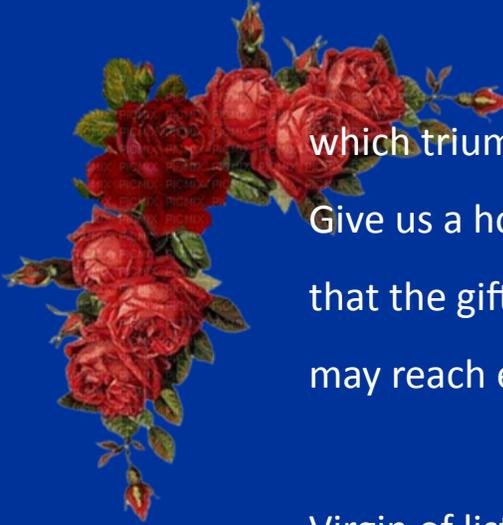
and joined the disciples in awaiting the Spirit

so that the evangelizing Church might be born.

Obtain for us now a new ardour born of the resurrection,

that we may bring to all the Gospel of life





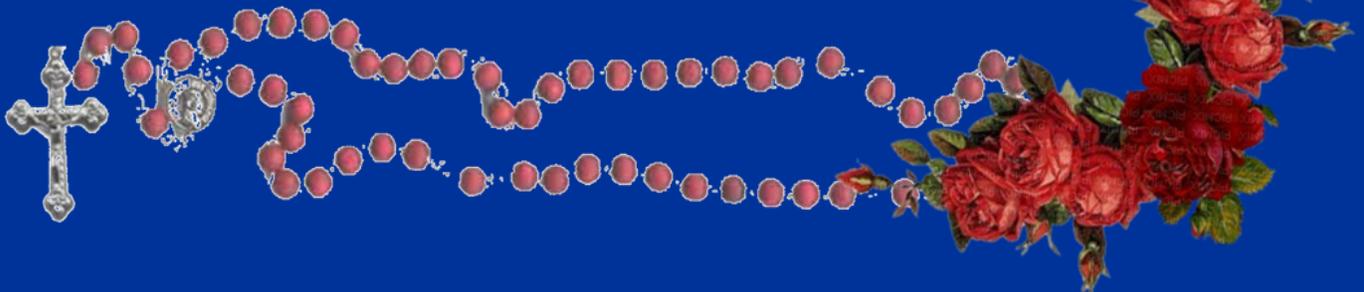
which triumphs over death.

Give us a holy courage to seek new paths,
that the gift of unfading beauty
may reach every man and woman.

Virgin of listening and contemplation,
Mother of love, Bride of the eternal wedding feast,
pray for the Church, whose pure icon you are,
that she may never be closed in on herself
or lose her passion for establishing God's kingdom.

Star of the new evangelization,
help us to bear radiant witness to communion,
service, ardent and generous faith,
justice and love of the poor,
that the joy of the Gospel
may reach to the ends of the earth,
illuminating even the fringes of our world.

Mother of the living Gospel,





wellspring of happiness for God's little ones,
pray for us.

Amen. Alleluia!

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