

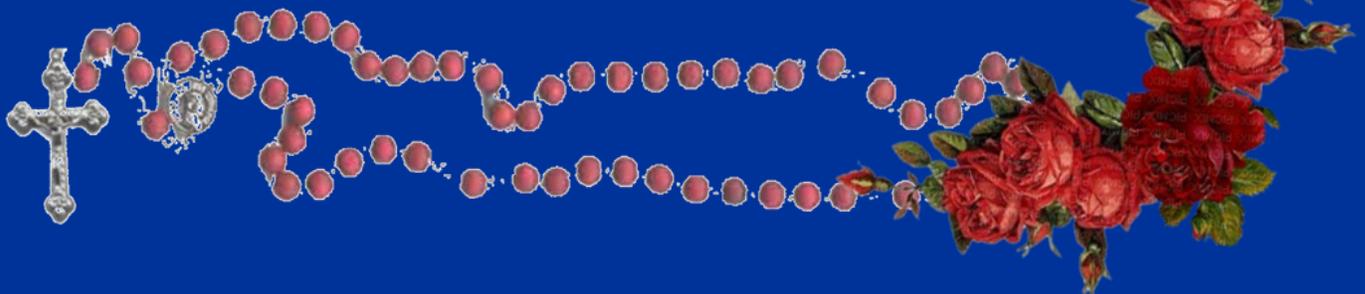


## *Mary, Undoer of Knots*

### **Introduction**

In the 1980s, while doing his doctoral studies in theology in Germany, a Jesuit priest became very fond of a Baroque icon entitled Maria Knotenlöserin located in the Church of St. Peter in Perlach in Augsburg. He was so impressed by its symbolism that he took postcards of the image back with him to his home province of Argentina. He would enclose copies in every letter he sent out. An Argentinian artist-friend of his made an oil-on-canvas miniature painting of the picture, which was hung in the chapel of Colegio del Salvador in Buenos Aires where the priest was assigned. The college staff was so attracted by it that they persuaded the local pastor to have a larger copy made for the parish church of San José del Talar. Over time, devotion to Maria Knotenlöserin, or Mary, Undoer of Knots, spread across Latin America. Who was the Jesuit priest? Jorge Bergoglio – now called Pope Francis.

This Marian devotion skyrocketed in popularity once the word “leaked out” that it was Pope Francis’ favorite. Five years ago, most Catholics in the United States had never even heard of this devotion. Search the internet now for Mary, Undoer of Knots and you’ll find information, prayers and novenas, as



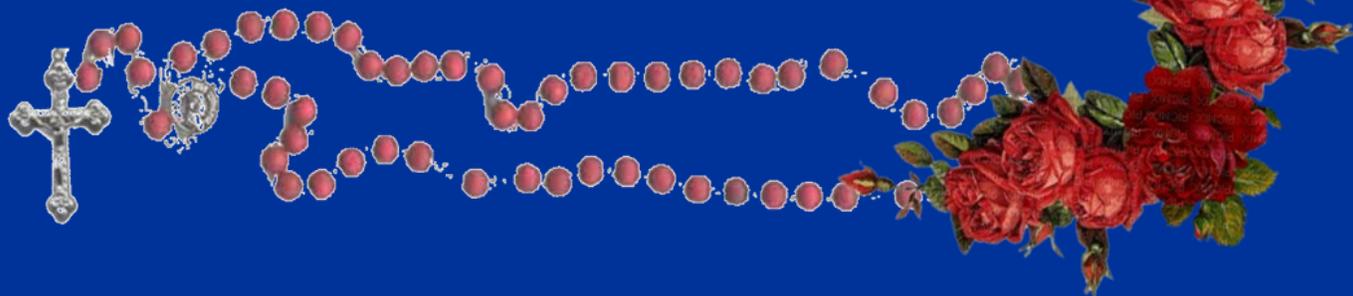


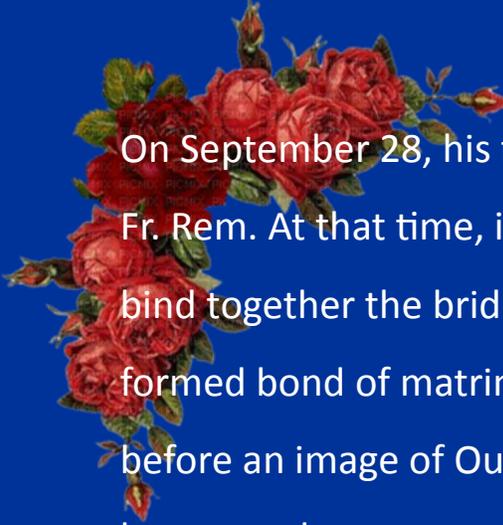
well as a variety of objects to fuel your devotion: paintings, tapestries, statues, holy cards, medals, books and booklets, rosary pouches, devotional candles, holy water fonts, greeting cards, Christmas ornaments, keepsake boxes, throw blankets, refrigerator magnets, car visors, auto stickers, auto rosaries, coffee cups, t-shirts, hoodies, and even a jeweled music box that plays the “Ave Maria” when you open it.

Even though this seems to be a new Marian devotion, it actually is not new, but over 300 years old. Unlike Lourdes or Fatima, this devotion is not based on an apparition of the Virgin Mary, but a very simple family story.

### History

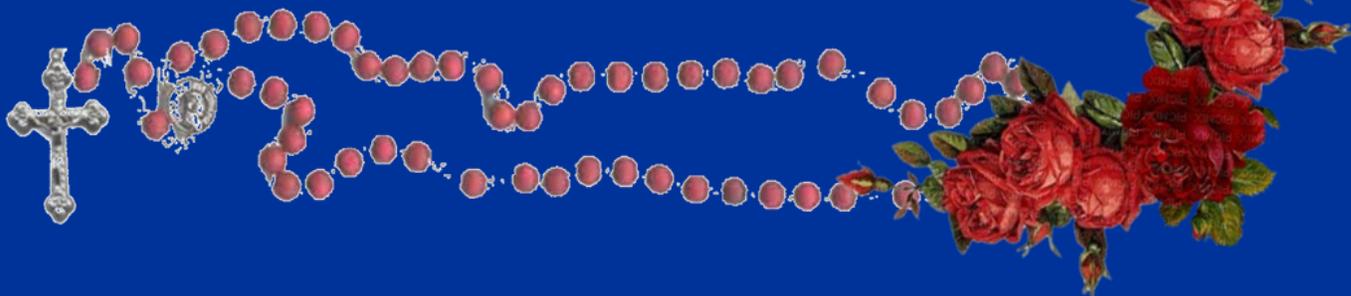
In 1615 a nobleman in Augsburg, Germany, Wolfgang Langenmantel, was distraught when his wife Sophia was planning to divorce him. To save the marriage, Wolfgang sought counsel from Fr. Jakob Rem, a Jesuit priest, respected for his wisdom, piety and extraordinary intelligence. Fr. Rem was stationed at the University of Ingolstadt, located 70 kilometers north of Augsburg. Over a period of 28 days, Wolfgang visited Fr. Rem four times and received advice from the holy priest. During their meetings, Wolfgang and Father Rem would pray together, especially asking the Virgin Mary to intercede.

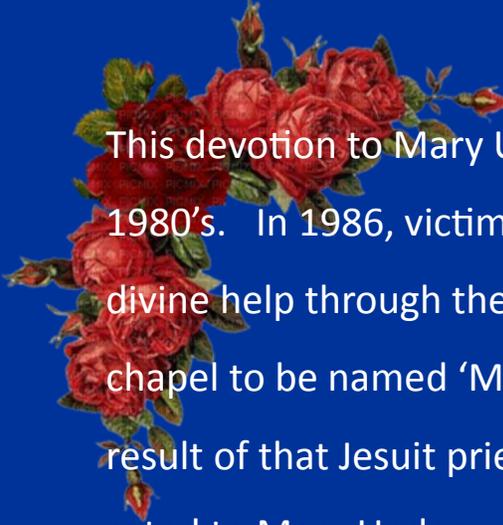




On September 28, his fourth visit, Wolfgang brought his 'wedding ribbon' to Fr. Rem. At that time, it was a Bavarian tradition for the maid of honor to bind together the bride and groom by the arms to symbolize the newly formed bond of matrimony. Fr. Rem, in a solemn ritual act, raised the ribbon before an image of Our Lady of the Snows, while at the same time untying its knots one by one, praying, "In this religious act, I raise the bonds of matrimony, to untie all knots and smoothen them". As he smoothed out the ribbon, it became dazzling white. This was taken as confirmation that their prayers were heard. Consequently, the divorce was averted, and Wolfgang and Sophia remained happily married!

Eighty-five years later, in the year 1700, Wolfgang's grandson, Fr Hieronymus Langenmantel, parish priest of the Church of St Peter in Perlach, donated a family altar dedicated to Our Lady of Good Counsel to commemorate the turn of the century. Such donations were a common tradition at the time. He commissioned Johann Schmidtner to provide a painting to be placed over the altar. Schmidtner was inspired by the story of Wolfgang and Fr. Rem, and so based his painting on that event. This image eventually came to be venerated as Mary Undoer of Knots. The painting, which has survived wars, revolutions and secular opposition, still adorns the St. Peter Church in Augsburg today.





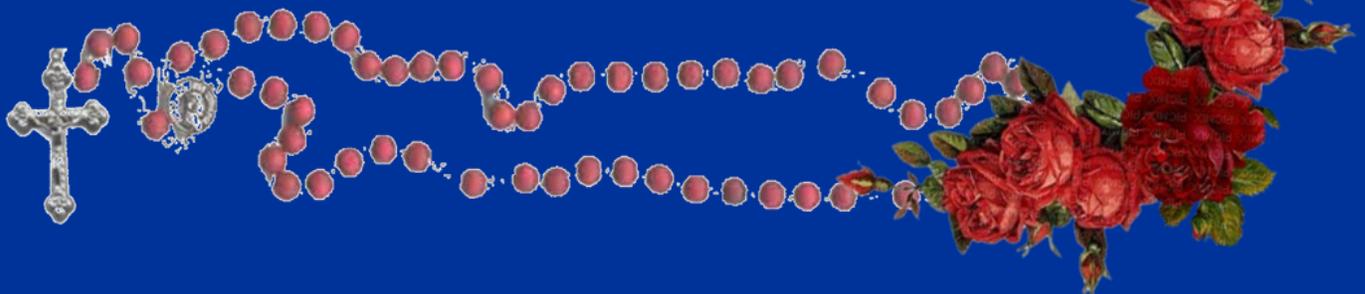
This devotion to Mary Undoer of Knots remained localized in Germany until the 1980's. In 1986, victims of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant disaster sought divine help through the devotion of Mary Undoer of Knots. In 1989, the first chapel to be named 'Mary Undoer of Knots' was constructed in Austria. As a result of that Jesuit priest taking the devotion to Argentina, a chapel was dedicated to Mary Undoer of Knots in Formosa, Argentina on December 8, 2000. From Argentina the devotion rapidly spread through South America. The National Sanctuary of the Virgin Mary Undoer of Knots in Sao Paulo, Brazil was built in 2006. In the last four years, this Sanctuary reports that it has welcomed more than 600,000 pilgrims from all over the world.

Why has this devotion attracted thousands of people to it? Let's begin with the painting – the visual image of the devotion.

### **Image**

The original painting of 'Mary Undoer of Knots' measures six feet in height and almost four feet in width.

The painting depicts Mary as Our Lady of Good Counsel suspended between heaven and earth, resplendent with light. She is surrounded by angels, signifying her position as Queen of the Angels and of Heaven. Mary is dressed resplendently in crimson wearing a deep blue mantle. She is standing on a crescent moon with a crown of twelve stars adorning her head. These two images,





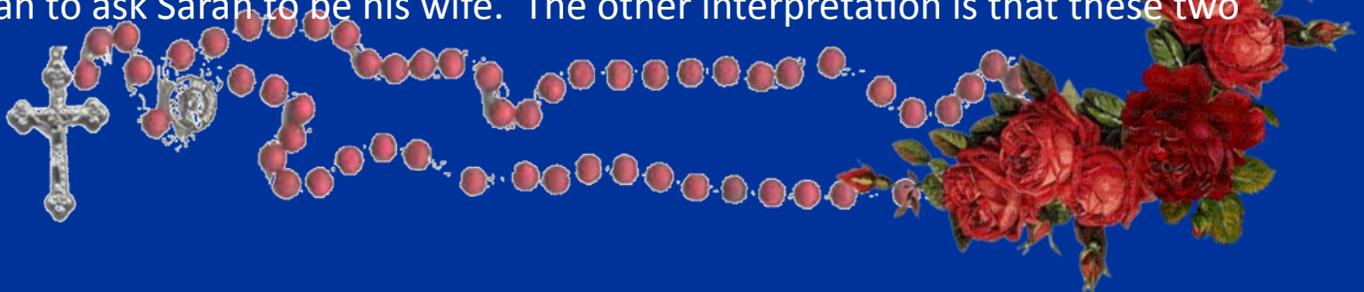
common elements in Marian art, are found in the Book of Revelation 12: "A woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of 12 stars" (NAB)

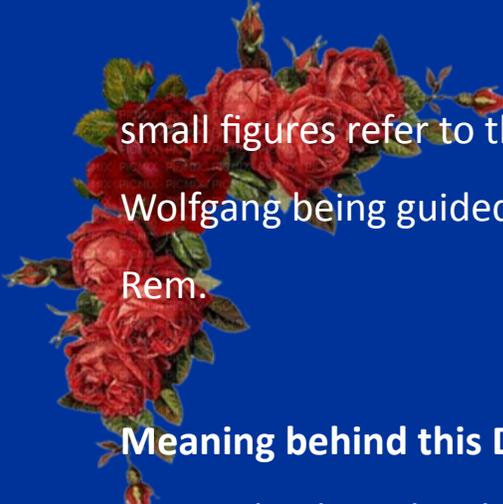
The Holy Spirit in the form of a dove is above Mary's head, reminding us that she is the Spouse of the Holy Spirit and became Mother of God and full of grace through the work of the third person of the Trinity.

Mary's foot is crushing the head of a "knotted" snake. Her treatment of him fulfills the prophecy in Genesis 3:15: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel (NAB)." The crushing of the serpent illustrates that Mary is the Immaculate Conception, since she as the one exempt by special grace from all stain of original sin is the serpent's eternal opponent.

In her hands is Wolfgang and Sophia's white marriage ribbon, which she is serenely untying. Assisting her at the task are two angels: one presents the knotted ribbon to her, while another angel presents the ribbon, freed from knots, to us.

At the bottom of the painting are shown a human figure and an angel. This scene has two different interpretations. One interpretation is from the Book of Tobit in the Old Testament. Here we see the Archangel Raphael traveling with Tobiah to ask Sarah to be his wife. The other interpretation is that these two





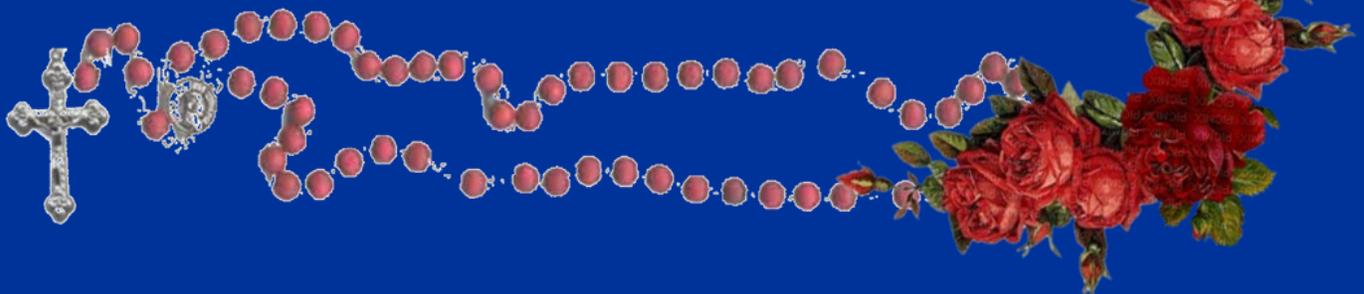
small figures refer to the original story that inspired the artist: here we see Wolfgang being guided in his distress by his guardian angel to meet with Fr. Rem.

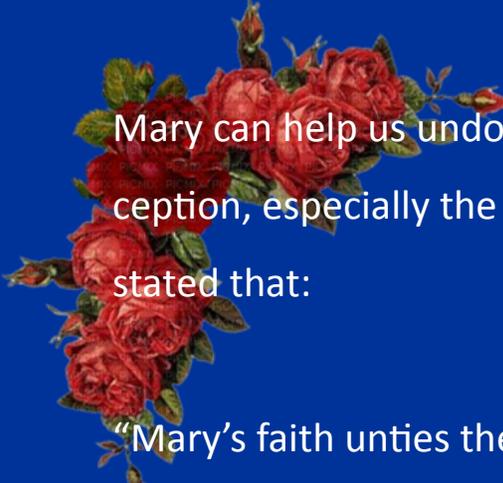
### **Meaning behind this Devotion**

Why does this devotion appeal to so many people? It's the knots. We all have knots in our lives. There are big knots, little knots, different knots, or even the same knots, but knots just the same.

“There are the problems and struggles we face for which we do not see any solution: knots of discord in our family, a lack of understanding between parents and children, disrespect, violence, the knots of deep hurts between husband and wife, the absence of peace and joy at home. There are also the knots of anguish and despair of separated couples, the dissolution of the family, the knots of a drug addict son or daughter, sick or separated from home or God, knots of alcoholism, the practice of abortion, depression, unemployment, fear, loneliness...” (“Our Lady Undoer of Knots)

Sometimes our lives may seem one big knot due to circumstances beyond our control, as when we face a medical problem, financial problems or difficulties in relationships. Then there are the big knots that face our nation and the world.





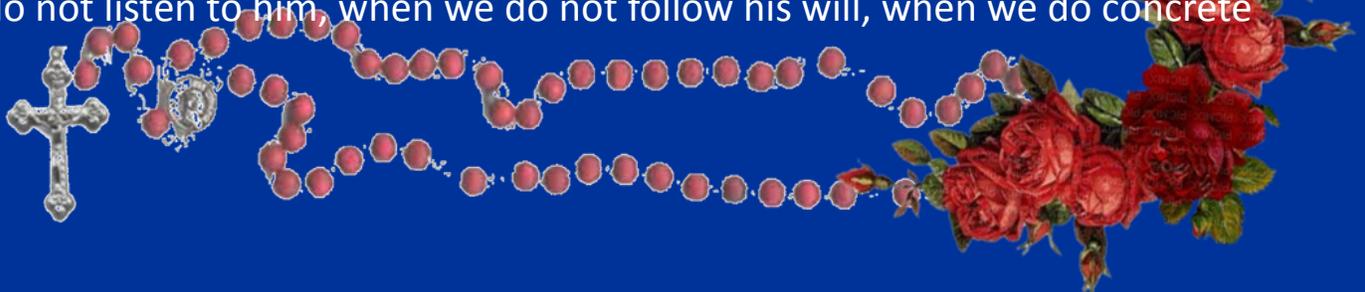
Mary can help us undo those knots. Mary's been untying knots since her conception, especially the knots of sin. Pope Francis, in speaking of this devotion, stated that:

“Mary's faith unties the knot of sin (cf. Lumen Gentium, 56). What does that mean? The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council took up a phrase of Saint Irenaeus, who states that ‘the knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by the obedience of Mary; what the virgin Eve bound by her unbelief, the Virgin Mary loosened by her faith’ (Adversus Haereses, III, 22, 4).” (Palmo)

In Mary, the new Eve, God untangles the knotted mess of fallen human nature and produces the Immaculate Conception. She has been undoing knots all throughout her life and continues to do so in heaven.

She will help us with every sort of knot. Just as a child will go to their mother with a knotted shoelace, so too do we need to go to Mary, our Mother, with all the wounds and brokenness of our lives.

Pope Francis explains: “The ‘knot’ of disobedience, the ‘knot’ of unbelief. When children disobey their parents, we can say that a little ‘knot’ is created....Something of the same sort happens in our relationship with God. When we do not listen to him, when we do not follow his will, when we do concrete



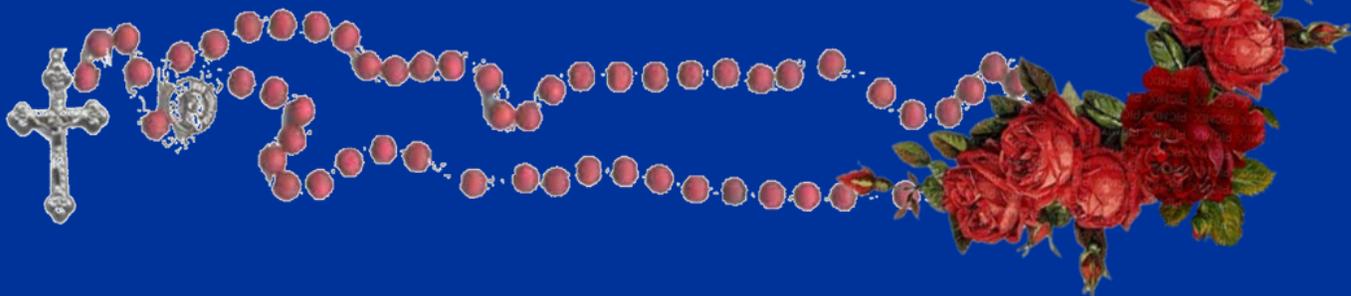


things that demonstrate our lack of trust in him – for that is what sin is – a kind of knot is created deep within us. These knots take away our peace and serenity. They are dangerous, since many knots can form a tangle which gets more and more painful and difficult to undo.” (Palmo)

We are living in difficult times where the problems, the knots, the temptations, the lack of peace and the evils are all around us. Like a roaring lion your adversary, the devil, prowls around, looking for someone to devour. (1 Peter 5,8)

For that reason, Mary who undoes the knots, who was chosen by God to crush the evil one, comes to us. She wants to undo the knots of our sins which dominate our lives, so that we can be close to her Son and not lose hope or be overcome with despair.

Look again at the painting. The first angel looks to Mary and holding onto the ribbon of our life, presents it to her and says, "We trust you, Mother; you can help us. Undo, then, the knots of this life!" Then Mary takes our life into her compassionate hands and with her long fingers of love and grace goes on to undo each knot, one after the other. The second angel taking the ribbon of our life, freed of all knots, looks at us and seems to say, "See what she did. Look at what Mary, through her intercession can do again. Trust her, place your problems and afflictions in her hands!" (Our Lady Undoer of Knots)

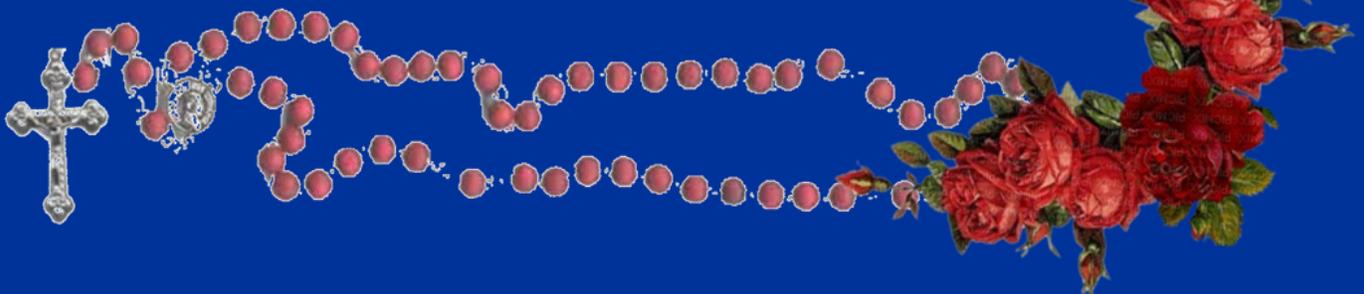


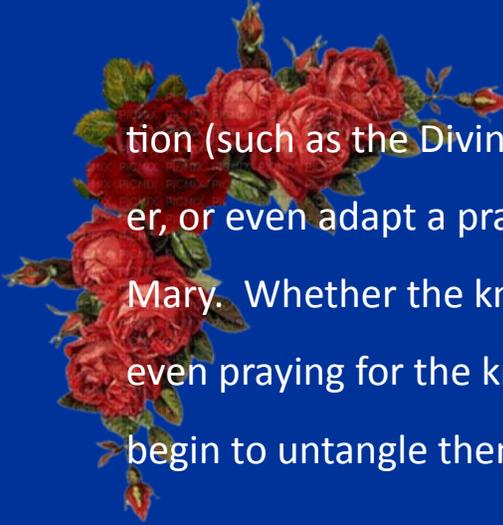


Pope Francis encourages us to have confidence in this loving Mother who, with the Father, can free us from any knots in our life:

“...we know one thing: nothing is impossible for God’s mercy! Even the most tangled knots are loosened by his grace. And Mary, whose ‘yes’ opened the door for God to undo the knot of the ancient disobedience, is the Mother who patiently and lovingly brings us to God, so that he can untangle the knots of our soul by his fatherly mercy. We all have some of these knots and we can ask in our heart of hearts: What are the knots in my life? ‘Father, my knots cannot be undone!’ It is a mistake to say anything of the sort! All the knots of our heart, every knot of our conscience, can be undone. Do I ask Mary to help me trust in God’s mercy, to undo those knots, to change? She, as a woman of faith, will surely tell you: ‘Get up, go to the Lord: he understands you’. And she leads us by the hand as a Mother, our Mother, to the embrace of our Father, the Father of mercies.” (Palmo)

We will end our reflection by praying together the prayer written by Pope Francis to Mary, Undoer of Knots. This is only one of the many prayers, including Novenas, which are available to anyone who visits Catholic book stores or searches the internet. As of now, there is no “official” church designated novena to Mary, Undoer of Knots, nor has one ever been given by divine revela-



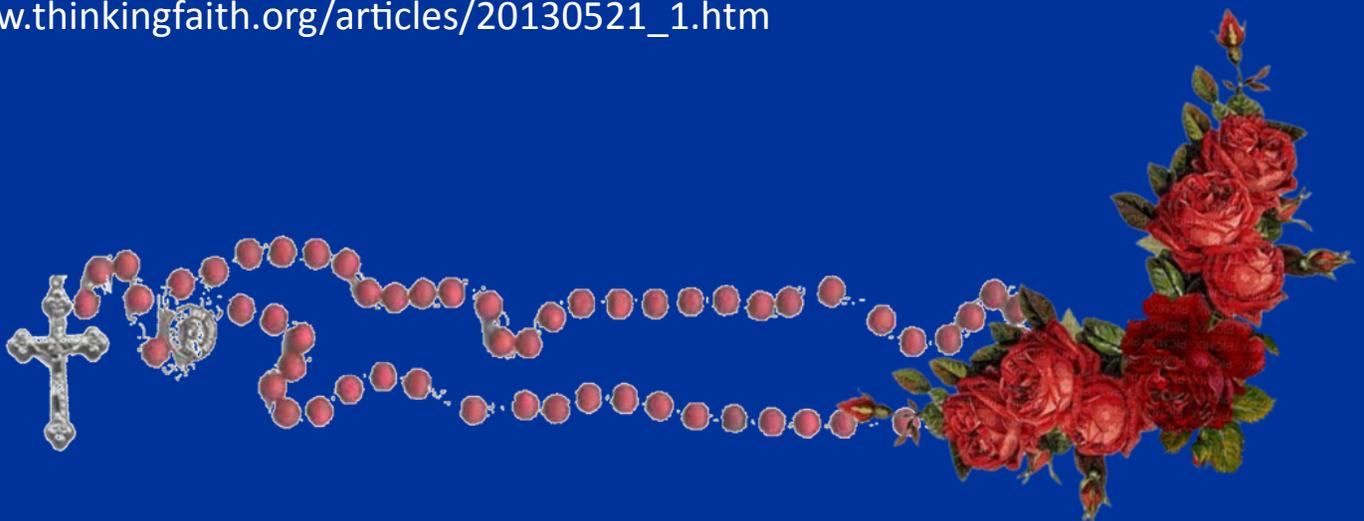


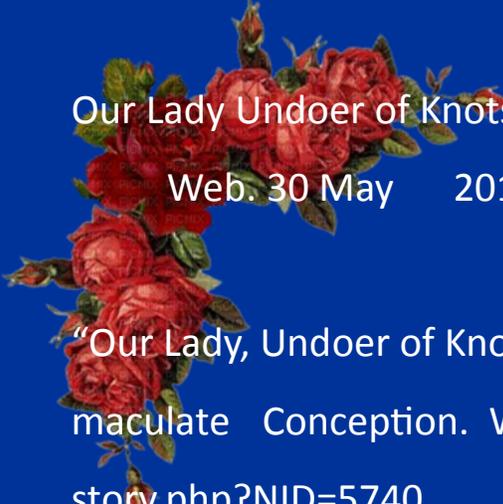
tion (such as the Divine Mercy novena). This will allow you to look for a prayer, or even adapt a prayer, that speaks to the knots that you wish to present to Mary. Whether the knots are those in your own life, the life of a loved one, or even praying for the knots in our Church, nation, or world, Mary is ready to begin to untangle them.

“Mary, Undoer of knots, pray for us. Through your grace, your intercession and your example, deliver us from all evil, our Lady, and untie the knots that prevent us from being united with God, so that we, free from sin and error, may find Him in all things, may have our hearts placed in Him, and may serve Him always in our brothers and sisters. Amen.”

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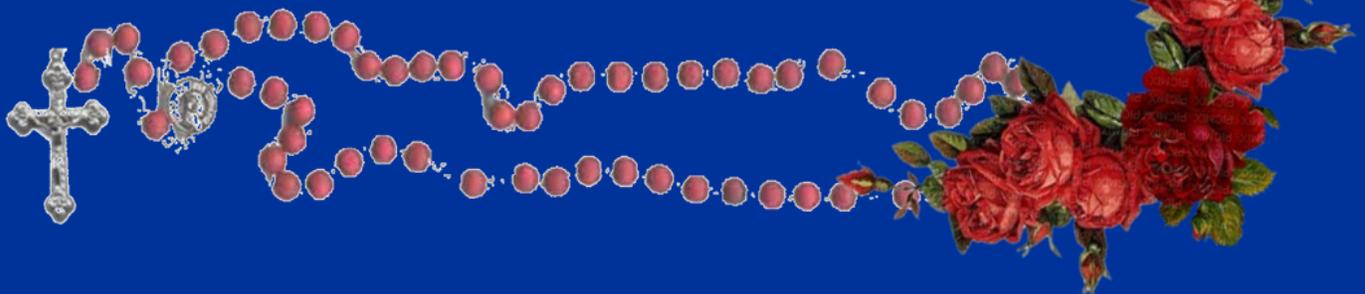
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