

The History of the Feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and its place in the hierarchy of Church feasts

I would like to begin tonight's talk by explaining why we are celebrating the feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary on the Thursday before rather than the Saturday after the feast of the Sacred Heart. The reason behind the change for this year (with the Bishop's kind permission) can be found in the meshing of the Temporal and Sanctoral Cycles of the Church's liturgical calendar. First let me define each. The Temporal Cycle consists of the celebration of Our Lord's earthly life in the seasons of the liturgical calendar: Advent, Christmas, Ordinary Time, Lent and Easter. The Sanctoral Cycle consists of the celebration of Mary, the angels and saints. The intertwining of the two is governed by a Hierarchy of solemnity:

- a. Holy Week, Easter Triduum and Easter Week (which cannot be moved or interrupted)
- b. Sundays of Lent and Advent (also immovable)
- c. Solemnities (obligatory celebration even on Sundays, transferred if falling on a. or b. For example, this year the solemnity of St. Joseph was anticipated on March 15, because it fell during Holy Week and the Annunciation was postponed to March 30 because it fell during Easter Week)
- d. Feasts (mandatory celebration unless they fall on Sunday)
- e. Memorials (celebration should take place, however they can be superseded by the season of Advent and Lent or for some pastoral reason)
- f. Optional Memorials (as the name implies celebration is optional)
- g. Ferias: any weekday on which there is no feast.

Now that you understand the workings of the hierarchy of feasts, let us move on to a specific application of this principle. Ordinarily, since 1969 when Pope Paul VI moved it, this feast is celebrated on the Saturday after the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart. The Solemnity of the Sacred Heart is itself a moveable feast determined by when Easter falls. It is always celebrated on the Friday after the Solemnity of Corpus Christi – in our country “Body and Blood of Christ” Sunday. The feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary has the rank of a memorial. This year this feast day would fall on May 31, which is the FEAST of the Visitation. Since the Visitation has the rank of feast, it pushes the memorial of the Immaculate Heart of Mary off the calendar this year. Rather than cancel our public novena this year, Bishop Jackels has granted us permission to anticipate the feast on the day before the Sacred Heart (bishops can do that in their own dioceses) and so our public novena is going on as usual this year.

Let us turn to the origins of the feast. The devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, of course, had been developing for a long time before St. John Eudes (d. 1681) started pushing for a feast honoring it. He succeeded in getting it approved at a local level: first at Autun in 1648 and then in a number of French dioceses.¹ However, he died without seeing the feast approved for the universal Church.

Others including Father Pinamonti (d. 1703) continued the effort, but it was not until 1799 when Pope “Pius VI, then in captivity at Florence, granted the Bishop of Palermo the feast

¹ Bainvel, Jean. "Devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 7. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910. 18 May 2008 <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07168a.htm>.

of the Most Pure Heart of Mary for some of the churches in his diocese. In 1805 Pius VII made a new concession, thanks to which the feast was soon widely observed.”²

The apparitions (1830) that lead to the Miraculous medal and locutions to Fr. des Gennettes (1833) at the Church of Our Lady of Victories at Paris which lead to the founding of the arch-confraternity of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Refuge of Sinners gave momentum to the spread of the celebration of the feast.

Finally, “on 21 July, 1855, the Congregation of Rites finally approved the Office and Mass of the Most Pure Heart of Mary without, however, imposing them upon the Universal Church.”³

The apparitions at Fatima in 1917 again emphasized the devotion of the Immaculate Heart of Mary as Refuge of Sinners. Mary requested that Russia be consecrated to her Immaculate Heart. In response to this request Pope Pius XII in 1944 established the feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary on August 22 and consecrated the world to her. Because of the reform of the liturgical calendar after Vatican II, August 22 was changed to the Feast of the Queenship of Mary, and in 1969 Paul VI moved it to the Saturday after the Sacred Heart of Jesus, reducing it to an optional memorial.

Pope John Paul II in the Year of the Rosary, reinstated the day to a rank of memorial.

² Ibid, Bainvel.

³ Ibid. Bainvel.