



Mary in America

Friday, June 5, 2026

Mary, Refuge of Sinners



Good evening and welcome to night two of our novena to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Let's begin with a prayer. Hail Mary....

“Hail Mother of the Lord, queen of mercy, you are comfort for the world and hope for the downcast.” (Alleluia Verse from Votive Mass of “Holy Mary, Queen and Mother of Mercy II”)

Tonight's topic is Our Lady under the title of Refuge of Sinners. Refuge of Sinners is an ancient title of Our Lady and closely associated with other titles such as Help of Christians, Mother of Mercy, Mother of Hope, and Comforter or Consoler of the Afflicted- and rightly so because Our Lady is all of these. Interestingly, the title Refuge of Sinners and the idea of Our Lady being a powerful intercessor for their conversion, has always been linked in a particular way to devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.¹ However, for our talk tonight, I wish only to dive deeper in to what the title 'Refuge of Sinners' means- How is Our Lady a refuge? And what does this mean for us?

In speaking about this topic at dinner a few nights ago, a Sister shared with us her image of Refuge of Sinners: after antagonizing her older siblings, she would run to her mom for safety with her older angry siblings in hot pursuit. I think many of us are familiar with this image, a humorous one for sure. While it only skims the surface of what it means for Our Lady to be the Refuge of Sinners, it does at least convey a couple of truths. One, that our Lady, as our Mother, is truly a place of safety for us. Secondly, that Our Lady will not refuse to receive us, even when we are to blame for the hot anger of older siblings, or perhaps of God himself- but we will return to this idea later.

First, I wish to address the idea of Our Lady as a refuge. A refuge is place where we can go when we are up against something bigger than ourselves. A place of safety. A stronghold of defense when things are out of our control.² In ancient times in Israel there were cities of refuge where one could flee from dangers of

¹ Timothy Harris SCS, “Refuge of Sinners,” St. Benedict Center, accessed on May 30, 2026, <https://www.saintbenedict.com/catholic-resources/refuge-of-sinners/>.

² John Hanson OP, “Homecoming for the Children of God,” St. Jose Maria Institute, June 30, 2024, <https://stjosemaria.org/homecoming/>.



invading armies or find safety if you were at odds with the king.³ However, most often, Scripture speaks of God Himself as the place of refuge for his people. This is just a sampling of this imagery found in the psalms (all from the NAB):

Psalm 91: 1-2 – *You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, say to the Lord, “My refuge and fortress, my God in whom I trust...*

Psalm 25- *I wait for you oh Lord, I lift up my soul to my God. In you I trust; do not let me be disgraced...Good and upright is the Lord, who shows sinners the way...for the sake of your name Lord, **pardon my guilt though it is great...**Look upon me, have pity on me, for I am alone and afflicted. Relieve the troubles of my heart; bring me out of my distress...**Preserve my life and rescue me...**for I trust in you.*

Psalm 27- *The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom do I fear? The Lord is my life’s refuge; of whom am I afraid?... One thing I ask of the Lord; **this I seek: to dwell in the Lord’s house all the days of my life...**Do not repel your servant in anger. You are my help; do not cast me off; do not forsake me, God my savior! Even if father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me in.*

I want to note two things here: the psalmist trusts God and seeks Him as a safe place, a place of refuge from his enemies, from traps, afflictions, and troubles of the heart. Secondly, note the connection between seeking God as a refuge, forgiveness of sin, and the desire for eternal life. (See bolded portions of the psalms above.) A cry for salvation from our sinfulness and the snares of the devil is this cry to God for refuge. Sin and its consequences, even the consequences of other’s sins, cause us to cry out to God for mercy, for forgiveness, and with the hope of attaining true life, eternal life with God as He Himself has promised.

God wants to be our refuge from sin and its consequences. He wants to shower us with His mercy. But so often we doubt, we pull back, we become afraid. Sometimes we hide from God because we sin and are afraid that we will be met by God with condemnation, and if not with condemnation, then at least with disapproval or disappointment.⁴ The enemy, the devil, can trip us up in two ways—either by blinding us to our sin (so that we fail to seek God’s mercy) or by making us doubt that God’s mercy is attainable, to think that if we turn to God we will be met with condemnation, disapproval, or disappointment, to lose hope in overcoming sin, to lose hope even in attaining salvation, but this is precisely where Our Lady comes in.

³ Alphonsus Ligouri, *The Glories of Mary*, 2nd ed. (London: Burns & Oates, 1868), 94.

⁴ There is some truth here, for without the mercy we have received from God in Christ we would all be condemned. But with Christ, in Him, through Him, God offers us unlimited mercy if only we repent and come to Him to receive his mercy.

When all seems hopeless, when we feel as if we cannot approach God, Our Lord gives us a Mother to whom we can turn. He gave her to us intentionally at the foot of the Cross, when Christ gave Mary to the beloved disciple. He gave her to all of us as our Mother. This was willed by the Father, and it was the last task Christ fulfilled before expiring on the Cross. “After this, aware that everything was finished...” (John 19:28). This is a beautiful gift from God to His children, and if our Lady is a Refuge of Sinners for us, it is only because God is our refuge first.

We see the greatness of this gift in two ways. First, God places Mary in front of us as our Mother, as Mother of the Church, with all the sentiments and the natural appeal of an earthly Mother. If we take all the human gifts and virtues of our own mothers, we can find these in their perfection in Our Lady. This natural appeal to us on the part of His Mother is also a mercy of the Father. How often our human hearts are inclined to run from the wrath of our dad and seek refuge in our mother? Or how natural it is for us to go to ask some favor from our mother first, knowing that if she takes our request to our father we have a better chance of success? The Lord knows human nature and the human heart. In His mercy and love for us, He gives us a heavenly Mother to whom we can turn. And on her part, Our Lady always takes us straight back to God.

The second reason for the greatness of this gift, is that God uses Mary to reveal His own tender love for us sinners in a unique way. Our Lady is a sign, or an icon, of God’s tender love for his people. In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II’s apostolic letter on the dignity and vocation of women, he speaks of how God, though rightly referred to as and addressed as Father, is the source of all love, the love that we see expressed in a human way both by fathers and by mothers.⁵ Both types of love teach us something about the way that God loves us.⁶ At times, Scripture expresses God’s tender love for his children like the love of a mother: “But Zion said, ‘The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.’ [And our Lord replies:] ‘Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.’” (Isaiah 49:14-15).⁷ This passage is one example of many. When we look at Our Lady, we see a feminine human heart, the heart of a mother, brought to its glory of perfection by the fullness of grace and her cooperation with that grace. With a heart completely transformed by grace, she of all mere human persons, has a heart most like God’s. In her then, we find the most beautiful maternal expression of God’s own love tender for his people. She shows us in a unique way what God’s love is like. That is why in the East, Our Lady is often referred to as an icon or a sign.⁸

⁵ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women *Mulieris Dignitatem*, (15 August 1988) para. 8, (Boston, St. Paul Books and Media, n.d.), 30-31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), para. 2674.

She is like pure glass which allows God's love to shine forth through her to us.⁹ When we add to this the natural appeal Our Lady has to us a mother, we can see what a true gift from God this woman is for us. For all the times we doubt God's mercy, we lose hope, we grow discouraged by our sins or their effects, or by the sufferings in life, the Lord places before us a Mother to guide, console, and encourage us. Her maternal Heart will always lead us back to His, and this is why Our Lady desires to be our Refuge, the Refuge of all sinners.

When we take refuge in Our Lady, she teaches us the truth about God, sin, and ourselves. We already mentioned how Our Lady in a singular way illustrates the tender love of God and His mercy. No one is excluded from the love of God, His Mercy, and His forgiveness. In Mary's motherly affection she receives all sinners: those who have turned away from sin, those who want to turn from sin but are stuck in it, and all those whom we entrust to her maternal care. Jesus Christ died for all. This mother, who stood at the Foot of the Cross and was herself pierced, who for three hours stood offering the Son to the Father on our behalf, the behalf of all sinners, wills our salvation, wills that all receive that saving merits of her Son. In the *Glories of Mary*, St. Alphonsus Ligouri points out that a mother loves most those for whom she suffers the most.¹⁰ Are we not all her children? Did she not suffer immensely for each of us at the foot of the Cross?¹¹ She is fully aware of the price our salvation, desires it for us, and works for it, and she will not cease to do so. She offers comfort and encouragement to the contrite. She helps those stuck in sin to repent, interceding on their behalf in order to gain for them the grace of repentance and contrition. St. Alphonsus gives us another image: If a woman had two sons who were at odds with one another, would she not do everything in her power to see them reconciled?¹² Mary is the mother of both Christ and the Church, the mother of the judge and the mother of the criminal.¹³ Therefore, her desire to reconcile us to her Son is even greater.¹⁴

I want to say a word here about the great love Our Lady has for us and the power of her intercession. These two images I also take from St. Alphonsus Ligouri. The love of Our Lady for us sinners is so great that for our salvation she would have crucified Christ herself had it been the Father's will.¹⁵ Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son at the word of the Father. Was not our Lady's faith even greater than that of Abraham?¹⁶ Was not the sacrifice of her innocent Son the way to salvation for all the rest of her sinful children? In speaking of the compassionate

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ligouri, *Glories*, 33.

¹¹ Ibid., 34.

¹² Ibid., 46.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 34.

¹⁶ Ibid.

love of a mother, St. Alphonsus uses the Canaanite woman as an analogy. If you recall from the Gospels, the Canaanite woman, a gentile, approaches Jesus and pleads for him to heal her daughter who is possessed (see Matthew 15:21-28). She says to Jesus, “Have pity (or mercy) on me,” and then asks him to heal her daughter. St. Alphonsus points out that the mother pleads for Jesus to have mercy not on her daughter, but upon herself, for all mothers take on their children’s sufferings as their own.¹⁷ When we fly to Mary, our good Mother and our Refuge, in her love for us she takes on our own sufferings and pleads with Christ, “Have mercy on *me*.” This woman, this perfect disciple, the Mother of the Son, the one with a Heart most like our Lord’s who endured with Him to the bitter end- is it even possible for the Lord to refuse this request? Therefore, we can have great confidence in the power of this Refuge of Sinners, both in her great love for us and in her effective intercession for us and for all sinners.

But don’t be fooled, Our Lady is a tender mother, but she’s tough. Her Immaculate Heart receives us in our weakness and will help to gain the graces we need for repentance and to persevere in grace, but she will tolerate no insincerity. This Refuge of Sinners is no ‘den of thieves’. She will help convict us of God’s mercy, but she will also ask the Holy Spirit to help convict us of sin. And this is actually good for us. Remember as we said before, the devil can trip us up in two ways- not only by doubting God’s mercy, but also by blinding us to sin. When we receive this gift and take refuge in Our Lady she helps us to see sin and ourselves as we truly are, but this is not without hope. For Our Lady sees us as God sees, and she sees us with the eyes of a mother. A mother in a particular way knows who you are, and holds the hope of all that you can be.¹⁸ Though sinful and broken, Our Lady looks at us with compassion, calls us higher, and holds in her heart the hope of a bright future- one of grace and of eternal joy, even when we cannot hold on to this hope ourselves.

From the very birth of the Church we see Our Lady giving refuge to poor sinners and interceding on their behalf. She notices our needs before we even ask, as at Cana, and makes our needs known to her Son. At the foot of the Cross she pleads for us, offering her Son to the Father on our behalf. In the Upper Room, she is there, interceding for the newborn Church at Pentecost, and loving each and every sinner in that room. I don’t think we often take time to consider who was actually in the room. Our Lady does not limit her love simply to the faithful- John and the women who did not abandon our Lord but were at the foot of the Cross- but she remains with all of them. She is a refuge not just for saints, but for sinners. She offers her love to them, prays with them and for them, and I presume, offers them consolation, the same consolation they will all receive soon in the descent of the Holy Spirit. Even now, as then, she offers us the refuge of her heart as she has

¹⁷ Ibid., 47-48.

¹⁸ Father John Hay, (Homily for IHM Sisters of Wichita, Colwich, KS, May 2026).

through the centuries. She reminded Juan Diego, “Am I not your mother?”, and she asked Lucia at Fatima, “Are you suffering much? Take courage. My Immaculate Heart will be your refuge and your way to God.” She says the same to us now, inviting us into her motherly care.

This Refuge of Sinners, is a gift from God, which I think would be foolish on our part to refuse. So let us fly to her for comfort, for consolation, conviction, for her powerful intercession when we have fallen, are tempted, persecuted, discouraged, or confused. Let us strive also to be like her, to flee from sin and to be a refuge for others: loving with a divine love, forgiving, being truthful about sin, and showing mercy. Though we may have never noticed, from childhood we have been formed by our various prayers to approach Mary as we are, as sinners. In the *Hail Mary* we ask our Lady to ‘pray for us sinners.’ In the *Hail Holy Queen* we address ourselves as ‘poor banished children of Eve.’ And in the *Memorare*, we will fly to her now as we pray, “Remember of Most Gracious Virgin Mary...”