 Reading time: 9 min.

(continuation from previous article)

Chapter XIII. Institution of the Feast of Mary Help of Christians.

The marvellous way in which Pius VII was freed from his imprisonment is the great event that gave occasion for the institution of the feast of Mary Help of Christians.

The Emperor Napoleon I had already in several ways oppressed the Supreme Pontiff, stripping him of his possessions, dispersing Cardinals, Bishops, Priests and Monks, and likewise depriving them of their goods. After this Napoleon demanded things from the Pope that he could not grant. To Pius VII's refusal, the Emperor responded with violence and sacrilege. The Pope was arrested in his own palace and with Cardinal Pacca, his secretary, taken on a forced journey to Savona where the persecuted but still glorious Pontiff spent over five years in severe imprisonment. But since where there is the Pope there is the Head of Religion and therefore the concurrence of all true Catholics, so Savona became in a certain way another Rome. So many demonstrations of affection moved the Emperor to envy, wanting the Vicar of Jesus Christ humiliated; and therefore he commanded that the Pontiff be moved to Fontainebleau, which is a castle not far from Paris.

While the Head of the Church groaned as a prisoner separated from his advisers and friends, all that remained for Christians to do was to imitate the faithful of the early Church when St Peter was in prison, to pray. The venerable Pontiff prayed, and with him all Catholics prayed, imploring the help of She who is called: *Magnum in Ecclesia praesidium*: Great Presidium in the Church. It is commonly believed that the Pontiff promised the Blessed Virgin to establish a feast to honour the august title of Mary Help of Christians, should he be able to return to Rome on the Papal throne. Meanwhile everything smiled on the terrible conqueror. After he had made his dreaded name resound throughout the land, walking from victory to victory, he had taken his weapons to the coldest regions of Russia, believing he would find new triumphs there; but divine Providence had instead prepared disasters and defeats for him.

Mary, moved to pity by the groans of the Vicar of Jesus Christ and the prayers of her children, changed the fate of Europe and the whole world in a moment.

The rigours of winter in Russia and the disloyalty of many French generals dashed all of Napoleon's hopes. Most of that formidable army perished frostbitten or

buried in snow. The few troops spared from the rigours of the cold abandoned the Emperor and he had to flee, retreat to Paris and deliver himself into the hands of the British, who took him prisoner to the island of Elba. Then justice was able to take its course again; the Pontiff was quickly set free; Rome welcomed him with the greatest enthusiasm, and the Head of Christendom, now free and independent, was able to resume the administration of the universal Church. Having been freed in this way, Pius VII immediately wished to give a public sign of gratitude to the Blessed Virgin by whose intercession the whole world recognised his unexpected freedom. Accompanied by some Cardinals, he went to Savona where he crowned the prodigious image of Mercy that is venerated in that city; and with an unprecedented crowd in the presence of King Victor Emmanuel I and other Princes, the majestic function was held in which the Pope placed a crown of gems and diamonds on the head of the venerable effigy of Mary.

Returning then to Rome, he wished to fulfil the second part of his promise by instituting a special feast in the Church, to attest to posterity that great prodigy.

Considering, then, how at all times the Blessed Virgin has always been proclaimed the help of Christians, he relied on what St Pius V had done after the victory of Lepanto by ordering the words to be inserted into the Loreto Litany: *Auxilium Christianorum ora pro nobis;* explaining and expanding more and more the fourth feast day that Pope Innocent XI had decreed when he instituted the feast of the name of Mary; Pius VII, in order to perpetually commemorate the prodigious liberation of himself, the Cardinals, the Bishops and the freedom restored to the Church, and so that there might be a perpetual monument to it among all Christian peoples, instituted the feast of Mary Help of Christians to be celebrated every year on 24 May. That day was chosen because it was on that day in the year 1814 that he was set free and was able to return to Rome to the liveliest applause of the Romans. (Those who wish to learn more about what we have briefly set out here can consult Artaud: *Vita di Pio VII.* Moroni article *Pius VII.* P. Carini: *Il sabato santificato*. Carlo Ferreri: *Corona di fiori* etc. *Discursus praedicabiles super litanias Lauretanas* by Fr. Giuseppe Miecoviense). As long as he lived, the glorious Pontiff Pius VII promoted the cult of Mary; he approved associations and Confraternities dedicated to Her, and granted many Indulgences to pious practices done in Her honour. One fact alone is enough to demonstrate the great veneration of this Pontiff towards Mary Help of Christians.

In the year 1817 a painting was completed that was to be placed in Rome in the church of S. Maria in Monticelli directed by the Priests of the Christian doctrine. On 11 May that painting was brought to the Pontiff in the Vatican so that he could bless it, and impose a title on it. As soon as he saw the devout image, he felt such

great emotion in his heart, that without any prevention, he instantly burst out in the magnificent preface: *Maria Auxilium Christianorum, ora pro nobis*. These words of the Holy Father were echoed by the devout Sons of Mary and at the first unveiling of that (15th of the same month) there was a real rapture of people, joy and devotion. The offerings and fervent prayers have continued to the present day. So that it can be said that that image is continually surrounded by devotees who ask for and obtain graces through the intercession of Mary, Help of Christians.

Chapter XIV. Finding of the image of Maria Auxilium Christianorum in Spoleto.

In recounting the story of the discovery of the prodigious image of *Maria Auxilium Christianorum* in the vicinity of Spoleto, we literally transcribe the report made by Monsignor Arnaldi Archbishop of that city.

In the Parish of St Luke between Castelrinaldi and Montefalco Archdiocese of Spoleto, in the open countryside far from the town and off the road, there existed on the summit of a small hill an ancient image of the Blessed Virgin Mary painted in fresco in a niche in the attitude of embracing the Child Jesus. Next to this, four images representing St Bartholomew, St Sebastian, St Blaise and St Roch appear to have been altered by time. Exposed to the elements for a long time, they had not only lost their vividness, but had almost entirely disappeared. Only the venerable image of Mary and the Child Jesus has been well preserved. There is still a remnant of a wall that shows that a church existed there. For as long as anyone can remember, this place was totally forgotten, and was reduced to a den of reptiles and particularly snakes.

For several months already, this venerable image had somehow encouraged veneration by means of a voice repeatedly heard by a not-yet-five-year-old boy named Henry, calling him by name and addressing him in a way not well expressed by the boy himself. However, it did not attract the public’s attention until 19 March in the year 1862.

A young peasant from the surrounding area, aged thirty, subsequently aggravated by many ills which had become chronic, and abandoned by his doctors, felt inspired to go and venerate the above-mentioned image. He declared that, after commending himself to the Blessed Virgin in this place, he felt his lost strength restored, and in a few days, without the use of any natural remedy, he returned to perfect health. Other people likewise, without knowing how or why, felt a natural impulse to go and venerate this holy image, and they reported reported graces

from it. These events brought back to memory and to discussion among the people of Terrazzana the by now dormant voice of the above-mentioned child to whom no credit and importance had naturally been given, as it should have been. It was then that it became known how the child's mother had lost him in the circumstances of the supposed apparition and could not find him, and finally found him near a high, crumbling little church. It is also known how a good living woman, afflicted by God with grave afflictions, announced at her death a year ago that the Blessed Virgin wanted to be venerated there, that a church would be built and that the faithful would flock there in great numbers.

In fact, it is true that a great number of people, not only from the diocese, but also from the neighbouring dioceses of Todi, Perugia, Fuligno, Nocera, Narni, Norcia, etc., flock to the place, and the number grows from day to day, especially on feast days, to five or six thousand. This is the greatest miracle that has been truly reported, since it is not seen in other prodigious discoveries.

The great concourse of the faithful who flock from all sides as if led by a light and a celestial force, a spontaneous concourse, an inexplicable and inexpressible concourse, is the miracle of miracles. The very enemies of the Church, also those whose faith is weak, are forced to confess that they cannot explain this sacred enthusiasm of the people…. Many are the infirm who are said to have been healed, the prodigious and singular graces bestowed are many, and although it is necessary to proceed with the utmost caution to discern rumours from facts, it seems undoubtedly true that a civilised woman lay afflicted with a mortal illness and was healed by invoking that sacred image. A young man from the Villa of St James, who had his feet crushed by the wheels of a cart and was forced to stand on crutches, visited the holy image and felt such an improvement that he threw away his crutches and was able to return home without them, and is perfectly free. Other cures also occurred.

It must not be forgotten that some unbelievers, having gone to visit the holy image and mocked it, came to the place and, against their better judgement, felt the need to kneel down and pray, and returned with completely different feelings, speaking publicly of Mary's wonders. The change produced in these corrupt people of mind and heart made a holy impression on the people. (Archbishop Arnaldi so far).

This Archbishop wanted to go himself with numerous clergy and his Vicar to the place of the image to ascertain the truth of the facts, and he found thousands of devotees there. He ordered the restoration of the effigy, which was broken in various parts, and having already collected the sum of six hundred *scudi* in pious donations, he commissioned skilful artists to design a church, insisting that the

foundations be laid with the utmost care.

To further the glory of Mary and the devotion of the faithful to so great a Mother, he ordered that the niche where the miraculous image is venerated be temporarily but decently covered, and that an altar be erected there to celebrate Holy Mass.

These dispositions were of indescribable consolation to the faithful, and from then on the number of people from all walks of life grew daily.

The devout image had no title of its own, and the pious Archbishop judged that it should be venerated under the name of *Auxilium Christianorum* as seemed most suitable to the attitude it presented. He also provided that there should always be a priest in custody of the Sanctuary or at least some layman of known probity.

This prelate's report ends with an account of a new trait of Mary's goodness worked behind the invocation at the 'feet' of this image.

"A young girl from Acquaviva was a postualnt at this Monastery of St Mary of the Star, where she was to wear the habit of a *conversa*. She was struck down by a general rheumatic illness so that all her limbs paralysed, and she was forced to return to her family.

"No matter how many remedies were tried by her good parents, she could never be cured; and four years had passed since she had been lying in bed, the victim of her chronic condition. On hearing the graces of this miraculous effigy, she wished to be taken there in a carriage, and as soon as she found herself before the venerable image, she experienced a remarkable improvement. Other singular graces are said to have been obtained by people from Fuligno.

"Devotion to Mary is always growing in a way that is most consoling to my heart. May God always be blessed who in his mercy has deigned to revive the faith throughout Umbria with the prodigious manifestation of his great Mother Mary. Blessed be the Blessed Virgin who with this manifestation deigned to point out in preference the Archdiocese of Spoleto.

Blessed be Jesus and Mary who with this merciful manifestation open the hearts of Catholics to a more lively hope.

Spoleto, 17 May 1862."

† GIOVANNI BATTISTA ARNALDI.

Thus, the venerable image of Mary Help of Christians near Spoleto painted in 1570, which remained almost three centuries without honour, has risen to the highest glory in our times because of the graces that the Queen of Heaven bestows

on her devotees in that place: and that humble place has become a true sanctuary, where people from all over the world flock. The devout and beneficent children of Mary gave signs of gratitude with conspicuous donations through which the foundations of a majestic church could be laid, which will soon reach its desired completion.

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