

Wonders of the Mother of God invoked under the title of Mary Help of Christians (4/13)

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Chapter V. Devotion of the early Christians to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The faithful of the early Church themselves made constant recourse to Mary as a powerful helper for Christians. This is particularly demonstrated by the general commotion caused by the news of her imminent departure from the world.

Not only those in Jerusalem but the faithful still in the vicinity of the city crowded around Mary's poor house, yearning to contemplate once more that blessed face. Moved by seeing herself surrounded by so many children who showed her with tears the love they bore her and the sorrow they felt at having to be separated from her, she made them the warmest of promises: that she would assist them from heaven, that in heaven at the right hand of her divine Son she would have greater power and authority and would do all things for the good of mankind. Here is how St John Damascene relates this wonderful event:

At the time of the glorious Dormition of the Blessed Virgin, all the holy Apostles, who travelled the earth for the salvation of the nations, were in a moment transported to Jerusalem. There a vision of angels appeared to them and a sweet harmony of heavenly powers was heard, and thus Mary surrounded with divine glory rendered her holy soul into the hands of God. Then her body transported with the song of the Angels and Apostles, was placed in a coffin and carried to Gethsemane, in which place the Angels' song was heard for three continuous days. After three days the angelic singing

ceased. St Thomas, who had not been with the other Apostles at the death of Mary, arrived on the third day, and having manifested a most fervent desire to venerate the body which had been the dwelling place of a God, the Apostles who were still there opened the tomb, but in no part could they find her sacred body. But having found the cloths in which she had been wrapped, which exhaled a most sweet odour, they closed the tomb. They were greatly astonished by this miracle and could only conclude that He who had chosen to take flesh from the Virgin Mary, become man and be born, even though He was God, the Word and the Lord of glory, and who after the birth preserved her virginity intact, also wanted her immaculate body after death, keeping it incorrupt, to be honoured by being transported to heaven before the common and universal resurrection (St John Damascene).

An experience of eighteen centuries shows us in a most luminous way that Mary continued from heaven and with the greatest success the mission as mother of the Church and helper of Christians that she had begun on earth. The innumerable graces obtained after her death made her cult spread with the utmost rapidity, so that even in those early days of persecution, wherever the sign of the Catholic religion appeared, there the image of Mary could also be seen. Indeed, from the days when Mary still lived, many devotees of her were already to be found, who gathered on Mount Carmel and there, living together in community, devoted themselves wholly to Mary.

It does not displease the devout reader that we relate this fact as it is narrated in the Office of the Holy Church under the Feast of the Blessed Virgin of Mount Carmel, 16 July.

On the sacred day of Pentecost, the Apostles having been filled with the Holy Spirit, many fervent believers (*viri plurimi*) had given themselves to follow the example of the holy prophets Elijah and Elisha, and at the preaching of John the Baptist had prepared themselves for the coming of the Messiah. Having seen the predictions they had

heard from the great Forerunner verified, they immediately embraced the Gospel faith. Then, while the Blessed Virgin was still living, they took special affection for her and honoured her so much that on Mount Carmel, where Elijah had seen that little cloud, which was a distinguished figure of Mary, ascend, they built a small shrine to the same Virgin. There they gathered every day with pious rites, prayers and praises and venerated her as the singular protector of the Order. Here and there they began to call themselves the brothers of the blessed Virgin of Mount Carmel. In the course of time, the supreme pontiffs not only confirmed this title, but also granted special indulgences. Mary then gave the name herself, granted her assistance to this institute, established for them a sacred scapular, which she gave to the blessed Simon Stock so that by this heavenly habit that sacred order would be distinguished and those who wore it would be protected from all evil.

As soon as the Apostles came to our lands to bring the light of the Gospel, it was not long before devotion to Mary sprang up in the West. Those who visit the catacombs of Rome, and we are eyewitnesses to this, still find in those dungeons ancient images representing either the marriage of Mary with St Joseph, or the assumption of Mary into heaven, and others depicting the Mother of God with the child in her arms.

A renowned writer says that "in the early days of the Church, the Christians produced a type of the Virgin in the most satisfactory manner that the condition of art at that time could have required. The feeling of modesty that shone, according to St Ambrose, in these images of the Virgin, proves that in the absence of a real effigy of the Mother of God, Christian art was able to reproduce in it the likeness of her soul, that physical beauty symbol of moral perfection that one could not but attribute to the divine Virgin. This character can also be found in certain paintings in the catacombs, in which the Virgin is painted seated with the Child Jesus on her knees, now standing and now half-length, always in a manner

that seems to conform to a priestly type.”

“In the catacombs of St Agnes”, writes Ventura, “outside Porta Pia, where one can see not only tombs, but oratories still of second-century Christians filled with immense riches of Christian archaeology and precious memories of early Christianity, one finds in great abundance images of Mary with the divine Infant in her arms that attest to the faith of the ancient Church about the necessity of Mary’s mediation to obtain graces from Jesus Christ, and about the cult of sacred images that heresy has attempted to destroy, branding them as superstitious novelties.”

Chapter VI. The B. Virgin explains to St. Gregory [Thaumaturgus] the mysteries of the faith. – Chastisement of Nestorius.

Although the holy Virgin Mary has at all times shown herself to be the help of Christians in all the necessities of life, yet she seems to have wished in a particular way to make her power manifest when the Church was attacked in the truths of the faith either by heresy or by enemy weapons. We gather here some of the most glorious events that all concur to confirm what is written in the Bible. Thou art like the tower of David, whose building is encircled with ramparts; a thousand shields are hanging round about, and every kind of armour of the most valiant (Cant. IV, 4). Let us now see these words verified in the facts of ecclesiastical history.

Around the middle of the third century St Gregory lived, known as a thaumaturge because of the multitude of miracles he performed. Since the bishop of Neocesarea, his homeland, had died, St. Phaedimus, Archbishop of Amasea, on whom that was dependent, thought of elevating St. Gregory to that bishopric. But, considering himself unworthy of that sublime dignity, he hid himself in the desert; indeed, in order not to be found, he went from one solitude to another; but St. Phaedimus, enlightened by the Lord, elected him bishop of Neocesarea in spite of himself, even though he was absent.

That diocese still worshipped false deities, and when s. Gregory had only 17 Christians in all. Gregory was greatly dismayed when he was forced to accept such a high and dangerous dignity, especially since there were those in that city who made a monstrous mixture of the mysteries of faith with the ridiculous fables of the Gentiles. Gregory therefore begged Phaedimus to give him some time to better instruct himself in the sacred mysteries, and he spent entire nights in study and meditation, commending himself to the Blessed Virgin who is the mother of wisdom, and to whom he was very devoted. Now it happened one night that after long meditation on the sacred mysteries, a venerable old man of heavenly beauty and majesty appeared to him. Amazed at this sight, he asked him who he was and what he wanted. The old man kindly reassured him and told him that he had been sent by God to explain to him the mysteries he was meditating on. When he heard this, with great joy he began to look at him, and with his hand he pointed out to him another apparition in the form of a woman who shone like lightning, and in beauty surpassed every human creature. Frightened, he prostrated himself on the ground in an act of veneration. In the meantime he heard the woman, who was the Blessed Virgin, calling that old man by the name of John the Evangelist, and inviting him to explain to him the mysteries of true religion. St John replied that he was very ready to do so, since it pleased the Mother of the Lord. And in fact he set about explaining to him many points of Catholic doctrine, then not yet elucidated by the Church and therefore very obscure.

She explained to him that there was only one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that all three are perfect, invisible, incorruptible, immortal, and eternal; that to the Father is attributed especially the power and creation of all things; that to the Son is ascribed especially wisdom, and that he became truly man, and is equal to the Father though begotten of him; that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son and is the source of all holiness; perfect Trinity without division or inequality, which has

always been and will always be immutable and invariable.

Having explained these and other most lofty doctrines, the vision vanished, and Gregory immediately wrote down the things he had learned and taught them constantly in his Church, nor did he ever cease to thank the Blessed Virgin who had instructed him in such a portentous manner.

If Mary proved to be a prodigious help to Christians in favour of the Catholic faith, God shows how terrible are the punishments inflicted on those who blaspheme against the faith. We see this verified in the fatal end that befell Nestorius, Bishop of Constantinople. He denied that the Virgin Mary was properly the mother of God.

The grave scandals caused by his preaching moved the Supreme Pontiff, who was called Celestine I, to examine the doctrine of the heresiarch, which he found erroneous and full of impiety. The patient pontiff, however, first admonished him, then threatened to separate him from the Church if he did not recant his errors.

Nestorius' obstinacy forced the pope to convene a council of over 200 bishops in the city of Ephesus, presided over by St Cyril as papal legate. This council, which was the third Ecumenical Council, met in the year of Christ 431.

Nestorius' errors were proclaimed anathema, but the author did not convert, rather he became more obstinate. He was therefore deposed from his seat, exiled to Egypt, where after many tribulations he fell into the hands of a band of robbers. Because of his exile, poverty, abandonment, a fall from a horse, and his advanced age, he suffered excruciating pain. Finally his living body rotted, and his tongue, the organ of so many blasphemies, rotted and was pink with worms.

Thus died the one who dared to utter so many blasphemies against the august Mother of the Saviour.

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