

a Hezekiah, a discerning eye that sees impediments to true worship for what they are and removes them.

Perhaps the present debate around the Eucharist will help us at least discern more carefully so that the Eucharist may indeed be our powerful medicine. We are not perfect now, though Christ calls us to perfection, and He gives us Himself in order that we can attain it. We perjure ourselves in receiving Him falsely.

St. Thomas More's life was cut short, while Richard Rich, his betrayer, lived to a ripe age and died in his bed. Judas hanged himself in despair, while Peter, though faltering, found his way, in time, to the cross. Whatever the length of life allotted us, let us dispose ourselves so that Christ's entry under our roof makes us more fit to live.

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QUEST column

By Phillip Campbell

MARIAN DEVOTION AS A WAY OF LIFE

On December 8, Catholics celebrate one of our most beloved festive days: the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This feast commemorates the sublime mystery whereby, by

a singular privilege of God, the Blessed Virgin Mary was conceived without the stain of original sin that she might be made a fitting vessel for the sinless Son of God. It is perhaps the greatest of all Marian feast days, serving to remind us of the marvelous privileges God has bestowed upon Our Lady.

When I first embraced Catholicism two decades ago, I was ambivalent about devotion to the Virgin Mary. I was not opposed to it, per se — I had studied enough to understand its historical and theological framework — but I questioned to what degree I could integrate Marian devotion into my spiritual life. I had dabbled in Protestantism for less than two years on my journey from agnosticism to the Catholic Church, but those two years were enough to leave me with a residual mistrust of the prerogatives Catholics assigned to Mary — that she was somehow “replacing” Jesus in the lives of Catholics. Eventually, I worked my way through this by getting to know actual Catholics and seeing that this was a slander with little basis in fact.

I started praying the Rosary when I was 19. I remember the first time I did it: it felt like something dirty. I was huddled behind a locked door in a dark side room in the First Presbyterian Church in Brighton, Michigan, where I worked as a night janitor. It was a strange experience, something I did more because “this is what Catholics do” than because I had a deep love for the Blessed Mother.

I thought I had put these misgivings behind me by the time I entered the Church on the Feast of St. Francis in 2002. But I faced new challenges when I went to live abroad in Austria at the Ave Maria College campus in Gaming. There, in the Old World, in the heart of the ancient Holy Roman Empire, Marian devotion was not a theoretical proposition, not a theological structure, but a way of life. Gilded statues of the Blessed Virgin adorned columns in village squares; roadside shrines to Mary cropped out of flowerbeds along scenic rural byways; and, throughout the country, men clanked their steins of ale together with a toast to the Mother of God.

I remember feeling a little put out by all this; it was almost too much. I see now that while I recognized the theological place of Mary in the economy of salvation, I had not yet anchored my affections to her. I knew what it was to accept her as a doctrine but not to *love* her. I wondered at the time whether I'd ever feel the kind of spontaneous affection for her

those Austrians did when they toasted their drinks to her. I wondered whether what came so naturally to them would ever feel natural to me.

Well, praise Christ, it came in time, but over many long years: thousands of evenings by candlelight running the beads of a Rosary through my fingers; scores of Marian feast days observed in the liturgical cycle year after year: the Immaculate Conception on December 8, the Solemnity of the Mother of God on January 1, the Purification on February 2, the Annunciation on March 25, the Assumption on August 15, and the Holy Name of Mary on September 12. It came through driving a half hour to Ann Arbor — to Old St. Patrick Church or St. Thomas the Apostle Church — to walk in the solemn Candlemas processions each February in the ancient Latin rite, singing hymns honoring the mystery of Mary's role in salvation history. It came from numberless quiet afternoon visits to Marian shrines and grottoes at countless parishes, the quiet chanting of the *Salve Regina* in moments of devotion or the *Regina Caeli* in moments of spiritual triumph, and making the simple Sign of the Cross whenever I saw her image.

Yes, over the years I came to cherish the Mother of God deeply. My heart smiles whenever I see a picture of her. My eyes light up like a man in love. When I am passing through a town and I see a Catholic church, I stop, and if they have an outdoor grotto or Marian shrine, I kneel before it and send a few *Aves* wafting up to Heaven. If the shrine is cluttered with branches or dead leaves, I clear them out. I have sometimes bought bouquets of flowers or individual roses and left them before her as prayers incarnated. I erected a Marian shrine in my own yard and had it consecrated so I could honor her better on my own soil. When I really want to pray intensely for someone, I do so before an image of Our Lady. And I, too, have offered toasts in her honor.

If you are a Protestant or just someone who doesn't understand Marian devotion, I'm not going to bother trying to explain it here (although I do want you to understand it is not because I feel "too sinful to come to Jesus directly" or any such nonsense). I will say, however, that I

get it now. I understand why the saints love her so much; why knights swore their vows to her honor; why Bl. Alan de la Roche said each *Ave* was like a rose cast at her feet; why even men of war like the Spanish General Lorenzo de Orellana led his men barefoot to the shrine of Mary at Santo Domingo in Manila after surviving a harrowing battle; why countless popes have promoted the Rosary; why St. Louis de Montfort recommends devotion to her as the surest way to Christ; and why St. Bernard of Clairvaux said, *De Maria numquam satis* ("About Mary, one cannot say enough").

Having walked this long journey, it was especially wounding to see an article in *The Atlantic* — published this August on the Assumption, the very day Catholics and Orthodox were celebrating Mary's bodily translation into heavenly glory — claiming that the Rosary is a symbol of extremism. I felt like someone had insulted my beloved; like my own mother was assaulted. Of course, the Rosary is a weapon, but not of the sort the author assumed. It is a weapon by which the treasures of Heaven are opened and grace is poured forth upon the earth; it makes the world better because it makes *me* better. If the Rosary is a sign of extremism, count me as an extremist. If I had to be deprived of all earthly consolation, of every possession and all I'd ever owned, and start over again in rags, I'd find consolation in those beads and their transformative power.

Even if you don't believe in grace or saints, Mary, taken merely as a symbol, represents all that is good, wholesome, beautiful, and worth fighting for in our world. I'd rather be a social pariah with her than find worldly acceptance without her. And when my stiffened corpse lies stretched out cold, about to be consigned to the earth, and awaiting the Resurrection of all flesh at the end of time, bury me with my fingers entwined around those beads.

If you love the Blessed Virgin Mary, if you honor her, if she means anything to you, or her name makes your eyes light up and the fire of affection grow in your breast, you will understand. And if you don't, then I pray that someday you may.

Ave Virgo gloriosa, favo mellis dulcior,



*The Blessed Virgin Mary
adorned with Pentecost flowers*

*Shrine of the Pious
Union of St. Joseph
Grass Lake, Michigan*

photo by Phillip Campbell

*Mater Dei gloriosa, stella sole clarior:
Tu es illa speciosa, qua nulla est pulchrior,
rubicunda plus quam rosa, lilio candidior.*

Hail, glorious Virgin, sweeter than honey
from the honeycomb,
Glorious Mother of God, star brighter
than the sun:
You are that beautiful one, than whom
nothing is more beautiful,
Redder than the rose, whiter than the lily.

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