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# The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop  
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## VIRGIN AND CHURCH

Connections between the month of May and the Blessed Virgin Mary are so many and so obvious that one hardly knows where to begin. Working in English, as we are, we might start with the visual presentation of the words on the page, and note that a single letter differentiates *Mary* from *May*. From that patent but not very helpful comparison and point of contact, we could then go on to follow Cardinal Newman, who once composed a full set of daily meditations for the month of May. For the bulk of the days, he chose a title of Mary from the Litany of Loreto (aka the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary) for his daily theme, but he began the series with two meditations on why the month of May is especially dedicated to her.

Newman thinks that there are two principal reasons why we exercise a special devotion to Mary in May. The first has to do with the normal progress of the months and the seasons. May occurs in the late spring of the year, "the time when the earth bursts forth into its fresh foliage and its green grass after the stern frost and snow of winter, and the wild wind and rain of the early spring." The days grow longer, and blossoms are on the trees and flowers in the gardens. The joy and gladness of nature make May a fit month for devotion to the one who bears the title of *Mystical Rose*. Of course, there can be some rough weather in May, especially in Newman's England, yet that is not how we generally remember the month, nor how we keep its picture in our minds. For May, whatever its weather in a particular year, contains the sure promise of summer, and it is that character of being a promise of more to come that makes it

especially suitable for devotion to Mary. She, in her person and in her response to God, is the certain promise of the coming of the Savior.

The second reason Newman gives why May is the appropriate month for Marian devotion is also bound up with a calendar, only this time it is the liturgical calendar of the Church. May belongs to the Easter season, either in whole or in part, for in most years the entire month falls within the fifty days of Easter, and in any event at least the first half of the month will belong to that season of Resurrection. More than any other month, May hears the song of the *Alleluia*. This makes it a fitting month to honor Mary, Newman says, because "she is the first of creatures, the most acceptable child of God, the dearest and nearest to Him," and so of course "this month should be hers, in which we especially glory and rejoice in His great Providence to us, in our redemption and sanctification in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost."

Continuing his reflection, the Cardinal points out that although Mary is the most acceptable child of God, she is not at all the only acceptable handmaid of the Lord. There are others, many others, enough to fill Heaven and earth. She may be *Queen of All Saints*, but she is a saint, a holy one, who is in many respects not so very different from others of God's holy ones, and May is full of such saints' days. Newman ticks them off one by one, and of course there were many more of them in the calendar of the saints in use in his day. So many May saints, so many great saints in May, and Mary stands amongst those "who form the court of their glorious Queen."

Newman's age, the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was an era of intense interest in, and growing devotion to, the Blessed Virgin. It was the century of the Miraculous Medal (which he himself wore), the dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception, and the apparitions at Lourdes. Within this rising tide of Marian piety there was a tendency to emphasize the unique graces that she alone received and to exalt her as Queen of Heaven so as to effectively remove and distance her from anything that was recognizably human.

As a convert to Catholicism, Newman had not grown up with this kind of devotion, and the lines of his own veneration of Mary were quite different. He knew well and quoted often Saint Augustine's words that Mary had received Jesus into her heart before she had conceived him in her womb, and that the discipleship of Mary – which was total, complete and perfect, as expressed in her *fiat* spoken to the angel – was even more

meritorious than her motherhood. Mary was not only the first “follower” of her Son, but also the best one, as she was with him at the beginning of his public ministry, at Cana in Galilee, and remained faithful to him, standing at the foot of the cross, when nearly all the other disciples had betrayed, denied or fled. It was out of this deep and rich patristic vein that Newman composed these few lines, meant to be placed under a painting of the Immaculate Heart of Mary:

*Holy the womb that bare Him,  
Holy the breasts that fed,  
But holier still the royal heart  
That in His passion bled.*

One of the effects of this placing of the accent mark on the discipleship of Mary is that she is thereby firmly anchored to the whole community of disciples, the Church. The best of all believers, she is yet a believer in Christ, or as Newman expressed it, her being the most ac-

ceptable child of God does mean that she is the only acceptable handmaid of the Lord. There are others, and these are gathered around her. She is truly Queen, but she does not reign in solitary splendor and glorious isolation; she is surrounded by her court, which is composed of her brothers and sisters in the Lord, her fellow disciples of her Son. Indeed, Mary can be a model for all believers only if she is herself a believer, one of them. Far from denying her sinlessness or compromising her Immaculate Con-

ception, Newman's approach tends to make sense of those graces as both personal and ecclesial: they are bestowed on her and are unique to her, precisely so that through her they can enrich her brothers and sisters (who are more properly called her children), the other members of the Church. Within this framework, perhaps the most evocative biblical portrayal of Mary becomes that of Acts 1:14, in which she is joined in prayer with

the disciples in the upper room, as they all await the descent of the Holy Spirit, that same Spirit by which she had conceived the Son of God in her womb.

In this, as in so much else, Newman anticipated Vatican II. After John XXIII had called for the council, the preparatory theological commission began to compose draft documents for the bishops to consider. The commission's idea was that there would be a document setting forth the nature and work of the Church, and another, separate, document that would deal with the Virgin Mary. One of the first decisions of the Council was to reject this proposal and insist that the Council's teaching on Mary would appear not in a stand-alone piece, but as a part of its teaching on the Church. Thus, the final chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, is entitled “The Blessed Vir-



gin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church.” In a very Newmanesque turn of phrase, it identifies her as “a preeminent and singular member of the Church, and as its type and excellent exemplar in faith and charity” (53).

Without trying to be an exhaustive treatment of the doctrine on Mary, Chapter VIII of *Lumen Gentium* nevertheless makes for great spiritual reading in this month of May. It is divided into five relatively short sections, and so could feed an average Catholic (or two) for a week. The second section is the longest, and presents the dogma of the Immaculate Conception (which far too many of still think refers to Jesus’ conception rather than to Mary’s), the mysteries of the life of Mary as they are given in the New Testament, and her Assumption and coronation. It is full of scripture quotes and citations, and just looking up and reading these would be a worthwhile exercise.

The third section is on Mary and the Church, and focuses on Mary as mother. Since both the Church and Mary are called *mother of the faithful*, this section is particularly important both for understanding Mary’s ongoing role in the economy of salvation, and for appreciating the image of Mary as the perfect symbol of the Church and as an example for every believer.

By God’s grace and her *fiat*, Mary becomes the mother of Jesus. She and she alone brings him to birth, physically, in our world. Because of who Jesus is, Mary must be called *Mother of God*, but not in a way so that this title takes away anything from Jesus’ unique and supreme role as the one Mediator between God and man. Her divine maternity of Jesus means that she will also be mother to all who belong to Jesus in faith. For Jesus is never purely and simply Jesus. He is the head of the body, which is the Church. As members of his body, we belong to him, are a part of him, and so his mother becomes ours in a mystical way. We do not need to guess or speculate on this; Christ himself pronounced it clearly from the cross when he said to Mary, indicating his beloved disciple, “Woman, behold your son,” and then said to the disciple, “Behold your mother” (19:25-27).

This led Saint Ambrose to call Mary “a type of the Church in the order of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ” (63). By *type* he means symbol, but more than a symbol. Type and reality are so closely identified that to speak of one is to invoke the other, and to see into the heart of one is to see into the heart of both. Thus even as Mary becomes a mother by giving birth to Christ in the world, so the Church becomes a mother by receiving the Word of God and bringing forth into new life the children that are born to her in the waters of baptism. Ambrose sees a kind of ecclesial virginity that mirrors Mary’s perpetual virginity. By her virginity, Mary keeps herself whole and entire for God, and in a like manner the Church keeps whole and entire the faith that is given to her by Christ, who is both her Lord and her spouse.

Of course, type and reality are not identical, they are not the same thing, and so there are differences. Mary’s holiness was always perfect, and now she rejoices in the fullness of the glory of Heaven. The members of the Church, however, are obviously not there yet. The Church herself is free of sin, as the spouse of Christ, but her members are all too often imperfect and prone to sinful behavior. Thus, the members of the Church look to Mary as mother and model of all virtues, and ask for her prayers to aid their efforts to purify their faith and become more like her. This intercession she willingly gives, and so she truly becomes their mother, asking her Son, the one Mediator, to complete in them, who are her children in the ecclesial and sacramental order, the good work he has already begun in them. Thus Mary, who is always virgin and mother, becomes model, helper, and image of the Church, which is also seen as virgin and mother, as well as the bride of Christ.

The religious imagination of Saint Francis of Assisi caught this in words about as well as it can be caught when, in his prayer *The Salutation to the Blessed Virgin Mary*, he addressed her as “Lady, holy Queen, holy Mother of God, Mary, the Virgin become Church.” With all this, and more, May can be a quite lovely month, regardless of what the weather is doing.

—Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.

