



THE MAGAZINE OF THE Society of Mary



American Edition

Presentation of the Lord, 2025

www.somamerica.org

From the Superior

January 2025

Dear Members and Friends of the Society of Mary,

This issue of AVE brings greetings for a happy and healthy Year of Our Lord 2025. Included is an account of our October 2024 annual Mass at the Cathedral Church of Saint Paul in Springfield, Illinois, and my sermon on that happy occasion.

It gives me pleasure to announce that the **2025 Annual Meeting** of the Society of Mary in the United States is scheduled to take place by Zoom videoconference on **Thursday, May 15th, at 7 pm ET**. Closer to the time, an email announcement will invite members in good standing to register with the Council Secretary, Dr. Paul Cooper. Those who so register will receive in turn the login credentials for the meeting. And this information carries two urgent implications:

First, since our Annual Meetings are now being conducted online, it is crucial for us to have your email address. If you have received a hard copy of this issue of AVE, then we do have your mailing address. But a quick glance at our membership database reveals that we are still missing a good number of email addresses. If yours is among them, then please email it to membershipadministrator@somamerica.org so that we can connect with you easily on matters of Society business.

Second, participation in the Annual Meeting presupposes membership in good standing. If you have not already done so (and if you are not a Life Member), we really need you to renew your membership by paying your dues. This is easily done through the Society website at somamerica.org. Your dues payments and other contributions help the Society to fulfill its mission of promoting devotion to Mary and the Saints in all our churches, not least by regularly printing and distributing AVE.

The **2025 Annual Mass** is scheduled for **Saturday, October 18th at Grace Church in Sheboygan, Wisconsin**. It will be combined with the celebration of Grace Church's annual Walsingham Festival—always a splendid occasion in itself. If you are at all able, please begin making your plans to attend now. I'm looking forward eagerly to being back in one of my favorite cities in Wisconsin.

Since pilgrimage is a component of the Christian life that the Society of Mary enthusiastically promotes, it seems worth mentioning that my wife Elizabeth and I have booked places on The Living Church May-June

pilgrimage to Turkey in celebration of the 1700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed. After several days in Istanbul (Constantinople), we will be traveling deep into Asia Minor to visit many places mentioned in the New Testament or associated with the early Church Fathers. Our itinerary includes Ephesus, site of the Third Ecumenical Council (431), which ratified Mary's title of Theotokos or Mother of God, and we will visit the house traditionally identified as the dwelling of Mary and the Beloved Disciple. Please keep our travels in your prayers. God willing, within the year I will be contributing another brief travelogue to AVE. **AVE**

All blessings in Christ and Our Lady,
The Rev. John D. Alexander, Ph.D.
Superior, Society of Mary in the United States

THE VIRGIN MARY AND CHARLES WILLIAMS

By Phoebe Pettingell

Charles Williams (1886-1945) is best known for his novels, which T. S. Eliot memorably described as “supernatural thrillers, and secondarily, for his theological writings. A lifelong Anglo-Catholic, he was a parishioner at St. Silas the Martyr in Kentish Town, London, until 1939, when he moved with Oxford University Press, where he was an editor, to Oxford itself during the Second World War. C. S. Lewis—whose book *The Allegory of Love* (1936) Williams had edited—invited him to join the writers’ gathering known as The Inklings. An autodidact, Williams was a prodigious reader and writer at a time when a number of Christian authors were making names for themselves. In addition to Eliot and Lewis, he numbered among his friends and admirers W. H. Auden, Evelyn Underhill, and Dorothy Sayers, among other names less familiar today.

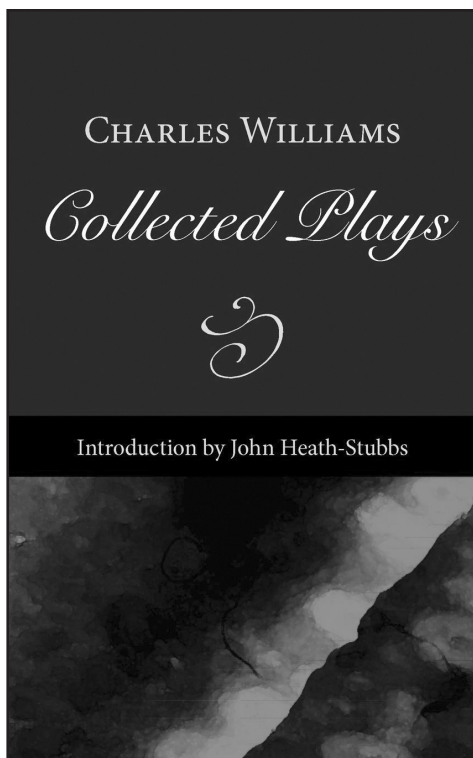


Charles Williams

Most of Williams's writings are imbued with his theological views. He was deeply influenced by the poets Dante and Milton. The supernatural was real to him in an era where atheism was common in intellectual circles. He interpreted Saint Paul's command to "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2), which he termed the "doctrine of substituted love," to mean that you could take on the fears or anxieties of others, which then would affect you less, and help free them. To help break pre-conceived ideas he tended to use his own terms. Thus, he rarely says "Jesus," but usually refers to the Second Person of the Trinity as "Messias." He often speaks of "co-inherence," a

description of the relationship among the persons of the Trinity derived from the Greek term *perichoresis*, which he also uses to define the believer's mutual indwelling with Christ. Much has been written about Williams's theology, both in his own writings, and by his admirers. However, here I want to discuss a less familiar subject, his portrayal of Mary the Mother of God.

Williams wrote a number of plays which were performed in churches. This was the period of T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), first performed in the chapter house at Canterbury. A year later, Williams was commissioned to write his own, *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* (1936), celebrating another martyred Archbishop. Many of Williams's plays are in the form of a Christmas pageant. There is a surreal element to them—what the author called an abolition of time and space, where characters



Collected Plays of Charles Williams
(2006 Reprint of 1963 Oxford University
Press edition)

like Adam and Eve coexist and interact with Mary and Joseph (whom Williams, in opposition to Roman tradition, imagines to have been a young man). Some characters are personifications like Pride and Hell or Man. The plays are composed in a form of blank verse since Williams considered himself primarily a poet.

He portrays the Virgin Mary in unusual ways too. In *Seed of Adam* (1936), she describes coming from a circus where she has been watching jugglers. Her opening speech in *The Death of Good Fortune* (1939) begins:

Incipit vita nova: substance is love,
love substance. Begins substance to move
through everywhere the sensuality of earth and air.
I was its mother in the beginning: I taught
the royal soothsayers to follow a moving star,
and brought them to their primal, far, and hierarchical Head.
I am Wisdom whose name is Mary. I wept by the Dead.
I arose with the Arisen.

One wonders what the original audience made of this, since it requires considerable unpacking. A primary allusion is to the Old Testament personifications of Holy Wisdom as a woman, as in Proverbs 8 and especially Ecclesiasticus 24:9-12, appointed in *The Anglican Missal* as the first reading in Votive Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary. For Williams, Mary is both a mortal woman and Holy Wisdom, sometimes identified with the *Shekinah* in rabbinic Judaism, a feminine aspect of Divinity. As it is said, the Incarnation not only brings the Godhead into humanity, but humanity into the Godhead, and Williams stressed that this sanctifies matter. This is why marriage is a sacrament; there is for him a divine quality in conjugal love which can grant a nearer relationship to God who is Love.

The most interesting and imaginative of Williams's reflections on Mary is *Terror of Light* (1940). Unlike the other plays, it is not in verse which to my mind makes its speeches sound more realistic. Williams meant to revise it, but died before he could do so. Its subject is Pentecost, the scene Jerusalem, and the cast contains John the Evangelist, the Virgin Mother, the repentant Mary Magdalen (who is in love with John), doubting Thomas, Peter, Saul of Tarsus, Simon Magus and his female companion, Luna. Saul is a friend of John, who before his conversion at Damascus, represents the Pharisaical party opposed to the Incarnation. John is a mystic, Thomas an intellectual, Peter a

common man, Simon Magus a Gnostic. As the Pharisees reject the idea that God can become flesh, Gnostics value the spiritual realm as truth, and the material realm as illusion. At the time Williams was working on this play, he was also finishing his final novel, *All Hallows Eve* (1945), which stresses one of his regular themes, that the devil cannot become incarnate; therefore, the very act of conception confers a heavenly blessing. Thus, the Virgin Mary (the author accepts her perpetual virginity) is not only Wisdom but also *Theotokos*—God Bearer—and, at the climax of the play, Mother of the Church. As John tells her after the tongues of flame descend on the Apostles, “I knew then that the light had always been intertwined with your body but we had not seen it; and the wind of the spirit had been in your voice, but we had never heard it. And now when we can, when we can see and hear, you will go.” She answers that the Holy Spirit has effected an exchange with them, so their mission now is to take Christ to the world, while she rejoins Him in heaven. Her last act, as Mother of the Church, is to tell the Apostles to spread the Word to all nations and peoples. And so, explaining the meaning of Pentecost, she describes the same Holy Spirit moving on the waters in the beginning to bring forth the world, then overshadowing her to bring forth the Incarnate Word, and finally descending on the apostles to bring forth the Church:

It was that which lay first upon the waters and moved,
and there was light; and the relay entwined in my body
and moved, and there was my son; and lay about you, the
Companions, and moved and there was the Church. Joyful
and sorrowful and glorious are the children of His love.
Light on the waters, light in the body, light in the Church.
Oh my Son is waiting....

This complex play, one of Charles Williams’ last works before his untimely death, offers his most developed vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and the hour of our death. **AVE**

Phoebe Pettingell, Editor of AVE, lives in northern Wisconsin.

SANTA MARIA MAGGIORE, ROME: THE MARIAN PAPAL BASILICA

by

John D. Alexander

Sometime in the mid-1980s, when I was living and working in London, I joined a pilgrimage to Rome and Assisi organized by a Church of England parish (Saint Michael and All Angels) in Brighton. It was my first and, so far, only visit to the Eternal City.

Our pilgrimage guide and driver dutifully took us to all four papal basilicas: Saint Peter's, Saint John Lateran, Saint Paul Outside-the-Walls, and Santa Maria Maggiore—in English, Saint Mary Major or Saint Mary the Great—so-called to differentiate it from the city's many “minor” Marian basilicas and churches, such as Santa Maria in Trastevere, Santa Maria in Cosmedin, and Santa Maria del Popolo.

Santa Maria Maggiore made an immediate and lasting impression. Several of my fellow pilgrims remarked that it combined the grandeur and magnificence of the other papal basilicas with an ambience of warmth and intimacy all its own. It is a must-see on any visit to Rome: an architectural treasure in itself and a storehouse of artistic and spiritual treasures within.

Rather than attempting an exhaustive catalogue, my aim in this article is simply to highlight a few of the most valuable treasures of Santa Maria Maggiore: arguably the Western Church's oldest Marian shrine and hence a key part of our spiritual inheritance as members of the Society of Mary.



Inscription in Central Arch of Santa Maria Maggiore (c. 434)

The Council of Ephesus and Pope Sixtus III

In the Universal Calendar, August 5th is kept as the Anniversary of the Dedication of the Basilica of Saint Mary Major. This date is thought to mark the consecration by Pope Sixtus III in 434 of the present basilica, reconstructed on the foundations of an earlier basilica built by Pope Liberius in the previous century (more on which below).

The Third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus (431) had just reaffirmed Mary's title as *Theotokos* (God-bearer or Mother of God), and Sixtus commemorated the decision by rebuilding the basilica in her honor. A dedicatory inscription at the top of the basilica's triumphal arch reads *Xystus Episcopus Plebi Dei*—"Sixtus Bishop to the People of God."

Our Lady of the Snows

From 1568 to 1969, August 5th was observed as the Feast of the Dedication of Saint Mary of the Snows. This name refers to the legend associated with the basilica's original founding by Pope Liberius in 352 (on account of which it was also known as the Liberian Basilica).

When a wealthy Roman patrician named John and his wife, being without heirs, wanted to bequeath their inheritance to the Virgin Mary, they asked God for guidance on how best to do so. In response, Mary appeared simultaneously to John and Liberius in their dreams during the night of August 4th-5th, and told them to build her a basilica in a place on the Esquiline Hill that they would find covered with snow in the morning.

Snow is rare in Rome even during the winter, and unheard-of during August, when many Romans leave the city to escape the summer heat. But, sure enough, in the morning snow was blanketing the summit of the Esquiline Hill. In some versions, the snow formed the shape of a basilica's base, which Pope Liberius used to mark out the foundations, as depicted in a wonderful early fifteenth-century painting by Masolino da Panicale.

Alas, the legend has no written attestation before the year 1000, and *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1917) concluded that it seemed to have no historical basis. In 1741, a congregation appointed by Pope Benedict XIV recommended that the legend be stricken from the Breviary, but no action was taken until the 1969 reform of the Roman Calendar that renamed the anniversary dedication as that of "Saint Mary Major."

Apart from questions of historicity, it seems to me that the legend exhibits the classical features of a biblical prophetic sign. Throughout the Scriptures, messages from God given through angels or prophets are

accompanied by signs that confirm their truth and reliability. Without the confirmation of the snow, John and Liberius might have dismissed their dreams as the workings of feverish imaginations. And without the prior message, the snow in August might have been dismissed and forgotten as a freak of nature. As it was, however, the sign confirmed the message, and the message interpreted the sign.

The image of snow carries particular biblical resonances. In several scriptural verses, snow signifies moral purity and the forgiveness of sins: *“Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow”* (Psalm 51:7); and again: *“though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow”* (Isaiah 1:18).

Elsewhere, the descent of rain and snow symbolizes the fecundity of God’s Word: *“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it”* (Isaiah 55:1-11).

Most of all, perhaps, the miracle of the snow in the scorching August heat echoes an obscure passage in the Wisdom of Solomon: *“Snow and ice withstood fire without melting ... whereas the fire ... even forgot its native power”* (16:22-23).

All in all, the miracle of snow in August vividly symbolizes Mary’s purity and fullness of grace. On August 5th, rose petals are still showered down from the basilica’s dome upon the congregation below as a reminder of the legend of Saint Mary of the Snows.

Salus Populi Romani

Possibly the best-loved treasure of Santa Maria Maggiore is the icon of Virgin and Child known as *Salus Populi Romani* (Health / Salvation / Protection of the Roman People).



Masolino da Panicale, *The Miracle of the Snows* (c. 1400-1430), National Museum of Capodimonte, Naples

The icon's origins and arrival in Rome are shrouded in mystery. According to legend, it is the work of Saint Luke the Evangelist, painted on a tabletop crafted by Saint Joseph and, in some versions, used by the Lord at the Last Supper. According to the *Roman Pontifical*, it was brought to Rome by Saint Helena in the fourth century.

By another tradition, Pope Gregory the Great had the icon carried in procession seven times around the city of Rome during the Black Plague of 590. Having been a Roman envoy to Constantinople prior to becoming Pope, Gregory may have got this idea from the regular processions

through the streets of Marian icons, such as the *Hodegetria*, that he had witnessed there. In any case, during the final circuit, Gregory saw a vision of Saint Michael the Archangel standing above Hadrian's Mausoleum and sheathing his sword to signal the plague's cessation. Thereafter, the building was known as *Castel Sant' Angelo*, the Castle of the Holy Angel.

Repeatedly overpainted through the centuries, and encrusted with jewels, the icon underwent extensive restoration in 2017-2018 in the Vatican Museum. Its restored features seem (to my untrained eye) similar to paintings of the Virgin and Saints from Saint Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai dating to the year 600. Like them, the *Salus Populi Romani* may well be a rare and precious example of an ancient Christian image that survived the depredations of the eighth century iconoclastic heresy.

The icon has been the focus of veneration by numerous Popes as well as by Saint Ignatius of Loyola and the Society of Jesus. Unsurprisingly, then, the Jesuit Pope Francis has a particular devotion to the *Salus Populi Romani*, which he visits before and after all his journeys outside Rome. He has also arranged to be buried in Santa Maria Maggiore's *Capella Paolina* (Pauline Chapel), which houses the icon.



Salus Populi Romani (after 2018 restoration)

The Bethlehem of the West

Another historic name for Santa Maria Maggiore, dating back to the seventh century, is Saint Mary of the Crib (*Sancta Maria ad Praesepe*). This title derives from the presence of relics of the Manger of Bethlehem in the crypt or *confessio* under the High Altar. Also among the basilica's artistic treasures is what is believed to be the world's oldest carved Nativity set, sculpted in Carrera marble by Arnolfo di Cambio in 1291.

The crypt chapel dates to Pope Sixtus' rebuilding of the basilica in 434, when it was constructed with stones from the Holy Land to reproduce Bethlehem's Grotto of the Nativity. The relics of the Manger—five planks of sycamore wood—arrived in Rome in the year 644, a gift of Saint Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem, to Pope Theodore I, a native of Jerusalem who had fled to Rome at the time of the Muslim conquests in the 630s.

These relics raise an interesting question of biblical archeology. Numerous scholarly commentaries on Saint Luke's Gospel assert that the manger of Bethlehem must have been a feeding trough *carved from stone*—since wood was far too precious a commodity for such a use. On a visit to the Holy Land in 2022, our guide showed us multiple examples of biblical-era stone troughs that he explained were just like the one in which Mary placed the newborn Jesus.

The ancient written evidence is sparse. Origen of Alexandria wrote in *Contra Celsum* (c. 248), "In Bethlehem is pointed out the cave where He was born, and the manger in the cave where he was wrapped in swaddling clothes." In a sermon preached around the year 400, Saint Jerome—who lived in a cave adjacent to the Grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and who is buried in Santa Maria Maggiore—wrote with disapproval that the original manger, "made of clay," had been replaced with a new one, made of silver. Apparently, feeding troughs in New Testament times could not only be carved from stone but also fashioned from a composite of rocks, straw, and mud.

And yet, it strains credibility that Sophronius and Theodore, both canonized saints of the Church who lived in the Holy Land, were either the perpetrators or dupes of a deliberate hoax. By the seventh century, then, the idea that at least part of the manger had been made of cedar wood must have carried some plausibility even in the Holy Land itself.

Here, again, the 1917 *Catholic Encyclopedia* comes to our aid with the ingenious suggestion that while the manger itself was probably carved limestone, the relics in Santa Maria Maggiore were part of a wooden



Giovanni di Paolo, *The Procession of Saint Gregory* (c. 1470), Louvre, Paris

frame in which it rested. Scientific analysis has shown that the relics come from a species of cedar native to Palestine dating from around the first century. Beyond that, it's impossible to determine their authenticity.

In such cases, I fall back on what I like to call “the incarnational principle of the thing.” That is, the relics in Santa Maria Maggiore *might* come from the manger in which Mary placed the newborn Jesus. And even with just a small probability, that “might” makes all the difference. For it reminds us that a tangible manger really did once exist—if not this one then another one like it. Christianity is grounded neither in timeless myth nor in abstract philosophy but in God’s actual interventions among real people who lived in specific times and places in history. The relics of the manger in Santa Maria Maggiore thus cohere with our faith’s central affirmation: “*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us*” (John 1:14). And that’s really all we need to know when we kneel before them and worship the Lord’s holy Incarnation.



Holy Crib Reliquary, Santa Maria Maggiore

The Mosaics

Although the building has been renovated many times since its construction in the fifth century—with bits of Romanesque, Renaissance, and Baroque added here and there—the main part of Santa Maria Maggiore’s interior remains unmistakably an imperial Roman basilica: a tall and wide nave with side aisles separated by colonnades of re-used Athenian marble pillars, and, at the east end, a triumphal arch and semi-circular apse.

The building’s oldest and (to my mind) finest artistic treasures are the many mosaics adorning the walls. Most of these mosaics, depicting biblical stories, date to the fifth century. One could spend hours taking them all in. But the basilica’s crowning glory, so to speak, is the breathtaking apse mosaic of the Coronation of the Virgin, executed by the Franciscan friar Jacopo Torriti in the year 1295, which dominates the nave.



Jacopo Torriti, *Coronation of the Virgin* (1296)
Apse Mosaic, Santa Maria Maggiore

The Holy Door

Like the other papal basilicas in Rome, Santa Maria Maggiore has a Holy Door (*Porta Sancta*), which normally remains sealed shut from the inside, and is opened to visiting pilgrims only during Jubilee Years, which come around every quarter-century.

This practice harks back to the Old Testament Years of Jubilee, described in Leviticus 25, which took place every fiftieth year. Indentured servants were freed, exiles were allowed to return home, debts were forgiven, and the land rested a season from cultivation and harvest. The inscription on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia (cast in at the Whitechapel foundry in London in 1752) is taken from this part of Leviticus: “*Proclaim Liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof*” (25:10, AV).

Entering a papal basilica through the Holy Door evokes Psalm verses associated with the ascent to the Jerusalem Temple: “*Open to me the gates*

of righteousness, that I may enter in through them and give thanks to the Lord” (118:19). It also anticipates our final entrance into heaven: *“Blessed are those who wash their robes . . . that they may enter the city by the gates”* (Revelation 22:14).

It so happens that this year, 2025, is a holy year. The Santa Maria Maggiore bronze door, fashioned in 2000 as “a symbol of reconciliation with God, and a new beginning,” was opened by Pope Francis on January 1st, and will remain open for the rest of this year. Maybe it’s time for another Roman pilgrimage. 

The Rev. John D. Alexander, Ph.D. is Superior of the Society of Mary in the United States.



SOCIETY OF MARY 2024 ANNUAL MASS

Members of the Society of Mary gathered at the Cathedral Church of Saint Paul the Apostle in Springfield, Illinois, on Saturday, October 12—a beautiful Autumn day—for the Society’s 2024 Annual Mass.

The Rite I liturgy took the form of a Solemn Pontifical Mass according to the Sarum Use. The Rt. Rev. Brian K. Burgess, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Springfield, presided from the Throne, the Very Reverend Andrew S. Hook, Dean, celebrated; the Rev. John D. Alexander, Superior of the Society of Mary, preached; Fr. Robert Armidon of Elkhart, Indiana, served as Deacon.

Approximately 30 people were in attendance. Society of Mary members present included Fr. John Conner (Edwardsville, Illinois), Fr. Carlos de la Torre (Chicago, Illinois), and Fr. David and Elizabeth Baumann and family (Salem, Illinois).

The Propers were those of Our Lady of the Rosary (October 7th). The Mass setting was the *Missa Marialis*, sung in English by the congregation. Mr. Peter Roeder, the Cathedral’s Director of Music, capably provided the organ accompaniment.

The proceedings began with recitation of the Angelus from the back of the church, followed by the Entrance Hymn “Hail, Holy Queen Enthroned Above.” The liturgy commenced on a penitential note with recitation of the Decalogue, Confession and Absolution, followed by singing of the *Kyrie eleison*.

After the first reading (Acts 12:10-14), a plainchant *Magnificat* took the place of a psalm, followed by the sequence hymn “The Angel Gabriel from heaven came.” Following the Gospel (Luke 1:26-38) and sermon, the liturgy continued with the Prayer for the Whole State of Christ’s Church, followed by the Peace.

Peter Roeder chanted the Latin minor proper for the Offertory, followed by the Hymn “Sing we of the Blessed Mother” to the tune



High Altar, Cathedral Church of Saint Paul, Springfield



Luncheon following the Annual Mass

Rustington. The Eucharistic Prayer was the Roman Canon from *The Anglican Service Book*. The Ablutions Hymn was “Sing of Mary, pure and lowly” from *The 1940 Hymnal*.

Following the Pontifical Blessing, Dismissal, and Last Gospel, a concluding Solemn Procession around the Church was accompanied by the Lourdes Hymn, “Immaculate Mary, your praises we sing.” Most of those present then retired to the Cathedral café for a delicious and convivial buffet luncheon featuring country fried chicken.

The 2025 Annual Mass has been scheduled for Saturday, October 18th at Grace Church in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, as part of their annual Walsingham Pilgrimage. **AVE**



SERMON AT THE ANNUAL MASS

Saturday 12 October 2024
Cathedral Church of Saint Paul
Springfield Illinois

(Our Lady of the Rosary)

Acts 1:12-14

Luke 1:26-38

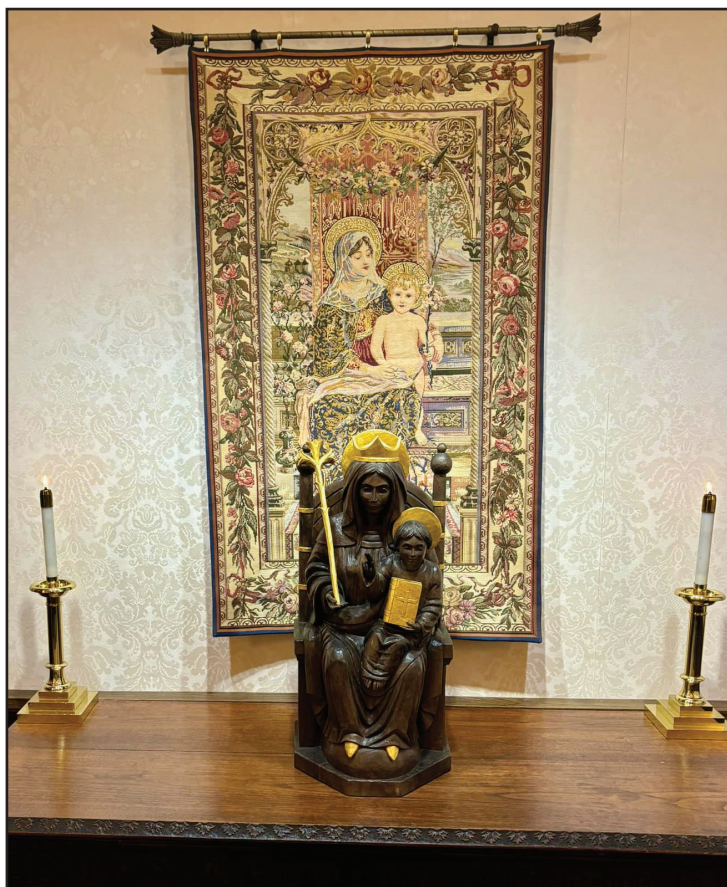
The two readings that we've just heard appear to be the New Testament's first and last mentions of the Blessed Virgin Mary by name during her earthly life: in the Gospel, at the Annunciation in Nazareth; in the reading from Acts, with the disciples in the Upper Room after her Son's Ascension into heaven.

Outside the New Testament, later writings and traditions tell us about Mary's life before the Annunciation, including her conception and birth to her parents Joachim and Anna, as well as her childhood and upbringing in the Temple at Jerusalem. Other traditions tell us of the later years of her life, including her living with John the Beloved Disciple in Ephesus, in what is today Turkey, and again, back in Jerusalem, her falling asleep or Dormition at the end of her earthly life, followed by her bodily Assumption into heaven.

But whatever credibility we accord these stories—and I find some of them very credible indeed—they belong to Holy Tradition and not to the Sacred Scriptures. So, again, in the canonical New Testament, the first glimpse we get of Mary is at the Annunciation in Nazareth, and the last glimpse we get, at least of her earthly life, is in the Upper Room in Jerusalem in the days between the Ascension and Pentecost.

(I realize that I'm leaving aside Saint John's vision of the woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars, in Revelation 12, which is why I was careful to say that these are the first and last glimpses we get in the New Testament of Mary, *mentioned by name, during her earthly life.*)

In any case, both these glimpses of Mary appear in the writings of Saint Luke the Evangelist, the author of both the Gospel bearing his name and the Acts of the Apostles. And the parallels between these two glimpses of Mary in Luke's writings are striking.



Walsingham Statue from Holy Trinity, Danville, Illinois,
at the Society of Mary 2024 Annual Mass

At the Annunciation in Nazareth, the Son of God is about to come down from heaven to take flesh in the Virgin's womb. Conversely, in the Upper Room, the crucified and risen Lord has just returned to his Father in heaven. So here, we see the Blessed Virgin just before and just after her Son's earthly Incarnation.

In both episodes what comes next is a descent of the Holy Spirit. At the Annunciation, the Angel Gabriel promises Mary: *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."* And in the Upper Room, the apostles have just received the Lord's promise before his Ascension: *"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth."*

Furthermore, in both cases, the Holy Spirit's descent brings about a birth. At the Annunciation, Mary is empowered to be the Mother of God and so bring Christ to birth. And at Pentecost, the apostles are empowered to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth and so bring the Church to birth. Thus, Pentecost is sometimes called the birthday of the Church.

Part of the traditional interpretation of these verses is that Mary's prayers in the Upper Room are instrumental in obtaining for the apostles the gifts of grace that they will receive on the Day of Pentecost. For among those present that day, she alone already knows what it is to experience the Holy Spirit descending in power.

The Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, in the Church's calendar this past Monday on October 7th, reminds us that the Holy Rosary is one key spiritual practice by which we ask our Lady's prayers for the gifts of the Holy Spirit as we seek to be faithful to our own God-given vocations in our own day.

According to tradition, the Blessed Virgin Mary gave the Holy Rosary to Saint Dominic Guzman, founder of the Dominican Order, in the year 1208, when he was in southern France on a preaching mission against the Albigensian heresy. Before that time, Christians were already using beaded strings to recite 150 times a rudimentary form of the prayer we know today as the Hail Mary. (Since there are 150 psalms, this method of reciting the Hail Mary 150 times was known as the Marian psalter.)

But the new element that Dominic introduced, following Mary's instructions, was interspersing these prayers with sermons or spoken meditations on the various episodes in the course of our Lord's incarnation, death, and resurrection. Up until this point Dominic had not been able to make any headway in converting the Albigensians back to the Catholic faith. But this combination of prayers interspersed with meditations on the joyful, sorrowful, and glorious mysteries became a powerful spiritual weapon against a heresy denying both the goodness of God's material creation and the reality of the Lord's Incarnation, death, and bodily Resurrection. In this way, the Holy Rosary enabled Dominic to fulfill his vocation to restore the Catholic faith in the south of France.

However, at various times in history, the October 7th commemoration has also been known as Our Lady of Victory. This title commemorates the naval Battle of Lepanto on October 7th, 1571, when, against all odds, the fleet of the Holy League, a coalition of Christian states, defeated a much larger fleet of the Ottoman Turks. By checking the Ottoman naval power in the Mediterranean, this victory helped

ensure the survival of Christian civilization in southern Europe. And credit for the victory went to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in response to a massive outpouring of prayer organized by dozens of rosary guilds and confraternities then active in Italy and other Catholic countries. So, both titles, Our Lady of Victory and Our Lady of the Rosary, are highly appropriate for this observance.

We see a pattern: the apostles in the Upper Room, Saint Dominic in southern France, the beleaguered mariners of the Holy League in the Ionian Sea. All wondering what happens next, all wondering how they can possibly carry on in their mission against seemingly insurmountable odds. In all three cases, Our Lady's prayers made all the difference, and they can make the same difference for us in our struggles as well.

Again, the perfect vehicle for seeking Our Lady's prayers is precisely the Holy Rosary, in which we ask her, again and again, to pray for us sinners, now, and at the hour of our death. Contrary to the misperceptions of some, this devotion to Mary leads us not away from Jesus but towards him—by focusing our attention on his life, death, and Resurrection. So, in the concluding prayer, we ask God to grant that by meditating on these mysteries of the Holy Rosary, we may imitate what they contain, and obtain what they promise. AVE

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