

A “New” Marian Feastday for an Old Marian Title

On May 21, the Church will observe a new obligatory Memorial of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church. There are several unusual things about this celebration. Although it's a new feast, the Roman Missal already has all the proper prayers for the Mass, as this has been an optional votive Mass since the 1980s. (A new set of readings has been assigned for the Mass, and a new prayer composed for the Liturgy of the Hours.) Whereas some local churches have been celebrating this title of Mary at various times, now the whole Latin Church will observe the Memorial on the same day.

It will be a moveable feast, celebrated on a different calendar day each year. Most feasts are on set days, but this one is affected by the fluctuating date for Easter. It will be celebrated on the Monday after Pentecost, which is the 50th day after Easter. Pentecost is considered the Church's birth day, since it commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles and the beginning of their witnessing to the Risen Christ.

The title “Mother of the Church” expresses a concept that goes back to the early Church, but was not much used until modern times. John's Gospel describes the crucified Christ saying to Mary, “Woman, behold, your son,” and to John, “Behold, your mother.” One interpretation is that Mary is given a role as the mother of the believing community (personified by John) and is accepted by them as such. The Acts of the Apostles states that Mary was in the Upper Room when the Holy Spirit came. Not only was she present for the birth of Jesus, she was also present for the birth of the Church, and is acclaimed as the mother of both. This is a reason for setting this Memorial on the day after Pentecost, the Church's birthday, rather than on a fixed calendar day.

In the 5th Century two significant Church leaders promoted the idea of Mother of the Church, if not the exact title. St. Augustine said that Mary was the mother of the members of Christ, because she cooperated with the rebirth of the faithful into the Church. St. Leo the Great said that the birth of the Head was also the birth of the body, thus indicating that Mary is not only the Mother of Christ, but also of his Mystical Body, the Church.

At the end of Vatican II's third session in 1964, Blessed Paul VI declared Mary as “Mother of the Church, that is to say of all Christian people, the faithful as well as the pastors, who call her the most loving Mother” and established that “the Mother of God should be further honored and invoked by the entire Christian people by this tenderest of titles.” During the 1975 Holy Year, the pope proposed a votive Mass in honor of Blessed Mary, Mother of the Church, which was later inserted into the Roman Missal.

On Feb. 11, 2018, the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, the Vatican Congregation of Divine Worship, in its decree establishing the universal celebration of the day, described the current pope's intention this way:

Having attentively considered how greatly the promotion of this devotion might encourage the growth of the maternal sense of the Church in the pastors, religious and faithful, as well as a growth of genuine Marian piety, Pope Francis has decreed that the Memorial of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, should be inscribed in the Roman Calendar on the Monday after Pentecost and be now celebrated every year.

This celebration will help us to remember that growth in the Christian life must be anchored to the Mystery of the Cross, to the oblation of Christ in the Eucharistic Banquet and to the Mother of the Redeemer and Mother of the Redeemed, the Virgin who makes her offering to God.

These Scriptures will be used at Mass that day:

1st Reading: Gen. 3:9-15, 20 (*mother of all the living*)
OR Acts 1:12-14 (*Mary praying with the Apostles in the Upper Room*)

Resp. Psalm: Ps.87, 1-2, 3 & 5, 6-7
R: *Glorious things are told of you, O city of God.*

Gospel Acclamation:
*O happy Virgin, you gave birth to the Lord;
O blessed mother of the Church,
you warm our hearts with the Spirit of your Son Jesus Christ.*

Gospel: John 19:25-34 (*Behold, your Son. Behold, your mother.*)

Prayer for the Office of Readings, Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer:

O God, Father of mercies,
whose Only Begotten Son, as he hung upon the Cross,
chose the Blessed Virgin Mary, his Mother,
to be our Mother also,
grant, we pray, that with her loving help
your Church may be more fruitful day by day
and, exulting in the holiness of her children,
may draw to her embrace all the families of the peoples.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.