

Mary, Mother of the Church

The Blessed Virgin Mary, our model and mother, intercedes for and consoles the Church, the Body of Christ.

Invaluable to the Christian life is a warm and loving devotion to Mary, the Mother of God. I was blessed to grow up in a home where the rosary was prayed daily, even on the busiest and most difficult days. There was always a statue of the Blessed Mother in our home and other reminders of Mary's love for us, her children. At school, May processions culminated in the crowning of a statue as we all sang to Our Lady.

In time, I got into the habit of praying a daily rosary, and as I meditated on the life of Jesus through the eyes of Mary, my vocation came into sharper focus. In my final years at Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, I often went to the beautiful grotto up the mountain, a national shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes. In the quiet of that grotto, my love for Mary deepened as I prepared to serve the church as a priest.

But it was not until I visited Lourdes, France, for the first time in the 1980s, that I was overwhelmed with the healing power of the Blessed Mother's intercession. In that holy place, where Mary revealed herself to St. Bernadette as the Immaculate Conception, I experienced a wonderful healing, cleansing and renewal of body, mind and spirit. Over the years, I have returned to Lourdes many times, often with pilgrims, many of whom suffer from serious illnesses. I visit with them before they go into the baths and, when feasible, pray with them after they emerge. The purifying love and powerful intercession of Mary is palpable in those encounters.

My love for the Blessed Mother likewise intensified when I visited the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe for the first time in 1990 and looked upon her miraculous image. The experience filled me with joy and opened my eyes to Mary's role in the evangelization of the world.

Inspired by these experiences, Marian devotion has become an essential part of my life. Like every good Knight of Columbus, I carry a rosary in my pocket. My father's own K of C rosary also remains in the little chapel in my residence. When the house

is quiet at night, I often slip into the chapel and pray with my dad's rosary. As I do so, I think about all the people I met during the day and the many people who asked me to pray for them. As the day comes to a close, nothing is more consoling than to spend a little time in conversation with Mary.

I also look upon a beautiful statue of the Blessed Mother that I received from my mentor and friend, Cardinal James Hickey, when I became a bishop many years ago. When I look upon that image, I never fail to pray for the cardinal, whose example and memory continue to influence my life so deeply.

That devotion is only intensified by the tragedy in Paris April 15, when fire damaged Notre Dame - French for "Our Lady" - Cathedral. Beyond being a sacred space, it is a world treasure.

During the month of May, we honor Mary in a special way, and on June 10, the Monday after Pentecost, we will celebrate her as the Mother of the Church. Her virginity symbolizes the truth and purity of the church's teaching and the sacrifice that the church daily offers. Her motherhood symbolizes the maternal care that the church gives to us, her children, reborn by water and the Holy Spirit. This love reaches us through many channels, not the least of which are the church's ministries of healing and charity.

These days, though, it is the church - sinful in her members - that needs healing. Sins against young people and the failure of church leaders to respond continue to haunt and hobble the Body of Christ. Many practical steps still need to be taken to ensure that bishops and other leaders are held accountable for their actions. But those steps alone, important as they are, won't fully heal the church's wounds. For that, we must turn our gaze toward Mary, asking her prayers that the church might be purified, cleansed, healed and renewed.