



"O name of Mary! Joy in the heart, honey in the mouth, melody to the ear of Her devout clients!"  
----St. Anthony of Padua +1231

### History of the Feast

In 1513, a feast of "The Holy Name of Mary" was granted by Papal indult [Pope Julius II] to the diocese of Cuenca in Spain. It was assigned with proper Office on September 15, the octave day of Our Lady's Nativity. With the reform of the Breviary undertaken by Pope St. Pius V, the feast was abolished, only to be reinstated by his successor, Pope Sixtus V, who changed the date to September 17. From there, the feast spread to the Archdiocese of Toledo [1622] and, eventually, to all of Spain and to the Kingdom of Naples [1671].

Throughout this time, permission to celebrate the feast was given to various religious orders in a prudent manner as has been the custom throughout Church history regarding feast-days, their dates, offices, liturgical expression, etc. However, this Feast of the Holy Name of Mary would one day be joyfully extended to the Universal Church, and this on account of rather dramatic circumstances involving one of Poland's great military heroes, John Sobieski [1629-1696].

While acting as field-marshal under King John Casimir, Sobieski had raised a force of 8,000 men and enough provisions to withstand a siege of Cossacks and Tartars, who were forced to retire unsuccessfully and at a loss. In 1672, under the reign of Michael Wisniowiecki, Sobieski engaged and defeated the Turkish army, who lost 20,000 men at Chocim.

'When King Michael died, Sobieski, a beloved hero at that point, was crowned King of Poland. But, even before his coronation could take place, he would again engage and drive back the Turkish hordes in separate battles including the raising of the siege at Trembowla. Once crowned, he advanced to the Ruthenian provinces, where, having too few soldiers to attack the Turks, who outnumbered his men ten to one, he literally wore out the enemy, garrisoning his troops at Zurawno. Because of this heroic effort, he was able to regain, by treaty, a good portion of the Ukraine.

With both Turks and Poles weary from battle, peace reigned for a time . . . until the Turks set their sights on Austria, setting out through Hungary with an army of approximately 300,000 men. Fleeing from Austria, Emperor Leopold asked for Sobieski's assistance, a plea which was seconded by the Papal Nuncio. In July 1683, the Grand Vizier Kara Mustapha had reached Vienna and laid siege to the city, which was being defended by only 15,000 men. Sobieski set out for Vienna in August, his forces marching behind the banner of the Blessed Virgin. Passing by the Sanctuary of Mary in Czestochowa, they implored Our Lady's help and blessing. Writing centuries later to the bishops of Poland, Pope Pius XII recalled the supplications of Sobieski to Mary at the Sanctuary on Jasna Gora [i.e., "Bright Hill"], the site of the Shrine:

"To the same Heavenly Queen, on Clear Mountain, the illustrious John Sobieski, whose eminent valor freed Christianity from the attacks of its old enemies, confided himself."  
[Letter, *Cum iam lustris abeat*, 1951]

In September, the men joined with the German troops under John George, Elector of Saxony, and Prince Charles of Lorraine. On the eighth day of the month, the Feast of the Nativity of Mary, Sobieski prepared himself for the ensuing conflict by the reception of Holy Communion.

Battle was engaged before the walls of Vienna on September 12, 1683, with Sobieski seemingly put to flight by "the fierce Turkish forces. However, this retreat was a minor setback only. The Hussars renewed their assault and charged the Turks, this time sending the enemy into a retreat. The combat raged on, until Sobieski finally stormed the enemy camp. The Turkish forces were routed, Vienna

was saved, and Sobieski sent the "Standard of the Prophet" to Pope Innocent XI along with the good news. In a letter to the Pontiff, Sobieski summed up his victory in these words: *Veni, vidi, Deus vicit* ----"I came, I saw, God conquered!" To commemorate this glorious victory, and render thanksgiving to God and honor to Our Lady for their solicitude in the struggle, Pope Innocent XI extended "The Feast of the Holy Name of Mary" to the Universal Church. Although the feast was originally celebrated on the Sunday after the Nativity of Mary, Pope St. Pius X [+1914] decreed that it be celebrated on September 12, in honor of the victory of the Catholic forces under John Sobieski. The history of this feast reminds us in some ways of that of "Our Lady of the Rosary," which was instituted to celebrate and commemorate the victory of the Catholic forces over the Turkish navy at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571: "And thus Christ's faithful warriors, prepared to sacrifice their life and blood for the welfare of their Faith and their country, proceeded undauntedly to meet their foe near the Gulf of Corinth; while those who were unable to join them formed a band of pious supplicants, who called on Mary and, as one, saluted Her again and again in the words of the Rosary, imploring Her to grant victory to their companions engaged in battle. Our sovereign Lady did grant Her aid." [Pope Leo XIII, *Supremi Apostolatus*, 1883]

### Pondering the Meaning of "Mary"

In Hebrew, the name Mary is *Miryam*. In Our Lady's time, Aramaic was the spoken language, and the form of the name then in use was *Mariam*. Derived from the root, *merur*, the name signifies "bitterness."

Miryam was the name of the sister of Moses; and the ancient rabbinical scholars perceiving in it a symbol of the slavery of the Israelites at the hands of the Egyptians, held that Miryam was given this name because she was born during the time of the oppression of her people. The Old Testament, chronicling as it does the "Time of Expectation" of the Redeemer, is filled with "types," or foreshadowings of people and events which would be made manifest during the "Time of Redemption," when Christ walked the earth. Jesus Mary and Joseph, the Sacrament of Baptism, the Eucharist, the Sacrifice of Calvary, etc., are all foreshadowed in the Old Testament, but we view them there "through a glass darkly," so to speak, under the guidance of the Catholic Church, which alone possesses the authority to interpret the sacred texts.

Miryam, the sister of Moses is a "type" of the Blessed Virgin. Miryam was a prophetess who sang a canticle of thanksgiving after the safe crossing of the Red Sea and the destruction of Pharaoh's army; Mary prophesied in Her Magnificat that all generations would honor Her, and She sang of how God would topple the proud and raise the lowly. Miryam supported her brother, Moses, the liberator of his people; as the Co-Redemptrix who united Her sufferings to those of the One Mediator on Calvary, Mary labored alongside the Redeemer, the true Liberator of His people. Just as Jesus was the "antitype" [i.e., fulfillment] of Moses, so was Our Lady the "antitype" of Miryam, the fullest realization of the courageous woman standing beside, and laboring with, the one who comes to free captives.

Throughout the centuries, Saints and scholars have put forth different interpretations for the name "Mary." A mixture of etymology and devotion has combined to produce an interesting array of meanings:

"Mary means enlightener, because She brought forth the Light of the world. In the Syriac tongue, Mary signifies Lady." [St. Isidore of Seville +636]

"Let me say something concerning this name also, which is interpreted to mean Star of the sea, and admirably suits the Virgin Mother." [St. Bernard +1153]

"Mary means Star of the sea, for as mariners are guided to port by the ocean star, so Christians attain to glory through Mary's maternal intercession." [St. Thomas Aquinas +1274]

"This most holy, sweet and worthy name was 'eminently fitted to so holy, sweet and worthy a virgin. For Mary means a bitter sea, star of the sea, the illuminated or illuminatrix. Mary is interpreted Lady. Mary is a bitter sea to the demons; to men She is the Star of the sea; to the Angels She is illuminatrix, and to all creatures She is Lady.'" [St. Bonaventure +1274]

"God the Father gathered all the waters together and called them the seas or *maria* [Latin, seas]. He gathered all His grace together and called it Mary or Maria . . . This immense treasury is none other than Mary whom the Saints call the 'treasury of the Lord.' From Her fullness all men are made rich;" [St. Louis de Montfort +1716]

The hallowed title, "Star of the Sea," dates back to St. Jerome [+420]. It has been said that the great Doctor had originally used the phrase *Stilla Maris* to describe Mary as a "drop of the sea," the sea being God. A copyist's error, then, could have resulted in *stilla* [drop] being written down as *stella* [star]. Of course, the hallowed title, "Star of the Sea," suits Our Lady perfectly:

" 'And the Virgin's name was Mary.' Let us say a few things about this name, which can be interpreted to mean Star of the sea, an apt designation for the Virgin Mother. She is most beautifully likened to a star, for a star pours forth its light without losing anything of its nature. She gave us Her Son without losing anything of Her virginity. The glowing rays of a star take nothing away from its beauty. Neither has the Son taken anything away from His Mother's integrity.

"She is that noble star of Jacob, illuminating the whole world, penetrating from the highest heavens to the deepest depths of Hell. The warmth of Her brilliance shines in the minds of men, encouraging virtue, extinguishing vice. She is that glorious star lighting the way across this vast ocean of life, glowing with merits, guiding by example.

"When you find yourself tossed by the raging storms on this great sea of life, far from land, keep your eyes fixed on this Star to avoid disaster. When the winds of temptation or the rocks of tribulation threaten, look up to the Star, call upon Mary!" [St. Bernard, Second Homily on the *Missus Est*]

The interpretation "Lady" for Mary was also proposed by St. Jerome, based on the Aramaic word, *mar*, meaning "Lord". This would render the meaning "Lady" in the regal or noble sense [as in "Lord and Lady."] Catholic sensibility, however, recognizing in Mary the simple dignity of a Mother, as well as the grandeur of a Queen, did not hesitate to add an affectionate touch to this majestic title. Mary is not just "Lady;" She is "Madonna," Notre Dame-----i.e., She is Our Lady. This aspect of Mary -----"Lady" or "Mistress"-----is close to Our Lord's Heart. We read in the Scriptures how, for a time, the youthful Christ made Himself "subject" to Her and St. Joseph, an act of Divine condescension which caused St. Bernard to wonder:

"Which shall we admire first? The tremendous submission of the Son of God, or the tremendous God-given dignity of the Mother of God? Both are marvels: both amazing. When God obeys a woman, it is humility without precedent. When a woman commands her God, it is sublime beyond measure." [First Homily on the *Missus Est*]

It is not difficult to see why these various interpretations of the name "Mary" should have been proposed and cherished, for they encapsulate many of our Marian doctrines and beliefs. "Bitter sea [mara = bitter; yam = sea]," for instance, in addition to the interpretation given by St. Bonaventure, also calls to mind Our Lady's Seven Sorrows and the sword which "pierced" Her soul on Calvary, recalling the lamentation of the mother-in-law of Ruth, who had lost a husband and two sons: "Call me not Noemi, [that is, beautiful,] but call me *Mara*, [that is, bitter,] for the Almighty hath quite filled me with bitterness [Rt. 1: 20]." *Maror* are "bitter herbs," such as are found on the seder plate at Passover.

The "Illuminated" points us to St. John's apocalyptic image of the "Woman clothed with the Sun," a dual image encompassing both the Catholic Church and Mary, the Mother and Image of the Church. In addition, the "Illuminated" has also been rendered as the "Enlightener" and, like St. Bernard, St. Aelred [+1167] combines this meaning with that of the *Stella Maris* in a powerful passage:

"Therefore a certain Star has risen for us today: Our Lady, Saint Mary. Her name means *Star of the sea*; no doubt the *Star of this sea* which is the world. Therefore, we ought to lift up our eyes to this Star that has appeared on earth today in order that She may lead us, in order that She may enlighten us, in order that She may show us these steps so that we shall know them, in order that She may help us so that we may be able to ascend. And therefore it is a beautiful thing that Mary is placed in this stairway of which we are speaking, there where we must begin to climb. As the Evangelist says, Jacob begot Joseph, the husband of Mary, so immediately at the very moment of our conversion She appears to us and receives us into Her care and enlightens us in Her light and accompanies us along this laborious path." [Sermon 24, For the Nativity of Holy Mary]

There is another interpretation for the name "Mary" which is quite interesting in that it relates to the Church as well. This supposes the name to be derived from the Hebrew verb *mara*, meaning "to be fleshy or robust. In the East, such descriptions implying corpulence were used to indicate beauty and fecundity. Here, then, Our Lady's name would indicate "The Beautiful One," quite fitting for the Immaculate Conception. [*Tota Pulchra Es, M aria!*-----"You are all beautiful, Mary!"] The Psalms prophetically describe the Church in this manner, all alluding to the fruitfulness and spiritual gifts of the Holy Ghost:

"The mountain of God is a fat mountain. A curdled mountain, a fat mountain . . . A mountain in which God is well pleased to dwell." [Ps. 67:16-17]

This image resonates with the prophecy of Isaias concerning the New Dispensation [and the Church], and with the words of Our Lord:

"And in the last days the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be prepared on the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills, and all the nations shall flow unto it [Is. 2: 2] . . . You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a mountain cannot be hid." [Mt. 5: 14]

It is here that the Psalms intersect with St. John's Apocalyptic vision, to present the maternal function of the Church, a virginal maternity mirroring that of Our Lady, which begets new "brethren" of Christ, new sons and daughters of Mary ["the rest of Her seed," as Catholics are called by St. John in his Apocalypse] and new children of God the Father:

"But as many as received Him, He gave them power to be made the sons of God, to them that believe in His name. Who are born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." [Jn. 1: 12-13]

"The foundations thereof are in the holy mountains: The Lord loveth the gates of Sion above all the tabernacles of Jacob. Glorious things are said of Thee, O city of God . . . Shall not Sion say: This man and that man is born in Her? And the Highest Himself hath founded Her." [Ps. 86: 1-3, 5]

The inspired texts prophesy that the Church will be "exalted"-----It shall be exalted above the hills, and all the nations shall flow unto it. So, too, will be the Mother of the Church, She who prophesied that "all generations shall call Me blessed." Another proposed meaning for the Blessed Virgin's name reflects this exaltation, the majesty of the Queen of Heaven. It derives from ancient Canaanite literature, where the word *mrym* [pronounced somewhat like Maryam] means "height" [sharing the same derivation as *marom*, the Hebrew word for "height"]. This would render Mary's name as "Highness" or "The Exalted One."

This fascinating-----and very, very Catholic-----desire to explore the meaning and depths of the holy name of "Mary" is not merely a pious pursuit, unrelated to any theological concerns. In the various interpretations set forth, a wealth of Marian doctrine is made manifest, not in the clinical language of theology, but in rich, colorful meditations on Our Lady's name, and sacred truths are explored and taught in language easily comprehended and appreciated by all.

In his fine book, *The Wondrous Childhood of the Most Holy Mother of God*, St. John Eudes [+1680] offers meditations on seventeen interpretations of the name "Mary," taken from the writings of "the Holy Fathers and by some celebrated Doctors. "Among these are "God born of my race," [St. Ambrose] "Rain of the sea, falling at convenient time and season," [St. Peter Canisius] "Myrrh of the Sea," [St. Jerome] and "The hope of those who voyage on the stormy sea of this world." [St. Epiphanius] It is quite clear-----from Scripture, Tradition and history-----that the Church owes so much to Mary, the Mother of the Redeemer and our Mother "in the order of grace." How does the gratitude and affection of Her spiritual children manifest itself in the beautiful Feast of the Holy Name of Mary, and what does this cherished name mean to those who love and venerate the Mother of God?

### **The Virtue and Power of Our Lady's Name**

A balanced view of salvation history will grant to the Blessed Virgin Her proper place in both the Incarnation of the Second Divine Person and in the Kingdom won by Him on Calvary. Therefore, She is venerated with thanksgiving as both the one who, in union with the Blessed Trinity, gave Jesus to the world, and as the one who stood by Him during His Passion, uniting Her "Com-Passion" to His Salvific Passion for the restoration of fallen mankind to the friendship of God. It was prophesied in Eden that the Mother of Christ would be given a share in the work of the One Mediator and, because of this, a unique share in His glory. As had been prophesied by Simeon in the Temple, the soul of the Co-Redemptrix was pierced beneath the Cross on Calvary. The Mother of the Church, who experienced no physical labor pains during the birth of the Incarnate God at Bethlehem, did undergo unimaginable spiritual 'labor pains' as Her Son hung on the Cross, dying the cruelest death imaginable. And God, in His wisdom, has decreed that these sufferings of Mary count for something, and something indescribably precious, in the economy of salvation. They were not the sufferings which redeemed humanity, like those of Jesus. They were not needed in order to augment or complete the superabundant Sacrifice of Jesus, which alone could and did atone for all the sins of the world. Yet, God decreed that Our Lady unite Her Sufferings to those of Jesus, the Woman of Genesis standing beside Her Seed during the restoration of the world.

Our Lady did this-----suffered as She did-----for us, for the spiritual progeny bequeathed to Her by Jesus in the person of St. John: "Woman, behold Thy son!" Therefore, we truly are brethren of Jesus, "the rest of Her seed:"

"And a great sign appeared in Heaven: A Woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under Her feet, and on Her head a crown of twelve stars: And being with child, She cried travailing in birth, and was in pain to be delivered . . . And She brought forth a man Child, Who was to rule all nations with an iron rod: and Her son was taken up to God, and to His throne . . . And the dragon was angry against the Woman: and went to make war with the rest of Her seed, who keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." [Apoc, 1-2, 5,17]

The Woman prophesied in Eden . . . The Virgin prophesied by Isaias . . . The Beautiful One of the Canticles . . . When the time had finally come, the world knew Her name at last: "And the Virgin's name was Mary." This woman uniquely honored with the title, Co-Redemptrix, was rewarded by Her Lord and Redeemer with a queenly crown in His Kingdom . . . and with the role of Mediatrix of All Graces, to dispense those graces which had cost Her Son so dearly on the Cross.

And so, we call out to this Mother and Queen in confidence: *Ave Maria . . . Salve Regina . . . Ave Maris Stella . . . Ave Regina Caelorum*. Because of this, we honor, respect and set aside in our hearts a special place for Her Holy Name, "Mary," for it was the beacon of our redemption. During the nine months that Jesus rested in His Mother's womb, no one encountered Christ except through Mary, as did the infant St. John the Baptist in the womb of St. Elizabeth. Men and women still, and always will, go to Jesus through Mary:

"Considering things as they are, because God has decided to begin and accomplish His greatest works through the Blessed Virgin ever since He created Her, we can safely believe that He will not change His plan in the time to come, for He is God and therefore does not change in His thoughts or His way of acting." [*True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*]

Mary, the daughter of Joachim and Anne . . . She is not a goddess, not a mythological warrior-queen, not a curious, elusive character recalled through the mists of antiquity. She is a person, a uniquely blessed and honored individual, but a person still. "When you

approach the time for reading about Mary Immaculate," wrote St. Maximilian Kolbe [+1941], "always remember that you are entering into contact with a living, loving person." No wonder, then, that Catholics [members of Christ's Mystical Body and, therefore, the "rest" of Mary's seed] should hold their Blessed Mother's name in such esteem. It reminds us of God's goodness, of His mercy and generosity to struggling mankind:

"The name of Mary is a name of salvation for those who are regenerated; it is the insignia of virtue, the honor of chastity, the sacrifice agreeable to God, the virtue of hospitality, the school of sanctity, a name altogether maternal." [St. Peter Chrysologus +450]

Of course, in a proper understanding of doctrine and Scripture, such a declaration will not be misinterpreted as any contradiction to the words of St. Paul concerning Our Lord and His sacred Name:

"For which cause God also hath exalted Him, and hath given Him a name which is above all names: that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those that are in Heaven, on earth, and under the earth: and that every tongue should confess that the Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father." [Phil. 2: 9-11]

St. Peter Chrysologus did not say that the name of Mary is a "name of salvation." He wrote that "the name of Mary is a name of salvation for those who are regenerated." A person who wishes to follow Christ, yet denies the Mother given to him by Jesus on Calvary, is fooling himself. Through the inspired Gospels, Our Lady has been presented to the world as Advocate and Mediatrix [in the Visitation and Wedding at Cana episodes], and as Spiritual Mother [on Calvary]. Because there are no empty shows or meaningless displays with God, then we are bound to understand Mary's advocacy and spiritual maternity as active, vital components in the life of the soul, for it is the good of souls that moved God to ordain the Incarnation:

"For God so loved the world, as to give His only begotten Son; that whosoever believeth in Him, may not perish, but may have life everlasting [Jn. 3: 16] . . . For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." [Lk. 19: 10]

The Blessed Virgin, then is a Divine bestowal, a gift bequeathed to the Church by Her dying Savior. And Her name? Her name will become more than a name It will be a sign of Our Lord's solicitude, a pledge of His love . . . and a prayer unto itself:

"We scarce remember now that once this name was spoken softly in a time before the *Aves* rang. Perhaps across some threshold it was said, so casually, by one who called to Her, 'Mary.' Then, She might have turned and come, obedient from where the children played together in the dusk: and no one knew that more was said than just a young girl's name."  
[Fr. John W. Lynch, *A Woman Wrapped in Silence*]

The Introit for the Mass of the Feast of the Most Holy Name of Mary, taken from Psalm 44, is an eloquent testimony to the reason we celebrate this beautiful name:

"All the rich among the people shall entreat Thy countenance: after Her shall virgins be brought to the King: Her neighbors shall be brought to Thee in gladness and rejoicing . . . My heart hath uttered a good word: I will speak my works to the King."

We are presented to Christ by His Mother. She presents our needs and petitions to Him; She is the instrument of His mercy and of the disposition of the "Treasury of Grace" won by Him for us on Calvary; She consoles our hearts and through Her maternal care, imparts to Her children whatever peace or happiness we can know in this vale of tears-----nothing less than the peace of Christ. We may struggle to maintain this peace in our bruised and weary hearts, but Our Lady is always ready and eager to share it with us again and again. Yes, the name of Mary, this brief, simple name, speaks volumes to us. "There is hidden in that Divine name [of Mary] a spell so potent," wrote Abbé Orsini, "and of such marvelous sweetness, that merely to pronounce it softens the heart, merely to write it beautifies the style." St. Bonaventure declared the the name of Mary "cannot be pronounced without bringing some grace to him who does so devoutly."

by Mark Alessio

[Catholic Family News](#) Sep 2001