

MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS

Patroness of Australia

Australia and Our Lady Help of Christians

When Cardinal Patrick Moran of Sydney wrote his History of the Catholic Church in Australia, he recalled the laying of the foundation stone of what was to become the first cathedral in this land. His eminence declared:

"Who was the patron selected by the people and their newly arrived pastor, Father Therry, for the Mother Church? Mary, the Immaculate Mother of God, under the special invocation of Help of Christians, was chosen patroness.

In choosing Mary, the young Church was following a sure Catholic instinct. But why the particular title of Help of Christians?

Events had happened in Europe only several years earlier, and this no doubt was still fresh in people's minds. Napoleon Bonaparte had jailed Pope Pius VI who died in goal, after which Pope Pius VII was elected. Just a short time later, he too was jailed by Napoleon, who kept him prisoner at Fontainebleau, 35 miles from Paris. The Holy Father vowed to God that, if he were restored to the Roman See, he would institute a special feast in honour of Mary. Military reverses forced Napoleon to release the Pope, and on May 24th 1814, Pius VII returned in triumph to Rome.

Twelve months later, the Pope decreed that the feast of Mary Help of Christians, be kept on the 24th of May.

The infant Church in Australia had a special reason for turning to Mary. In those early and mostly priestless days, it was largely the Rosary that kept the faith alive. Catholic Australia remained faithful to Mary, and was the first nation to choose her, under the title of Help of Christians, as principal Patroness.

It was in 1844, at the first assembly of bishops ever held in the British dominions since the Reformation, that Mary was re-accorded her place of honour. It was a long way and a long time from Sydney Town to Walshingham; but the Southland was to become her Second Dowry.

Although not officially approved by Rome, 1852 (due to the decree going astray in Bishop Pompallier's mislaid suitcase), our patronal feast was already being celebrated in Sydney as early as 1844. So the *Morning Chronicle* of that year reads: Votive mass of Mary, Help of Christians, the title of which she is patroness of our Ecclesiastical Province. In 1847 a plenary indulgence was granted "to those who receive Holy Communion under the usual conditions, on May the 24th each year." By 1862 and Ordo, still in St. Mary's archives, gives May the 24th as "a double of the first class" (in today's terms, a Solemnity).

It seems likely that it was the choice of the lay Catholics themselves, as they leaned heavily, as the Church did, on Mary's help for the establishment of the institutional church. It was precisely during this priestless period (1802-1819) that Pius VII returned to Rome from exile and instituted the feast 24th of May.

To show that this dramatic episode had deeply impressed and struck a sympathetic chord in the hearts of Irish Catholics in this new nation Australia. In 1816 Edmund Rice asked the Christian Brothers "to offer special prayers to Mary Help of Christians", when their young institution was under threat.

To confirm this, Archbishop Kelly's pastoral letter of 1904 lends strong weight: "The first Catholics here had brought strong devotion to Mary, Help Christians, who was the Patroness selected by the people

and Father Therry for their mother-church, Mary Immaculate under the special invocation of Help of Christians"

Indications are that Father Therry simply watered a Marian seed already planted by church - minded lay people.

While Dr. Polding was away in Rome, Archdeacon McEnroe took it on himself to publish a melodramatic letter on Australia's "real peril of a Russian invasion" during the Crimean War. The whole letter reminds the diocese of Mary's powerful assistance throughout all history as Help of Christians".

In the pioneering Adelaide diocese the first permanent church built there at Morphet Vale was dedicated to Mary Help of Christians, and Bishop Murphy of that diocese was to mention this devotion frequently in his homilies.

The altar at St. Mary's, with its statue of Mary Help of Christians, was erected as a memorial to Fr. Therry's name.

In this remarkable way Australia became the first nation in the world to have, Mary, Help of Christians as Patroness: the first church to celebrate May 24th on a national scale (elsewhere the feast was restricted to Rome and specified places); and the first country to have a mother-cathedral under the same title.

Today we do not need a melodramatic letter, to tell us of things that might or could be.

We live in a very fragile world where mortal sin is glorified.

We do, need to be reminded of Mary's powerful intercession throughout the centuries under the title Help of Christians. We need to pray relentlessly for her power intercession as we enter perseverance and discernment while we are facing a very different enemy, who loves the body, while killing the soul.

Mary Help of Christians, Pray for us

**Mary Help of Christians patroness of Australia
and of the Military Ordinariate (Feast: 24th May)**

Almighty God, deepen in our hearts
our love of Mary Help of Christians.
Through her prayers and under her protection,
may the light of Christ shine over our land.
May Australia be granted harmony, justice and peace.
Grant wisdom to our leaders and integrity to our citizens.
Bless especially the men and women
of the Australian Defence Force and their families.
We ask this through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Mary Help of Christians, pray for us.