

A characteristic of both Eastern and Western Catholics is a strong devotion to Mary, the Mother of God. Images and icons of “the Madonna” (the Blessed Virgin Mary with the Child Jesus) appear in every age. We have named many of our cathedrals, parish churches, and schools in her honour.

Many Catholic homes possess a statue of Mary as the Immaculate Conception or of Our Lady of Fatima. Catholics also hang on their rear-view mirror, carry in their pocket or purse, and pray rosaries: a series of prayers centred on the Lord’s Prayer and the Hail Mary.

Rosaries are so common, many people mistakenly accuse Catholics of worshipping Mary. We make a distinction between “latreia”—which is worship due to God alone—and “dulia,”—which is reverence accorded angels and saints, especially Mary. Oriental Christians call her “Theotokos,” the God-bearer, for she was the Mother of the Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Today is Mother’s Day. On this occasion, we honour those who gave us life. We who have lost our mothers remember them fondly. We visit their graves to recall and manifest our affection. Similarly, we honour Mary, whom Jesus entrusted to the Beloved Disciple John as He lay dying on the Cross. We believe Jesus’ words to Mary, “Woman, behold your son” and to the disciple he loved, “Behold your Mother” (John 19.26–27) are addressed to all believers.

In recent centuries, the Blessed Virgin Mary has purportedly appeared increasingly frequently to poor and unlettered individuals with encouraging and challenging messages. The contents of these occurrences constitute “private revelations.” To be credible, they must be in harmony with Scripture. The Church does not insist on the acceptance of private revelations.

In Mexico in 1531, Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to St. Juan Diego. To prove the authenticity of the apparitions, an image of the Virgin became impressed on his cloak by a miracle. She said to him, “Am I not your Mother?” Devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe is ubiquitous in Latin America and, increasingly, around the world.

In Lourdes, France, in 1858, Mary appeared to an unlettered girl, St. Bernadette Soubirous. She identified herself to the girl with the words, “I am the Immaculate Conception.” She asked that the diocese build a church there and that the priests institute devotional practices. Mary asked Bernadette to dig in the ground and a stream of fresh water flowed from the hole. Sick pilgrims bathe in this water and some are miraculously healed, as certified by medical authorities. Last Sunday, I attended a Mass there in the large underground basilica sponsored by the Order of Malta. Seven thousand faithful attended, including about 1,500 sick and disabled people.

One hundred years ago, on May 13, 1917 at Fatima in Portugal, began a series of six apparitions of Mary to three children, aged 7 to 12, as they pastured the family sheep. Our Lady of Fatima asked the children to pray the rosary for peace to end the Great War and for the conversion of Russia, where Communism had taken power. There were other prophecies, secrets, and eschatological revelations supposedly related to the Second World War and possibly future global wars. The Virgin requested the Consecration of Russia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

The eldest of the children—Lucia Santos—became a Carmelite sister. She died in 2005. Her cousins, Francisco and Jacinta Marto, died because of the Spanish Influenza outbreak of 1919. Yesterday, Pope Francis declared Francisco and Jacinta saints. They are among the youngest to ever be canonized. Like our Blessed Mother, they are interceding for us before God's Throne.

-30-