

SATURDAY IS MARY'S SPECIAL DAY—Our Lady of Fatima in the Light of History

by Father John A. Hardon, S.J. (1947)

Our Lady of Fatima

May 13, 1947 was the thirtieth anniversary of the first apparition of the Blessed Virgin at the grotto of Iria on the outskirts of the little Portuguese town of Fatima. In October of the same year, Our Blessed Mother revealed herself as “The Lady of the Rosary” and asked that all faithful Christians make reparation through her to her Divine Son for the sins of the world. She said:

I promise to help at the hour of death with the graces needed for salvation, whoever, on the first Saturday of five consecutive months shall confess and receive Holy Communion, recite five decades of the Rosary and keep me company for fifteen minutes while meditating on the fifteen mysteries of the Rosary. [1]

It is estimated that over ten million pilgrims have already visited the shrine at Fatima since that memorable Saturday noon in May when “the beautiful Lady come from heaven” first appeared to Lucia de Jesus and her two companions. Countless more have followed the Lady’s bidding and faithfully made the five first Saturdays in her honor and in reparation to the Divine Majesty. Our purpose here will not be to dilate any further on the devotion to Our Lady of Fatima except for one distinctive feature which surrounds the devotion and, in a sense, constitutes it. Mary’s first appearance to the Portuguese children was on a Saturday, and the substance of the message which she gave to the world through them centers about a special consecration of Saturday in her name. Why Saturday? Why not some other day of the week? The answer to this question carries us

back through fifteen hundred years of Catholic history.

Pope Innocent I

Though we may reasonably suppose that the last day of the week was specially dedicated to Our Lady from the first centuries of the Church, the earliest available evidence we have to this effect dates from the Pontificate of St. Innocent I. Towards the close of his eventful reign of sixteen years, Innocent published a letter to the faithful which is now shrouded in a good deal of obscurity on exact details but which substantially decreed that the Saturday of each week was to be observed as a day of abstinence in honor of the Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin.

Pope Urban II

English chroniclers are not fully agreed on the credit which should be given to the Benedictine monk, Alcuin, for assigning the Votive Mass and Office of the Blessed Virgin to Saturday; but popular tradition would favor giving him entire credit for both innovations. Under Urban II, the recitation of the Office of the Blessed Virgin on Saturday was made obligatory on all clerics and monks in communion with Rome, and Votive Masses of the Blessed Virgin were decreed for every Saturday of the year unless prohibited by explicit rubrics to the contrary. It was this same Pontiff, Urban II, whose devotion to Mary prompted him to compose the beautiful Preface of the Mass in her honor, which is still in use at the present day.

St. Bernard

With the advent of St. Bernard in the twelfth century, a new era was born in the Church’s devotion to the Mother of God. This remarkable saint, who during his lifetime established seventy Cistercian monasteries, assisted at innumerable councils and synods, preached a Crusade in France and, as one biographer puts it, “carried the

twelfth century on his shoulders," found in the support of his heavenly Mother the heroic strength he needed to carry him successfully through all his labors. "When you follow Mary," he would tell the people, "there is no straying from the way; when you pray to her, there is no cause to despair; if she holds your hand, you will not fall; and if she protects you, there is no need to fear." Now it was Bernard who first suggested the theological foundation for the Church's consecration of Saturday to the Blessed Mother. In his seventh sermon on the Assumption, he says:

In Mary alone did the faith of the Church remain steadfast during the three days that Jesus lay in the tomb. And although everyone else wavered, she who conceived Christ in faith, kept the faith that she had once for all received from God and never lost. Thus could she wait with assured hope for the glory of the Risen Lord.

St. Thomas Aquinas

After St. Bernard had laid the foundation for the traditional belief that Mary's faith never faltered even during the most trying days of her life, it was left for Thomas Aquinas to interpret this conviction in terms of the centuries-old custom of dedicating Saturdays to Mary. There are at least two places in St. Thomas' published works which, since his time, have served to explain why of all other days Saturday should be specially devoted to Mary. In his commentary on the prophecy of Isaias (63 :3), he writes: "Isaias was speaking of Christ when he said, 'I have trodden the wine-press alone, and of the gentiles there is not a man (vir) with Me.' The prophet uses the word man purposely, because of the Blessed Virgin, in whom faith never failed." Even more explicit are Aquinas' reflections on the Third Commandment of the Decalogue, where he goes into considerable detail to explain why Almighty God ordered

mankind to keep holy the Sabbath Day. Originally the reason was to make men mindful of the fact that the world did not exist from all eternity but was created in a limited period of time, after which "God rested on the seventh day from all the work which He had done." The Jewish Sabbath was, therefore, to be a memorial of the first creation of the physical universe. With the coming of Christ, the Lord by His grace made man into a new creature and this new creation was begun with the Savior's Resurrection from the dead. St. Thomas declares:

Since the Resurrection took place on a Sunday, we keep holy this day instead of the Sabbath as did the Jews of old. However, we also sanctify Saturday in honor of the glorious Virgin Mary who remained unshaken in faith all day Saturday after the death of her Divine Son.

Our Lady of Guadalupe

Early in the sixteenth century and about forty years after the discovery of the New World, the Mother of God consecrated the soil of America by her miraculous apparition to a poor Indian laborer, Juan Diego, in what is now Mexico City and was once the stronghold of Montezuma, Emperor of the Aztecs. Juan Diego had only recently been baptized and was on his way to assist at the Mass of the Blessed Virgin, at a place called Tlaltelalco, when he suddenly saw a Lady of marvelous beauty standing in the midst of the multi-colored light of a rainbow. "Her garments," he later testified, "shone so much that the rough rocks which rose on the hill top, struck by the rays, seemed to glitter like polished gems."

Looking upon him with a soft and endearing smile, the Lady said to him in his own simple dialect: "Juan, my child, where are you going?"

“My noble mistress and Lady,” he answered, “I am on my way to hear the Mass to which God’s ministers admit us.”

Without further introduction, the Blessed Virgin told him: “Know, my child, that I am Holy Mary, ever Virgin, the Mother of the true God, Who is the Author of life and the Creator of all things. And know that I wish to have built here on this spot a church in my honor. From it, I as a merciful Mother to you and others like you will show forth my affectionate clemency.” [2]

Such was the noble origin of the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which Pius X expressly called, “by common right, a monument of the piety of the whole of America.” The year of the first apparition to Juan Diego was 1531; the day was Saturday, December the ninth.

St. Charles Borromeo & St. John of the Cross

Charles Borromeo and John of the Cross were undoubtedly two of the greatest devotees of Mary among the saints of the sixteenth century. They died within seven years of each other, Borromeo at Milan and John at Ubeda in Spain but we could hardly find two other saints in God’s Church who were more widely separated in temperament and in their manner of serving God. One was a mystic, whose characteristic virtue was a profound humility born of years of the hardest interior trials and persecution at the hands of his enemies; the other was a scion of the Medicis, bishop, reformer, and man of action, who has justly merited the title of “the second Ambrose.” Yet these two disparate souls were united in their common love of Mary, commonly expressed by a special consecration of the Saturday of each week in her honor.

Orsenigo, the official biographer of St. Charles Borromeo, writes of him: “Our saint’s zeal for the cult of Mary Immaculate was extraordinary. He may be called the apostle of devotion to Mary in

the Milanese diocese in the sixteenth century.” [3] He recited her Rosary as well as her Office every day on his knees. On hearing the Angelus bell, though the ground might be wet and muddy, he would fall on his knees even in the public street. Over the main door of every church in the archdiocese, he caused an image of Mary to be placed as a reminder to the faithful that she is the Gate of Heaven. But more pertinent to our interest, Liguori records of him that he fasted on bread and water every Saturday of the year in praise of the Mother of God. And in the first provincial synod held under his authority, he ordered that Mass be celebrated every Saturday in honor of the Blessed Virgin, or if this were not feasible, that at least a commemoration of the Virgin be added to the prayers of the Mass. In the ninth synod we read that he ordered the clergy of collegiate churches to sing the Salve Regina or one of the other antiphons of Our Lady every Saturday after the Divine Office.

But this saintly archbishop, “who filled not only a diocese but the entire world with his fame, who left works and institutions behind him so great and solid that they have survived the centuries, had not, humanly speaking, even reached the noon-day of life when his Heavenly Mother called him.” He was only forty-six years and twenty-one days old when he died on November 3, 1584, the first Saturday of the month.

No less striking, and also not to be explained away as mere chance, are the circumstances surrounding the death of St. John of the Cross. An eyewitness of the saint’s final agony testified on oath that he made the following declaration a few hours before he died: “The Mother of God and of Carmel hastens to purgatory with grace, on Saturday, and delivers those souls who have worn her scapular. Blessed be this merciful Lady who wills that on this day of Saturday I shall depart from this life.” [4] The day was December 14, 1591.

St. Robert Bellarmine

During the last quarter of the sixteenth century and the first of the seventeenth, the lucubrations of the Church's enemies in Europe were being so well refuted by Robert Bellarmine that the Protestant divines had to resort to personal abuse to meet his incisive arguments. "Arch enemy, persecutor and betrayer of Christ, Papist mule, murderer of souls," they called him. In reality he was only defending the Church's heritage of doctrine from the attacks of the Reformers. Often enough, though, he had also to defend the true interpretation of Christian doctrine from the well-intentioned but misguided zeal of other Catholic theologians. A case in point was the stand taken by a certain John of Turrecremata, who taught that it is against divine revelation to deny that the Blessed Virgin alone remained constant in faith on the Sabbath after the Crucifixion. He seems to have based his claim on the current tradition of perpetuating the memory of this constancy of Mary's faith by dedicating the Saturday of each week in her honor. Bellarmine himself was deeply devoted to the Mother of God. Every one of his books of controversy against the heretics closes with the prayerful refrain, "*Laus Deo, Virginiq̄ue Matri Mariae.*" But he was also interested in the truth. And so he argues:

I am surprised to hear John de Turrecremata say that it is against the teaching of the Catholic Church to hold that anyone else except the Blessed Virgin remained constant in faith on the Saturday after the Lord's Passion. It is true that after His Resurrection, Christ upbraided His Apostles and disciples for their incredulity. However, we are not to interpret this to mean that they lost the faith which they had before Jesus was crucified. It simply means that they were slow to believe in Christ's power to raise Himself from the dead, which was certainly sinful on their part but for all that was not infidelity. (*De Eccl. Militante, lib. 3, cap. 17.*)

Bellarmino then proceeds to reconcile "the traditional belief" as he calls it, which says that Mary alone kept the faith over the Paschal Sabbath, with the corresponding tradition that the Church as such has never completely lost the faith. On the one hand, he reasons, "It would be dangerous to say that only the Blessed Virgin kept the faith because this would mean that the Church was at least temporarily destroyed, since one person cannot constitute the Church." On the other hand, there is no need of saying that the apostles actually apostatized from their belief in the divine power of Christ, but only that, "They did not explicitly believe in His Resurrection, to which, in fact, they were not bound under penalty of infidelity until Jesus had publicly and expressly manifested Himself in His Risen Body." It was Mary's special glory, therefore, to have believed explicitly and unwaveringly that her Divine Son would rise the next day from the grave in spite of all appearances to the contrary.

St. Alphonsus Liguori

In the next century St. Alphonsus Liguori, the founder of the Redemptorists, was to expatiate on this theme in his classic work on *The Glories of Mary*. When describing the various practices of piety in honor of the Blessed Virgin, he places special emphasis on the Marian Saturday. He writes:

It is well known that Saturday has been set aside by the Church as Mary's Day because it was on the Sabbath after the death of her Son that she remained unshaken in her faith. For this reason, the clients of Mary are careful to honor her on that day by some particular devotion and especially by fasting I affirm that those who practice this devotion can hardly be lost; not that I mean to say that if they die in mortal sin the Blessed Virgin will deliver them, but that those who

practice it will, through Mary's help, find perseverance in God's grace easy and obtain from her a happy death. All the members of our little Congregation who are able to do so practice this devotion. I say those who are able to do so; for if our health does not permit it, at least we should on Saturdays content ourselves with one dish at a meal, or observe an ordinary fast, or abstain from fruit, or something for which we have a relish. On Saturdays we should always practice some devotion in honor of Our Blessed Lady, receive Holy Communion, or hear Mass, visit an image of Mary, or something of that sort. [5]

St. Alphonsus practiced what he preached. We read in his biography that he fasted every Saturday in honor of his Blessed Mother who, it is said, preserved him in his baptismal innocence till his death in 1787, at the age of ninety-one.

Our Lady of Grace-the Miraculous Medal

Forty years later, the Mother of God showed her predilection for the vigil of Sunday as her own day when she appeared to Catherine Laboure in the marvelous visions that have since become crystallized in the devotion of the Miraculous Medal. The first apparition occurred on the 18th of July, 1830, the vigil of the Feast of St. Vincent de Paul. The second apparition, at which Catherine was given her commission concerning the Miraculous Medal, took place on November 27th, the Saturday before the first Sunday of Advent.

More than a hundred years have passed since that Saturday visit of Our Lady to the city of Paris. In the meantime, Sister Catherine has been raised to the dignity of the Blessed and the devotion which the Mother of Jesus commissioned her to propagate has penetrated into all the countries of the Christian world. From that Saturday in

November, in the words of Pius XI, "The diffusion of the Miraculous Medal has been most marvelous. By means of it, God has been most generous in working countless miracles even to the present day."

Our Lady of La Salette

Space forbids our giving more than passing mention to another famous appearance of the Blessed Virgin in the mid-nineteenth century. The witnesses of this heavenly visitation at La Salette, France, were two young shepherd children, Maximum Giraud and Melanie Calvat. Mary's message was a plea to the people of France to be more faithful in their attendance at Mass and to purify themselves from what Pius IX called their national mortal sin—the profanation of Sunday. Our Lady of La Salette appeared only once, but the memory of that one visit has, if anything, become more vivid with the passage of years. Thousands of pilgrims annually climb the hill that marks the spot where the apparition took place on September 19, 1846, the Saturday of Ember Week and the Vigil of the Feast of the Seven Dolors. [6]

Indulgences

Conscious of Mary's repeated preferences in this regard, the Church has for centuries officially sanctioned the dedication of Saturday to the Mother of God. We are not surprised, therefore, that within the last several decades the Holy See has renewed these pledges of fidelity to Mary's wishes by endowing with the richest indulgences certain pious practices and prayers in Our Lady's honor.

(Editor's note: The following three indulgences listed in the *Raccolta* are no longer in the official *Manual of Indulgences 2020*.)

In 1889, under Pope Leo XIII, the Congregation on Indulgences granted a plenary indulgence to all the faithful who resolve to perform some devout exercise in honor of Our Lady of the Rosary for

fifteen uninterrupted Saturdays, if they devoutly recite at least one-third of the Rosary or meditate on its mysteries in some other manner (*Raccolta*, No.362).

On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the definition of the Immaculate Conception, the Holy Office decreed that the faithful may gain a plenary indulgence on each of the twelve Saturdays immediately preceding the 8th of December, if they devote some time to prayer or meditation in honor of the mystery of Mary's Immaculate Conception (*Raccolta*, No.334).

And finally, in 1912, the same Roman Congregation issued a decree which plainly anticipated the promises of Fatima. A plenary indulgence would be gained by all the faithful who on the first Saturday of each month perform some special exercises in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary Immaculate in order to atone for the blasphemies whereby the same Blessed Virgin is reviled. Benedict XV by a rescript in his own hand extended the provisions of this decree to include a plenary indulgence at the hour of death if this devout exercise of reparation is performed on the first Saturday of eight successive months. The only further condition is the acceptance of death with resignation from the hand of God and at least a mental invocation of the Holy Name of Jesus (*Raccolta*, No.335).

Our Lady of Fatima

This brings us down to 1917 and back to Fatima and the devotion to Our Lady under that title. If there is any lingering suspicion that this devotion smacks of fancy novelty and has not that historical background which we instinctively look for in matters of this kind, we can easily convince ourselves to the contrary. Fatima with its dedication of Saturday to the Mother of God has its roots deep down in the soil of Catholic tradition. In his radio message of last May, addressed to half a million pilgrims who were

gathered at the Portuguese shrine, Pope Pius XII congratulated his listeners on having enrolled themselves in “a Crusade for the conquest – the re-conquest – of the Kingdom of the Madonna, which is the Kingdom of God.” This statement is no idle rhetoric. Viewed in the light of past history, we can safely look upon Fatima as destined to become the crowning glory of the Blessed Virgin in modern times. When the Albigenses in the twelfth century threatened to overrun western Europe with their unnatural doctrine of a god of evil, they were checked at what seemed to be the height of their power by Our Lady of the Rosary. In the sixteenth century when the Moslem hordes were pressing against the very gates of Rome, they were crushed at Lepanto by Mary, invoked under the title “Mary Help of Christians.” We trust that the hydra of Communism and Rationalism in our own day will finally be overcome, with our co-operation, by Our Lady of Fatima.

[1] Cacella, *Fatima and the Rosary* (New York: St. Anthony Welfare Center, 1944). P. 5.

[2] Vega, *Our Lady of Guadalupe* (Mexico City: Buena Prensa, 1939). Pp. 6 sqq.

[3] Orsenigo, *St. Charles Borromeo* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1943), p. 286.

[4] Bruno de Jesus-Marie, *St. John of the Cross* (New York: Sheed and Ward), p. 350.

[5] St. Alphonsus Liguori, *Glories of Mary* (Brooklyn: Redemptorist Fathers, 1927), Part III, No. 5; Part V, No. 4.

[6] This feast was formerly celebrated on the Third Sunday in September.

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