

OUR LADY, HELP OF THE SICK

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Catholics in health care have always had a devotion to the Mother of God. That is why we are attracted by places like Lourdes and it is also not surprising that so many of the sick visit Marian shrines, because they know that Our Lady has a special love for them. The purpose of this article is to establish the theological foundations of devotion to the Mother of God, by studying the Sacred Tradition of the early Church, both in the East and the West.

Let us go back in time to the great Council of Ephesus which took place in AD 431. The Council condemned Nestorius as a heretic. The unfortunate Nestorius was ironically a basher of heretics himself, as he had proclaimed: "Give me, O Emperor, the earth clear of heretics and I will give you the Kingdom of God." But he refused to call Mary the Mother of God, for how can it

be, he argued, that of a mere human being God should be born.

The Council proclaimed Mary to be "Theotokos" or God Bearer. Soon after the Council, there was a flourishing of devotion to Mary. For example, the great Basilica of Saint Mary Major was founded in Rome in honour of the Mother of God.

Mary is also the Mother of Mercy. Pope Benedict explains why by asking us to reflect on the Byzantine Icon of Our Lady of Tenderness, which portrays the Child with His face resting cheek to cheek against His Mother. The Child gazes at the Mother and the Mother gazes on us, conveying the tenderness of God.

Let us reflect on the great gifts that God has bestowed on Mary. She is gifted with the grace of being sinless, for sin always dehumanises. We have the following from the Night Office of the Eastern Church: "You, O God, would not allow decay to touch her body for she had given birth to your Son, the Lord of all life."

Mary is so receptive to God, and she is receptive of her own free will. Saint Augustine says: "She conceived in her heart before she conceived in her womb."

In the Byzantine liturgy of the Feast of the Annunciation, Gabriel says: "Hail thou, burning bush that has not been consumed. Hail thou, bridge that leads to heaven. Hail thou, deliverance from the curse." Mary answers: "I have not entered wedlock. How shall I bear a child?" Gabriel responds: "When God so wishes, the order of nature is overcome. Believe, O all holy Lady, utterly without

spot." In the Syrian liturgy, it is said that "God descended to Earth. He beheld her humility and innocence and dwelled in her for it pleases The Holy to dwell in those who are humble." So we see that at the Annunciation, Mary begins her pilgrimage of Faith, which will lead her to Calvary, the Holy Place of Sacrifice, and to the Upper Room, which is sanctified by the Last Supper, where she receives an outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Mary is like Abraham. With God, nothing is impossible. Both are praised for their Faith. Both are asked to sacrifice their sons. Both ascend a hill of sacrifice. In the case of Abraham, the son is spared. Not so in the case of Mary. Is there any wonder that she is so close to the sick and the broken hearted?

Let us contemplate the Birth of the Saviour. In the Syrian liturgy, it is said that "The Virgin gave birth to a miraculous Child. Let us go and behold the swaddled Baby who is older than the ages. Behold the Man of old being born of a Virgin. Behold the suckling infant giving Bread to the poor." Mary responds: "When I gave birth to you in a manger, you revealed your Glory. Behold the Fire embracing the little manger and the Seraphim with their six wings fluttering over it. He is the Lord betrothed to the Church and I am His Maid Servant."

Mary is our Mother. She is the Mother of the sick as, in the words of Saint Ephrem the Syrian, she is the healer of untreatable wounds.

According to the Egyptian Coptic Tradition, this is the last prayer of Mary before her Glorious Assumption:

" I give thanks unto Thee, O Lord God Almighty, and to Thy only Begotten Son, The Word of the Father, because He came to us and built for Himself a fleshly tabernacle in my womb. I brought Him forth without blemish. I nursed Him with anxious care and it was He who nourished me. Let the power of hell be ashamed, for nothing of theirs hath been found in me. Open unto me the gates of righteousness and let me go in through them."

So in Mary we see the most perfect response to the Covenant Love of God. She is the Daughter of Zion, the embodiment of her people. She is also a "type" of the Church. Both began in a closed environment, Mary at Nazareth and the Apostles in the Upper Room. There is then an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, leading to evangelisation. Mary goes out to Elizabeth and the Apostles go out with great joy to proclaim the Word of God. Saint Augustine writes: "The Church is a Virgin. You might ask how does it bring forth children. I answer that She is a Virgin and gives birth. She imitates Mary."

Mary may also be seen as the New Eve. But where death came through Eve, Life comes through Mary. Eve listened to the serpent. Mary listened to an Angel. Eve heard evil news. Mary accepted the Good News. Eve was disobedient. Mary was obedient. Eve brought death and punishment. Mary brought life and hope. Mary is our Mother. She is the Mother of the sick as, in the words of Saint Ephrem the Syrian, she is the healer of untreatable wounds. As Pope Benedict reminds us in his book "Jesus of Nazareth,".... she is the woman given to all of us in the person of Saint John the Evangelist by our dying Saviour. For Him to do so at that moment in time reminds us how important that gesture was to Our Lord. Blessed is she who believed.