

SOUND DEVOTIONS ARE EXTENSIONS OF THE LITURGY

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How many popular songs in recent decades have extolled memories? In addition, how often do we find ourselves and others recalling important incidents and persons of the recent or distant past?

When we stop to think about it, we are following the same human pattern when we celebrate some aspect of the official liturgy of the Church or a popular devotion. This is part of our Christian heritage.

Memories, stories, family customs and practices, and significant persons and events in our lives are a very important part of each of us. Recalling special persons and events, and continuing time-honored rituals with family and friends nourish the human spirit. This stimulates us to imitate and to continue what our predecessors have achieved.

Thus it is with Jesus and his faithful followers. We look to Mary and the saints for models and examples of how to continue in the footsteps of our Redeemer. Therefore, we call on their help in a variety of ways.

The mystery of God becoming human and our role in this mystery is communicated to the Church not only in its official teaching, but also in its liturgy, piety, art, music, and in the religious experience of its members.

Our devotional heritage provides us with many patterns for approaching God and worshipping Jesus Christ outside of the Church's official worship, the sacred liturgy. We insert ourselves into the ongoing plan of redemption as we make the way of the Cross, pray the rosary, follow a novena, fast, offer particular prayers, and perform charitable actions. However, from earliest times, devotion existed in the framework of the liturgy. For example, devotion to Mary has always existed in the Eucharistic Liturgy and in the Liturgy

of the Hours. Mary's close association in all the mysteries of Jesus is explicitly mentioned in those liturgical prayers.

However, as time progressed, new forms of honoring Mary and the saints, our heroes and models in the faith, were developed and practiced without the need of an ordained priest. The Bible, the liturgy, and the teachings of the Church have been the wellsprings for popular devotions that are celebrated in public or in private. From those sources, we develop other forms of celebrating God's love for us in company with Mary and the saints.

It is imperative to keep in mind that when we call Mary and the saints we are communicating also with Jesus for they lead us to him. In honoring the saints and asking for their assistance, we honor Jesus Christ. Christ is always our focal point.

Devotions are not meant to displace the liturgy but to extend it for special occasions and circumstances. They complement our liturgical prayer life with other forms of expressing our dedication to God.

If we honor or seek the help of Mary and the saints, it is because they are human mirrors reflecting the goodness of God. All this is borne out in the creed, code, and cult of our Christian faith. What is said and believed of Jesus applies also to Mary and the saints in appropriate, lesser degrees.

Alone or in a group, in public or in private, with approved prayers or using a prayer which is spontaneous or has no special authorization, we celebrate the life and love of our Savior in many ways, most of which carry the respect of centuries: the Way of the Cross, Eucharistic adoration, honoring the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary, praying the mysteries of the Rosary, special hymns and practices which highlight Mary and the saints and their attachment to God, novenas, pilgrimages to shrines, applying particular titles of holiness and protection, and similar practices. Most of us have some familiarity with such devotions.

Important to our appreciation and use of devotions is the understanding that they complement our life and further enrich our personal relationship with Jesus, sometimes directly and sometimes through the saints.

Since the second century devotion to Mary and the saints originated as a need arose, or when a priest was not available, or when a special occasion was to be marked, or when someone was inspired.

Devotions are based on faith and need a doctrinal underpinning. However, ordinary Christians at prayer are not concerned with theological nuance. Theological inquiry has produced a high Christology which tended to distance Jesus from ordinary people. He, like the Father, was king and judge. Jesus Christ was much too threatening to approach directly. Enter Mary and the saints. It made much better sense to cultivate the attention of his mother and most faithful disciple, and that of the saints. They seemed much closer to our human condition and were kindhearted enough to bend God's ear in our favor. The Marian apparitions, even of the twentieth century, have reinforced this attitude. Mary and the saints lead to Jesus. At all approved shrines, for example, Mary directs us to her Son in the Eucharist and in the sacraments.

In terms of devotion to Mary, every age tends to shape her image according to its own needs and desires. Yet, there are certain constants in her image -- healer, intercessor, prophet and social critic, gentlewoman who is mother, comforter, nurturer, counselor, and friend. Mary is the perfect friend and mother for us.

The Gospel continues in Mary and the saints -- and in us. We, the Church, are the continuation of Jesus Christ in our time, place and circumstances. Consequently, we need these saints and heroes as our models. Christian life without the saints is unthinkable. The saints are for the ages, ours no less than others, because they proclaim by their lives that life is worth living, that a provident God cares for us. Mary and the saints personify this hope.

However, the accolade that "never enough honor can be given to Mary" (*De Maria nunquam satis*) must be placed in proper perspective and understood accordingly. The Second Vatican Council moved in this direction by adapting Catholicism to the modern world, re-emphasizing the Biblical foundations of faith and worship, and directing us to the call of the social gospel.

Vatican II moved to correct abuses and excesses in liturgical worship and in popular devotions. The Council undertook a theological re-shaping of the image of Mary and the

popular impulses of devotion to her and to the saints. It should be noted that in every age Mary's image tells us as much about ourselves as it does about Mary.

Balance is what we seek. Blessed Pope John XXIII once remarked: "The Madonna is not pleased when she is put above her Son." We must not over-humanize or over-divinize the cult of Mary and the saints. Devotion should rest on a sure theological and historical footing without neglecting the needs of our affective piety for images of Mary and the saints, who are healers, intercessors, prophets, and friends. The saints and Mary do for the faithful what friends do for friends. Mary does for us what mothers do for children. What theologians may sometimes overlook, we ordinary Christians will provide.

Participating in and continuing honored practices of devotion are an important part of our faith-life. Devotions are touchstones of faith. They are part of our Christian heritage.

Remember, and be faithful.