

Our Lady, Mother of the Church

When we look back on anything in history, and in Scripture in particular, it's easy to imagine it a bit wrongly, because we already know the outcome of events. It's hard to put ourselves in the minds of the people who were there, who *didn't* know what the outcome was going to be. That's important when we think about Mary as the 'woman of faith'. To appreciate what that means, we need to avoid thinking that she already had supernatural knowledge of everything that was going to happen. We mustn't project onto her, as she walked this earth like any of us, the knowledge that God himself has. Like any of us, Mary had to live her faith in a kind of darkness. We walk by faith, not by sight.

In today's gospel, we were with Mary and the beloved disciple at the foot of the Cross. Now, our understanding is that Mary did in some way have faith in the resurrection of Jesus that was to come. Even so, she didn't have clear knowledge of everything; or of all the things that were going to happen in the rest of her life. She didn't know what it would mean for her to take the beloved disciple, St John, as her own spiritual son, given her by the words of Jesus from the Cross. And she could hardly have understood at that point all the *implications* of those words: that she was being made the mother of *all* the disciples beloved of her Son, the mother of all believers – which is to say, that she was being made the Mother of the Church.

Today we're celebrating a Mass of Our Lady, Mother of the Church. Every title that Mary has excites our hearts as legionaries in some way; but this title in particular resonates with what the Legion means, and with its mission. We refer to it in a way every time we pray the Prayer for the Beatification of Frank Duff: 'God our Father, you inspired your servant Frank Duff with a profound insight into the mystery of your Church, the Body of Christ, and of the place of Mary the Mother of Jesus in this mystery.'

This title of Mary as Mother of the Church goes all the way back to St Ambrose in the fourth century. It was used by Pope Benedict XIV in 1748, Leo XIII in 1885, and then St John XXIII often used it. But it was Pope St Paul VI who solemnly proclaimed the title, in his speech at the Second Vatican Council by which he promulgated the Council's keystone document, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*. (We remember that the entire last chapter of *Lumen Gentium* was devoted to Our Lady, the most any Council had ever said about her, and especially showing her in her relationship to the Church; the end of the Legion *Handbook* has a series of quotes from that.)

This speech was on the Feast of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin, 21st November 1964. Pope Paul, announcing the new title, declared: 'For the glory of the Virgin Mary and for our own consolation, we proclaim the Most Blessed Mary Mother of the Church, that is to say, of all the people of God, of the faithful as well as of the pastors, who call her the most loving Mother. And we wish that the Mother of God should be still more honoured and invoked by the entire Christian people by this most sweet title...She is the mother of Him who, right from the time of His Incarnation...joined to Himself as head His Mystical Body which is the Church. Mary, then as mother of Christ, is mother also of all the faithful and of all the pastors.'

In 1968 Pope Paul explained further the inner meaning of the title when he proclaimed the *Credo of the People of God*. He declared: 'We believe that the most holy Mother of God, the

New Eve, Mother of the Church, now continues in heaven her maternal role with regard to Christ's members, cooperating with the birth and growth of divine life in the souls of all the redeemed.'

Then in 2018 we rejoiced when Pope Francis inaugurated the *feast day* of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, to be celebrated as a memorial every year on the Monday after Pentecost Sunday. Some individual localities in the Church had already been celebrating Mary under that title, but since 2018 the feast has been extended to celebrations of the Roman Rite everywhere in the world. That was decreed by the Holy See on 11th February of that year, the 160th anniversary of Our Lady's first appearance at Lourdes; and then the inaugural celebration was on 21st May, straight after Pentecost 2018.

We can see a reason for that link with Pentecost in the presence of Mary with the infant Church between the Ascension and Pentecost, praying with and for all the disciples. In our first reading from the *Acts of the Apostles*, St Luke tells us that 'the apostles went back to Jerusalem...and they went to the upper room, where they were staying'. The upper room is understood to be the Cenacle, where the Last Supper took place, and where Jesus appeared to the Apostles on the night of the first Easter. So there's a close link with the Eucharist, and with the Resurrection itself. Luke then names St Peter, then all the Apostles – the link with the hierarchy of the Church, the shepherds instituted by Christ to guide the flock.

Then we read, 'All these joined in continuous prayer, together with several women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.' (*Acts* 1:12-14) So among all the women present, St Luke makes a special point of naming Mary. There's an interesting parallel, in that he opens his Gospel with a special focus on Mary giving birth to Christ. (That's actually unique to Luke. The five joyful mysteries of the Rosary all come from Luke. Matthew's infancy Gospel concentrates on St Joseph's perspective, and Mark and John don't speak about the infancy at all.) So in Luke's *Gospel* Mary is highlighted as the mother of *Jesus*; then in the opening of the *Acts of the Apostles*, which is Luke's sequel to his Gospel, he shows Mary mothering the *Church*. (We don't know if St Luke himself intentionally thought of making that parallel, but anyway, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit made it happen that way.)

I spoke earlier of putting ourselves in the perspective of people in past events who didn't know the outcome. So we think of Mary and the disciples in the upper room, praying for the coming of the Holy Spirit. With hindsight, we already know the great growth in the Church that was to come amidst all the trials and persecutions. But put yourself back into the minds of this tiny group of disciples, given the gigantic responsibility of making disciples of all the nations. Yes, they'd been with the Risen Lord, so that would have given them a deep confidence – but even so, what a huge, unimaginable mission there was in front of them. And yet, I think we rightly imagine them as having deep serenity, as they joined together in prayer, and with the inspiration of having Mary among them.

We might sometimes think we have a mammoth task in our own day – all the troubles of the world, and of the Church. Yet at least to human eyes, we're in a much stronger position than that tiny group of disciples would have appeared to be in. And we know what that tiny group was able to do – in the power of the Holy Spirit, and joining in prayer, 'together with Mary, the Mother of Jesus'. We can have full confidence that in the same power of the Spirit, and going to Jesus through Mary, our Mother, the Mother of the Church, if we persevere in our faithfulness God will bring forth results we can't yet see, beyond all our imagining.