

**Fr. Shields' suggestion for a New Year's resolution:
“... to deepen your devotion to Mary, and strengthen your
relationship with her. She will only lead you closer to her divine Son.”**

Homily – January 1, 2017

Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God

Holy Mary, Mother of God, Pray for Us!

“Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.” I doubt that there are any words more familiar to Catholics than those contained in the closing phrase of the Hail Mary. These words have been uttered in circumstances too varied to imagine, imploring Mary's intercession for assistance in overcoming the trials and tribulations of life. From safe childbirth, to health and wellness, and deliverance from every affliction of body and soul, Catholics have turned to Mary for consolation, hope, and mercy.

Even in the mundane pursuits of life, Mary's aid has been invoked. I remember hearing a talk a few years ago by Vince Dooley, legendary coach of the Georgia Bulldogs, who led them to a national championship. Coach Dooley grew up in Mobile, and played quarterback at McGill Institute. He told of the time when he and his wife Barbara, both of whom are devout Catholics, visited South Bend, Indiana, on the occasion of a football game between Georgia and Notre Dame. Coach Lou Holtz and his wife hosted the Dooley's, and showed them the campus, including the magnificent domed chapel dedicated to Our Lady, and the fresco of the Risen Jesus visible behind the goalposts in the Notre Dame stadium. After taking all of this in, Barbara Dooley, with a twinkle in her eye, turned to Lou Holtz, and said, 'Coach, you don't really think God cares who wins this football game, do you?' Without pausing, Coach Holtz replied, 'No, but His mother does!'

I don't know whether Mary cares about football, but I do know one thing—she cares about you and me. When she appeared to the humble and devout Juan Diego in 1531, and asked him to have a chapel built on Tepeyac Hill, she said to him, 'I am your merciful Mother...here I will listen to their pleas.' I am convinced that, not only in Mexico and far away shrines, but right here in the nearness of our own churches and hearts, Mary, the Mother of God, listens to the cries of her children.

We begin the year 2017, as we begin every New Year, with a feast in honor of Mary. It is fitting that we do so, since Mary represents the beginning of the new humanity. It is she who welcomed the Redeemer into our world, opening up the possibility for us to put our sad, sinful selves behind and be made gloriously new by the power of Christ.

I suggest that your New Year's resolutions include a firm intention to deepen your devotion to Mary, and strengthen your relationship with her. She will only lead you closer to her divine Son. Too many Christians have little or no devotion to Mary. What a pity to see them live as

Christian orphans! Don't let that happen to you –cultivate a warm and tender devotion to Mary, 'pure and lowly, virgin mother undefiled'!

There are challenges we all face in embarking on a deeper devotion to Mary. You may never have thought of these challenges, but they are everywhere, in the cultural air we breathe. These objections take their toll on us, robbing us of zeal and dampening our desire to honor Mary. I would like to address briefly three of these challenges, in the hope that I might clear away any obstacles which might be preventing you from reaching out, with a clear mind and ready heart, to embrace your mother, Queen of heaven and earth.

Many people, including many Christians, assume that devotion to Mary is unreasonable, unscriptural, and unnecessary. Unreasonable, because such devotion hinders us from the worship of the one God; unscriptural, because the Bible is thought not to enjoin such devotion; unnecessary, because such piety is thought to add nothing essential to the life of faith.

Some contend that prayer to Mary competes with the worship of Almighty God, contrary to the commandment of God Himself: "I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods before me." I would contend, on contrary, that, far from inhibiting the worship of the one God, honor paid to Mary only quickens and strengthens such worship.

Think back with me, to the scene at the foot of Mt. Sinai over three thousand years ago. Moses came down, his face radiant from the encounter with the living God, carrying not one, but two stone tablets. At the beginning of the first tablet, which concerns our relationship to God Himself, stands the injunction to monotheism, quoted above. But at the beginning of the second tablet, which concerns our relationship to our neighbors, is the fourth commandment: "Honor your father and mother, that it might go well with you and you might have long life in the land you are entering." How could God himself enjoin an obligation – to honor father and mother- which would interfere with the first and greatest commandment? Of course, such a possibility is absurd and illogical. In fact, as Jesus Himself taught, love of God and love of neighbor form an indissoluble unity. God knew that, if we cannot obey parents whom we can see, how can we ever learn to obey Him, who is pure Spirit?

Now we know that Jesus honored His parents, Mary and Joseph. St. Luke tells us that, after he had conversed with the teachers in the temple, at the age of 12, "he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them." (Lk. 2:51). Now if Jesus honored Mary, shouldn't we do the same?

And that is exactly what Catholics do—we honor Mary. Worship, known by the technical term, *latria*, is given to God alone, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But it is right and fitting to honor those chosen and honored by God Himself for special service in His kingdom. Who could possibly be more deserving of such honor (known by the term *dulia*) than Mary, without whom the Savior would never have been born?

Someone might still object, admitting the propriety of honoring father and mother, that Mary is the mother of Jesus, but she is not my mother. Is Mary not the mother of every Christian?

Think of Jesus hanging on the Cross for our redemption. What final gift does He bestow on St. John, the beloved disciple? He looks at him, and at Mary, standing near him, and tells John, 'Behold your mother.' Now it is well accepted that in the Gospel of John, the beloved disciple represents every disciple. By giving Mary to John as his mother, Jesus gives her to all of His disciples.

If you are baptized, you are a brother or sister of Jesus, members of His family. Do not brothers and sisters share the same mother? At a deeper level, it is from Mary that Jesus assumed a human nature, and it is the sacred humanity of Jesus to which we are joined. We are quite truly, by our baptism, adopted members of His Body, and therefore offspring of Mary.

Perhaps you will agree with me that devotion to Mary is not unreasonable. But is it unscriptural? Some would say that the Bible gives no warrant for the many titles we have for Mary, for the many glories we ascribe to her, or for the practice of seeking her intercession.

The Right Reverend Charles Gore was the Anglican Bishop of Oxford at the beginning of the twentieth century. A leading theologian in the High Church party of the Church of England, Bishop Gore at one point began praying the Hail Mary. One of his critics reprimanded him, remarking that this prayer sounded 'suspiciously Romish' to him. On the contrary, Bishop Gore retorted, it was 'suspiciously St. Lukish' to him!

The good Bishop was right. If you want to understand the Hail Mary, read two verses from St. Luke's gospel. In chapter one, verse 28, the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, and salutes her with these familiar words: 'Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.' Later, when Mary visits Elizabeth, her cousin exclaims to Mary, 'Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.' (Lk. 1:42).

Elizabeth also marveled at the fact that Mary had visited her, saying 'Who am I that the Mother of my Lord should visit me?' Now the Greek word for Lord used here is Kyrios, the same term used 1000 times in the Septuagint or Greek version of the Old Testament to name God. In other words, the Bible describes Mary as the Mother of God, a term to be formally adopted and ratified by the Council of Ephesus in 431. In today's liturgical celebration, we honor 'Mary, the Mother of God', in keeping with the Bible and the early, undivided Church. We honor her as Mother of God, not from all eternity, as if she were the origin of the Trinity, but as Mother of the Second Person of the Trinity in His Incarnation.

The Hail Mary seeks Mary's prayers at the two most important moments of life: 'now, and at the hour of death.' The past is behind me, and cannot be altered; the future is before me, hidden from my eyes. Now is the moment of grace, the moment God's word addresses me in the depths of my freedom. Like Mary, may I have the grace to say Yes to His call! And the next most important moment in my life is the hour of my death, when I pray that the darkness may not overwhelm me, but that I may rise and go to Mary's Son, and hear Him say to me, 'come you good and faithful servant, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world'

Perhaps someone may concede that devotion to Mary is neither unreasonable nor unscriptural. But is such piety really necessary? After all, can I not go straight to God, or to Jesus? Why should I clutter my prayers and spiritual life with thoughts of Mary, and invocations for her aid?

I don't really know how to answer this objection. How do you explain to an orphan what a mother is?

I encourage you to watch an old movie from 1955, which has been remade recently in a color version. It is entitled the 'Miracle of Marcelino', and tells the story of a baby boy abandoned at the doorstep of a Spanish monastery in the 19th century. Knowing that the monks, as taught by the Rule of St. Benedict, would practice hospitality and compassion, the little boy's father had left him with them. During the course of the movie, the little boy grows up in the monastery, and the monks provide for him. He has permission to roam throughout the cloister, and into the nearby town, but he is forbidden from going into the attic. Of course, such a prohibition is all that is needed to make certain that a rowdy and impetuous boy will head straight for one place – the attic!

In the attic of the monastery, the little boy discovers an old crucifix, and he begins to speak to the figure on the cross. He looks hungry, and so Marcelino begins to take him bread and wine from the refectory. Much to his surprise, the figure, who is, of course, Christ, comes alive and begins to speak to Marcelino. At one point, Marcelino, wondering about his own origins, asks the man on the cross a number of questions: What is a mother? Do you have a mother? 'Si', answers Jesus, 'I have a mother'. What does a mother do? Marcelino wants to know. 'A mother? A mother loves, Marcelino', Jesus explains.

One day, Marcelino looks pensive and sad, and so the man on the cross asks him what is wrong. 'I want to see my mother', Marcelino says plaintively. The movie ends with Marcelino dying in the arms of Jesus, cradled in His embrace, as the monks look on, having discovered Marcelino's secret miracle.

What does Mary want of us? Simply this, to show us a mother's love, and to show us how to fill every moment of our lives with love. I am convinced that one of the most profound and lasting ways we can contribute to the redemption of our world is to honor Mary, the Mother of God, and to invoke her aid, not only for ourselves but for our families, friends, neighbors, and the entire world. Far from leading us away from God, such devotion to Mary will lead us to love her Son more and more, and to become more fully human – faithful, humble, obedient, and respectful.

This year, don't live as a Christian orphan, separated from your mother. Call on her, and seek to imitate her in every situation. "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen."