

Assumption

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I toured around Europe back in 1999 after finishing my doctoral dissertation. I spent most of the summer in Innsbruck, improving my German, but before that I was able to do some traveling. And I ended up visiting several Marian pilgrimage sites. I was particularly taken with a specific kind of Marian statue I saw in a couple of those shrines. It was a statue of Mother and Child. Christ is a little boy, sometimes an infant, sometimes a four or five year old. Often he is holding the world in his outstretched hand while blessing it and the onlooker with his other hand. Christ in turn is being held by Mary, sitting or sometimes standing on her lap, as she sits on her heavenly throne. The figure of Mary is huge. She dwarfs the Christ child. Finally both of them are looking straight ahead at you as if to say that you belong here too, in his hands, and on her lap.

The two most striking instances of this statue I saw were in the crypt of the beautiful Gothic cathedral at Chartres and behind the main altar, surrounded by a ring of hanging oil lamps in an even older huge Romanesque cathedral at LePuy in southern France. Both statues are from the early middle ages. Both are carved in wood. Both are black—some say from centuries of candle smoke. Others though wonder whether the statues were not black from the start, Mary here being a Christian retrieval of the Celtic Mother earth goddess, for both churches were built on land already hallowed by centuries of Celtic devotion to the great goddess. In any case both statues were popular centers of pilgrimage throughout the middle ages and well into the eighteenth century.

During the hayday of the French revolution these Marian statues at Chartres and at Le Puy were both burned in the town square. The idea was to rid the populace of superstition and ignorance. And yet the violence involved in the destruction of these statues shows that the power of Mary did not extend simply to the illiterate peasants. Mary could not be simply ignored. Nor could she be merely taken away, and put in a museum someplace. Mary was too dangerous for that. She was burnt, in public like a witch, and her ashes scattered so that literally nothing remained. In fact at Le Puy government officials even chopped off her head first at the guillotine before they threw her onto the pyre.

But it turned out to be the revolutionaries who were ignorant and superstitious to think that the mere destruction of a statue could eradicate Marian devotions among the populace. Once the revolutionary fervor subsided, Mary returned.—Exact replicas of the original statue were carved and Mary was restored to her old places of honor. The pilgrimages resumed, and in Le Puy at mid-century a new gargantuan statue of Mary, hundreds of feet tall, standing this time, but still holding the Christ child at her breast was cast in bronze and placed atop a promontory overlooking the city. Also after the Revolution, Mary begins to appear in person, first in 1830 in a convent at Rue de Bac in Paris to a young novice from the countryside. A medal was struck on Mary's instructions

depicting Mary as a young mother, standing, stretching out her arms to the viewer—with the words around the medal's edge—"O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you." within a few years literally millions of French were wearing this Miraculous Medal as it was called on chains around their neck and would look to Mary for protection and comfort in times of distress. Our statue of Mary is a replica of this Mary depicted on the Miraculous Medal.

Our future Marian grotto would combine this first apparition of Mary to Catherine Laboure at Rue de Bac with another apparition, twenty seven years later, also in the south of France, this time in the foothills of the Pyrenees. By the end of the nineteenth century this later apparition of Mary to another young peasant girl from the French countryside at Lourdes would come to surpass both Chartres and Le Puy as the principle site of Marian pilgrimages.

What lies behind this enduring devotion to Mary? Wherein lies her power? She is not God, after all, despite what some Protestants may charge.

But she is God's mother, and by extension, ours as well. Mary embodies the maternal side of the divine, she does for us what Father, Son and Holy Spirit cannot do for us as well. When do we look to Mary? When do we take out our rosaries? At times of suffering and danger, and especially at times of death. At times when what we need less to be taught than to be held. Mary's prayer, the rosary, has itself less to do with words than with the ritualistic rhythm of its repetitions. Its cadence holds us when our hearts are too heavy or too troubled for words.

When the bishop decided to make us a parish back in 2002 he said: "Now you will need to decide on a name for your new parish. We already have so many parishes named after our Lady—Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady of Fatima, St Mary's of the Valley—think of a name that will give your new parish something distinctive, something with some punch." I looked around and everyone had the same startled look on their face. Marilyn Rookey spoke up first and said what was in all of our hearts—"O please, couldn't we keep it?" And we all quickly agreed that if the diocese did not want a fight on their hands, they had better not monkey with Mary.

Like the good bishop that he was, Skylstad backed away immediately. He had no idea what he was saying. It was just a good idea that had popped into his head as we were talking. But Mary is more than a good idea. Mary is our patron. She has been with us from the start. And in the years since, we have endeavored to give her a good home.