

Historical Witnesses

The title “Mother of the Church” also has roots in the Fathers of the Church. St. Augustine (354–430) sees Mary as “the mother of the members of Christ ... having cooperated by charity so the faithful might be born in the Church, who are members of that Head” (*De sancta Virginitate*, 6; cited in *Lumen Gentium*, 53). St. Leo the Great (c. 400–461) stated that “Christ’s generation is the origin of the Christian people; and Christ’s birth as head is also the birth of his Mystical Body” (*Sermon 6 on the Nativity of the Lord*).

In the Middle Ages, St. Anselm (1033–1109) spoke of Mary as “the Mother of justification and the justified; the Mother of reconciliation and the reconciled; the Mother of salvation and of the saved.” Pope Benedict XIV, in the papal bull *Gloriosae Dominae* (1748), states that Mary, at Calvary, is “in the proper sense Mother of the Church, a gift the Church received from lips of her dying Bridegroom.” In more recent times, Pope Leo XIII, in the encyclical *Adiutricem* (1895), extols Mary as “the Mother of the Church, the Teacher and Queen of the Apostles” (6).

After Pope Leo XIII, popes refer to Mary as Mother of the Church explicitly or in equivalent terms. In his December 4, 1963, address at the close of the Second Session of Vatican II, Pope Paul expressed hope that Mary would be honored with the title “Mother of the Church” in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. An earlier title of what would become Chapter VIII of *Lumen Gentium* was, “On the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church.” It was changed, though, to its present title, “On the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church.” About 200 bishops asked that the earlier title be restored, but the Theological Commission responded by noting that the revised title better corresponded to the contents of the chapter. Moreover, Mary, as Mother of the Church, is expressed in equivalent terms in the document: “The Catholic Church, taught by the Holy Spirit, honors [Mary] with filial affection and piety as a most beloved mother” (53).

Some council fathers had ecumenical concerns that referring to Mary as “Mother of the Church” might imply that the Church owes its existence to her and not to Christ. However, a good number of bishops — most notably Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński and the bishops of Poland — appealed to Pope Paul VI to proclaim Mary as Mother of the Church on his own authority. The pontiff responded to the request favorably, solemnly proclaiming Mary Mother of the Church in his address of November 21, 1964.

Hoped-for Fruits

Pope Francis believes this new obligatory memorial will highlight “the mystery of Mary’s spiritual motherhood, which from the awaiting of the Spirit at Pentecost has never ceased to take motherly care of the pilgrim Church on earth,” according to Cardinal Sarah. The pope also hopes that the memorial will help us root our spiritual lives “firmly on three great realities: the Cross, the Eucharist, and the Mother of God.”

Celebrating Mary as Mother of the Church on the Monday after Pentecost will help us all realize how important Mary, the mystical spouse of the Holy Spirit, is to our lives as Christians. She is truly our Mother “in the order of grace” (*Lumen Gentium*, 61). She is united to Christ, the Head of the Church “by a close and indissoluble” bond (53), and she is united to us as our spiritual Mother, the Mother of the Church.



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MARY
MOTHER OF THE CHURCH



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Mary as Mother of the Church has a long history and deep biblical roots, and in February 2018 it was announced by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments that a feast day to recognize Mary with that title is henceforth to be celebrated on the Monday after Pentecost on the Church calendar.

Foundation for the New Memorial

Cardinal Robert Sarah, in the decree announcing the feast day, pointed to Blessed Paul VI's address at the conclusion of the Third Session of the Second Vatican Council (November 1964) as the clear foundation for the memorial of Mary, Mother of the Church. Pope Paul declared the Blessed Virgin Mary to be "Mother of the Church, that is to say of all Christian people, the faithful as well as the pastors, who call her the most loving Mother." He also established that "the Mother of God should be further honored and invoked by the entire Christian people by this most tender of titles."

In a decree dated February 11, 2018, Cardinal Robert Sarah, prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, announced that "Pope Francis has decreed that the Memorial of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, should be inscribed in the Roman calendar on the Monday after Pentecost and be celebrated every year."

Therefore, in the Latin-rite Church, the celebration of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church — as an obligatory memorial — will have precedence over any other memorial of a saint or blessed on the Monday following Pentecost.

Years later, a votive Mass in honor of "Blessed Mary, Mother of the Church" (*Beata Maria Ecclesiae Matre*) was proposed during the 1975 Holy Year of Reconciliation and later was included in the Roman Missal. In 1980, the Marian title of "Mother of the Church" was added to the Litany of Loreto with papal approval. And in the 1986 Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary, three formularies for the celebration of "the Blessed Virgin Mary, Image and Mother of the Church" were included. Some countries, dioceses, and religious orders have already been celebrating the memorial of Mary, Mother of the Church with approval from the Holy See.

Scriptural and Theological Foundations

The recognition of Mary as Mother of the Church can be seen in several areas in Scripture. As the New Eve and "mother of all the living" (Gn 3:20), Mary takes on a maternal role toward all humanity, especially the faithful. As Mother of the Incarnate Word, Mary is the Mother of all the faithful who are joined to the Mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church (see Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 10:16–17; 12:12–31; Eph 1:22–23; 5:23–30; and Col 1:18–24).

Blessed Paul VI explained that, as soon as Christ took on a human nature in Mary's virginal womb, he united to himself, as its head, his Mystical Body, which is the Church. Therefore, "Mary, as the Mother of Christ, must be regarded as the Mother of all the faithful and pastors, which means the Church."

Cardinal Sarah points to John 19:25–27 for understanding Mary as Mother of the Church:

The Mother standing beneath the cross (cf. Jn 19:25) accepted her Son's testament of love and welcomed all people in the person of the beloved disciple as sons and daughters to be reborn unto life eternal. She thus became the tender Mother of the Church which Christ begot on the cross handing on the Spirit.

St. John Paul II likewise sees John 19:25–27 as instrumental for understanding Mary as Mother of the Church. "On Calvary, Mary united herself to the sacrifice of her Son and made her own maternal contribution to the work of salvation, which took the form of labor pains, the birth of the new humanity," he said in a 1997 General Audience. "In addressing the words 'Woman, behold your son' to Mary, the Crucified One proclaims her motherhood not only in relation to the apostle John but also to every disciple."

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into heaven also manifests Mary as the spiritual Mother of the Church. After being assumed into heaven, Mary, "by her constant intercession," continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation, and "by her maternal charity" she cares for us "who still journey on earth



surrounded by dangers and difficulties" until we are led into the happiness of our "true home" (*Lumen Gentium*, 62).

Mary, therefore, is Mother of the Church because she is the Mother of Christ, who is the head of the Mystical Body, the Church. Given to us as our Mother by the dying Lord on the cross, Mary continues to intercede for us with maternal love from heaven. In a special way Mary's spiritual motherhood is linked to Pentecost because, as the mystical Spouse of the Holy Spirit, Mary joins with the Church in prayer, and she is "the perfect image of what it means to be a disciple of Christ," the "mirror of all the virtues," and "the definitive model for the perfect imitation of Christ," as Pope Paul explained. As the Mother of the faithful, Mary is the exalted "type," or exemplar, of the Church because "in the most holy Virgin the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she is without spot or wrinkle" (*Lumen Gentium*, 65).



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