

# AUSTRALIA'S FORGOTTEN PATRONESS

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## AN EMBARRASSING REQUEST

Quite recently an Australian priest received an embarrassing letter from a missionary in India. He had written to the Marianist College, Dayton, U.S.A., the letter stated, requesting information on devotion to Mary, Help of Christians. There the good Marianists had searched high and low in their library — the most complete Marian collection in the English language — but nowhere could they find any literature on devotion to Mary under this title.

In expressing their regret they suggested that the missioner write to Australia, where there was sure to be “any amount” of material, as Our Lady was recognized as national Patroness of that country. The embarrassment of our local priest may easily be imagined when a hunt for the “abundant” material proved absolutely fruitless. Australia had not so much as a single book on devotion to its national or, better, forgotten Patroness.

## AUSTRALIA'S APATHY

Such an incident revealed the neglect that has characterized Australia's attitude to its Patroness over the last 114 years. Only a handful of Catholic homes and, for that matter, very few churches display a picture of Mary under this title. How many would recognize such a picture were they to see one and how many know anything of the meaning or origin of this title?

The old excuse that we are not a demonstrative people — that we hate a fuss — is no longer valid. An Olympic Games and two Royal visits have shown that we are as keen as the next nation when it comes to a show, provided that our interest and enthusiasm are up. The truth is that we are apathetic only when we have no heart in a cause. For over a century now we have left our Patroness in comparative oblivion, content to bring out her image for a half-hearted dusting, so to speak, on May 24<sup>th</sup> each year.

## A DUBIOUS DISTINCTION

As Catholics, we must be quite a puzzle to the new Australians. Coming as they do from countries where devotion to the Patroness is synonymous with loyalty to the Faith, they must look around for some manifestation of our national devotion. The half-empty church pews at Mass on May 24<sup>th</sup> would not do much to enlighten them.

Every country in the old world and beyond holds its patron in pride of place. There is no Irishman worthy of the name who has not taken with him all the world over an inborn love for Saint Patrick. Saint Joan of Arc means everything to a Frenchman, and the eyes of the Pole take on a new light at the name of Our Lady of Czestochowa. I have seen migrant Mexican farmers coming in from the strawberry fields of California to crowd like children around the picture of their beloved Lady of Guadalupe. Not even the Red hammer could smash the traditional icons of Mary that still adorn the cottages of the Ukraine.

Only in our own Catholic garden at home do we let the weeds grow high. As a nation we have a liking for exceptions and distinctions. Of all our distinctions the most dubious must surely be that of having the most neglected national Patroness of any country in the world. And yet the title “Help of Christians” is ideally suitable for our country's Patroness at the present time, as a glance at the meaning and origin of the title will show.

## MEANING OF THE TITLE

It is significant that those twin dreadnoughts of the Catholic Faith, Chesterton and Belloc, cherished a life long devotion to Mary, Help of Christians. The title has a martial ring all its own. It conjures up visions of sea battles, crusading armies, and papal victories against superior odds. Little wonder, then, that these two writers had nailed Mary's colours to their mast right from the outset. Their studies in history had given them a sharp picture of Mary's dramatic

intervention in the Church's battles. They had seen her suddenly appearing from a clear, blue sky, century after century, to crush a persecution from without or to suppress a heresy from within. Time and again in his books Belloc turns back, as if in fascination, to Mary's victory at Lepanto — "the greatest Christian triumph since the days of Charles Martel" — while the same victory inspired Chesterton's stirring ballad, "Lepanto".

At times you can sense their regret at not having been there under Mary's banner, at having missed the chance of firing literal, and not merely literary, broadsides, at the enemies of God's church. Their admiration for the powerful Queen of the Church knew no bounds. That is precisely the distinctive quality of this title in a nutshell. "Help of Christians" signifies Mary exercising her mediation in favour of the Church and its Sovereign Pontiff in the more critical moments of history. Its outstanding features are the might and timeliness of Mary's help.

Even the enemies of the Church recognize this. By some diabolical instinct the communists in China have reserved their bitterest persecution and most atrocious tortures for the Legion of Mary members. What angel of darkness has taught the Reds to dread the heel that will crush their head? The world is rapidly resolving itself into two camps: the blue army of the Woman terrible as an army in battle array, and the Red ranks of Satan — an enmity as old as Adam, and one foretold in his presence to the serpent: "I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel" (Gen. iii. 15.).

### **TIMELINESS OF THIS TITLE**

It comes as something of a shock to most of us to realize Our Lady's might and determination in a crisis. Brought up from childhood on concepts of Mary's sweetness, we find it hard to picture her in the think of the battle against the enemies of the Church. To see her as a more powerful commander, intervening mightily to guard the rights of the Church, is to see her in a new role. Such a realization should give a red-blooded transfusion to our all too anaemic devotion to Mary.

If the Catholic conscience has been rudely reawakened by the events and message at Fatima it has been due to Mary's strong warning of impending disaster to the world, and to the provision of hell that she gave to the three children. It has brought us back to fundamentals, to a face-to-face vision of the last things — judgment, heaven and hell.

Until now we have been inclined to forget that God's Mother is Queen of the Church militant, as well as the Church triumphant. just why it is difficult to know. Her Divine Son, after all, was to be a Sign of contradiction. Persecutors were to stalk Him and His Church from the beginning. Did we expect God's Mother to stand idly by and not intervene as the Help of Christians, when the city of God was under siege?

To the anti-Christian governments of the nineteenth century this warlike title was an object of hatred and a source of terror. It will be no less so for their modern anti-religious counterparts. For in the dreaded cry, "Help of Christians", these enemies of God will hear not merely a challenge and a battle hymn, but a note of triumph and a paean of victory for the Church. It will recall, to their mind, however unwillingly, a war already fought and already won, for the battleground was the Hill of Calvary nearly 2000 years ago, on a day that only Christians call "good". Yet Christ died for all men, and this divine amnesty is still open to all — even to His enemies. This title is no innovation. There is nothing novel about it. It has deep roots in Catholic teaching, Scripture and tradition, and its fruits are evident at every turn of Church History.

### **REASONS FOR THIS TITLE**

As Cardinal Newman has poetically reminded us, all Mary's glories are for the sake of her Son. Every title and privilege of Mary can be traced back to the title "God's Mother." She is Immaculate and assumed into Heaven, because it is only fitting that in her conception God's Mother be wholly pure, and that after death her body should be free from corruption.

To the same Divine Motherhood the title "Help of Christians" can trace its source. When Our Saviour had finished the work given Him to do by His Father, it was to Mary's care that He bequeathed the infant Church and its individual

members. “He saith to the disciple — Behold thy mother. And from that hour the disciple took her to his own” (John xix, 27.).

Mary’s help is, therefore, twofold. It embraces the universal church in its battles of history, and it extends to the daily battle in the soul of every Christian. St. Bernard’s “Memorare” is eloquent testimony that no Pope nor simple Christian has ever called on Mary’s help in vain.

This mediation is set down quite clearly in the Gospel. A young couple, embarrassed by the shortage of wine at their wedding feast, had their needs anticipated by Our Lady’s help and, by the first miracle of Her Divine Son, new wine was theirs without the asking. How typical of the little personal touch in Mary’s help! At Pentecost, when the newly ordained priests had lost their native courage and when the infant Church looked like being smothered in its cradle, it was in prayer “with Mary, the Mother of Jesus” that the Apostles settled down to wait for the coming of the Paraclete. Here we have the prime example of Mary’s social mediation.

The early Christian writers were fond of seeing prototypes of Mary in the wars of the Old Testament. A Judith beheading Holofernes, an Esther crushing Aman, inevitably led them to a comparison of the Help of Christians delivering the Church from peril. The rock Catechism of the Catacombs teaches us the same lesson. On the walls are depicted images of Mary dating back to the second century, seated Queen-like, as if making an intercessory gesture for the Church underground. The ancient, venerated painting, “Salus Populi Romani,” The Help of the Roman People, confirms this. So also does the oldest Marian prayer known to Christendom, begging Mary’s help.

In Church History, finally, is found the most telling confirmation of this title, Help of Christians. Time and again we come across the broken pens of heretics and the charred fleets of persecutors, floating like so much debris on the rocks at Mary’s feet. So numerous have been the incidents, and so dramatic their story, that they merit a section to themselves.

## **IN CHURCH HISTORY**

The annals of Church History read like a litany of Mary’s victories. When the Church chants in her praise, “Thou alone hast destroyed all heresies,” it is no mere lyrical flight of fancy. Our Lady, Help of Christians, has done just that.

In fact, as early as the fifth century the heresy of Nestorius rises up, denying Mary to be the Mother of God. All Christendom is roused, and two hundred bishops, assembled at Ephesus, condemn this perverse doctrine. The townspeople go wild with joy at seeing their Mother’s title vindicated, and at night they chair home the bishops by torch light to the accompaniment of Marian hymns and cheering.

Only three centuries later the Iconoclasts bring out the warped doctrine that the veneration of images is idolatry. Priceless statues, including those of the Blessed Virgin, are put to the hammer, until God sends his champion in John Damascene, renowned saint and writer. In their blind fury the Iconoclasts cut off John’s hand, but Mary miraculously intervenes to restore the hand that has defended her honour so well.

The Albigensians next attempt to pollute the wells of Faith in Europe, and once again it is Mary most holy who reveals to the sons of St. Dominic the pure doctrinal antidote of the Mysteries of the Holy Rosary. When, finally, Luther opens all the flood-gates of error on to Catholic Europe, the Queen of the Church immediately appears to a Spanish soldier at Manresa. She inspires Ignatius Loyola to found the Jesuit Order that is to be the bulwark of the Church in this critical hour.

## **THREE TURNING POINTS**

So it was also at those three turning points of history, Lepanto, Vienna, and Fontainebleau. The Rosary was to prove mightier than the sword, and Mohammedan and Napoleonic armies were to find worse than a Waterloo in Mary. That of Lepanto was such a manifestly miraculous victory that it merits a treatment apart.

At Vienna in 1683 the Moslem hordes were pressing at the gates of the city when the Polish king, John Sobieski, inflicted an unexpected defeat on them by the help of Our Lady. This victory gave the first impulse to the wave of confraternities that was to sweep throughout Austria and Bavaria in honour of Mary, Help of Christians.

Untaught by the bitter lessons of those who had gone before him, Napoleon in turn was to burn his fingers on Mary's mantle around the Church. For five years the power crazed corporal held Pope Pius VII prisoner, first at Savona and later at Fontainbleau. The rosaries of Catholic Europe went up to Mary most holy. "Does the Pope expect his excommunication to make my soldiers lay down their arms?" was Napoleon's sneer. There was bitter irony in the despatch from the Russian front a short time later: the French soldiers could not hold their rifles for the cold. When the Holy Father returned to Rome it was a veritable triumph all the way. He re-entered Rome on May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1814. In his moment of triumph Pius VII did not forget his deliverer. His first official act was to set aside May 24<sup>th</sup> each year in Rome as the feast of Mary, Help of Christians.

### **THE GLORY OF LEPANTO**

One glorious chapter above all shines out of the pages of Church History as Mary's hour. It is dated 1571, and bears the heading "Lepanto". There never was, and perhaps there never will be, a time when the armies of Christendom, motivated by such genuine chivalry, were so united in God's cause. Gone were the petty rivalries and lucrative self-seeking that had marred the Crusades many years before. Gone were the mercenaries and soldiers of fortune who had dragged the Christian name in the mud on their grudging and divided way to the Holy Places. For on this occasion the peril was far too imminent, and the cause far too noble, for any political interest or any self-indulgence.

The scimitars of Mohammed had swept eastern Europe, and the shadow of the crescent had all but eclipsed the Cross. When the saintly Pope Pius V sounded the alarm, the Emperor's son, Don John of Austria, led those who answered the call. A combined fleet, comprising Spanish, Venetian and Papal elements, was put at his command.

Down to the ships in Messina they rode, these tight-lipped, clear-eyed sons of the Church, inspiring in their formidable ranks behind the last knight of Christendom. At home the Christian families were on their knees, reinforcing their armies abroad with the most powerful of spiritual weapons, their holy Rosaries rising up like so much battle smoke to the mighty Queen of the Church.

The encounter itself took place in the gulf of Lepanto off the Greek coast in the Ionian Sea. From start to finish it was the bloodiest of battles and the purest of poetry. History was to witness that day a rare combination of powder and dogma, as two mighty religious powers were locked in a struggle to the death — "a collision of strong creeds," as Belloc liked to call it. For our description of the battle we are indebted to a remarkable historical document, the value of which has long been overlooked. It reads with the vividness and urgency of a press despatch, and it bears every hall-mark of authenticity. It was written on November 12<sup>th</sup> 1571, only thirty-five days after the events at Lepanto. The writer was Peter Canisius, later a canonized Jesuit saint. The information was received from the Archduke of Bavaria, who had the despatches directly from his first cousin, Don John of Austria, the Captain-General of the combined Christian fleet.

### **DESCRIPTION OF THE BATTLE**

"On Sunday, October 7<sup>th</sup>," Peter Canisius's account begins, "God was pleased to bring low the pride of our foes. They came on merrily with a great shout, all their sails and oars in action, absolutely certain of victory. Our men, having first reconciled themselves to God by confession and penance, . . . put their trust in the Living God.

"At a certain signal a crucifix was raised aloft in every ship in the fleet. Don John of Austria, clad in complete armour and standing in a conspicuous place on the prow of his ship, now knelt down to implore God's blessing. Every man followed his example. The soldier, with his firelock at the ready, knelt at his post by the bulwark. The gunner knelt with his lighted match beside his gun. The decks gleamed with kneeling men in mail.

"A stiff, sirocco wind began to blow, causing the battle smoke to drift towards the enemies' ships, so that they could not see our position. It was the work of God that 180 galleys were captured or sent to the bottom, that the Christians held captive on the Turkish ships turned their arms against their captors, and that the Catholic fleet should gain in the space of four hours a triumph without its like in Church history. The Turkish chiefs without exception and 30,000 Turkish soldiers were killed or captured."

Back in Rome, meanwhile, Pope Pius V had suddenly interrupted his affairs of state with a rapt expression on his face. “Kneel down, gentlemen,” he said, “this is no time for business. Let us thank Mary for a singular Christian victory.” It was October 7<sup>th</sup>. Mary had granted her beloved servant a vision of that victory in the distant Ionian Sea.

It had been no cheap victory. Over 7000 Christian soldiers had paid the supreme price for the faith of their fathers, and many, including the Spanish author Cervantes, carried scars of the battle to their grave. A war-weary Don John of Austria rode to Loreto, there to lay at Mary’s shrine the spoils of the victory that was really hers.

### **ORIGIN OF THE TITLE**

Until quite recently a popular tradition attributed to Pius V the addition of the title, “Help of Christians,” to the Litany of Loreto in gratitude for the Lepanto victory. Both the Roman Breviary and the Decree for the institution of the Feast in 1815 follow this opinion, although there is no mention of such an addition in the Acts of the Pontificate of Pius V.

In 1902 the German scholar, Dr. Paulus, came across an ancient copy of the Litany of Loreto. It was printed at Dillingen in 1558, fourteen years before Lepanto, and clearly includes the title “Help of Christians.” The title, in fact, not only antedates the battle of Lepanto but is at least eight years earlier than the pontificate of St. Pius V. There is still extant a fragment dated as early as 1524 containing the invocations “Advocate, of Christians” and “Help of Sinners,” which passed by an easy transition into the “Help of Christians” of the 1558 Litany.

Admittedly, the Christian soldiers, returning in triumph from the Lepanto battle, must have lent wings to the spread of this devotion throughout Europe, but it was already established prior to the battle. A French author, Pere Feuiller was the first to slip into the historical error mentioned above, and later historians have followed his lead since his book was published in 1674. Bavaria and, later, Piedmont seem to have been the centres of this devotion in Europe but its roots, as we have seen, go back even deeper. They sprang up from the Church’s spontaneous cry for Mary’s help in its critical hours, as early as the persecutions of Nero — as early as the church itself.

### **APOSTLE OF THIS DEVOTION**

At the outset of the nineteenth century this devotion, together with so many practices of Catholic life, seemed to be dying a lingering death in the anti-religious climate of Europe. Then came the triumph of 1814. Just one year after Pius VII returned in triumph to Rome, there was born in Piedmont a boy who was destined to be the champion of Our Lady, Help of Christians.

At the age of nine John Bosco had a dream. He saw before him a herd of wild animals which a voice asked him to tame. When the little fellow, all bewildered, objected that such a task was impossible, he was told that he would be given a Queen and a Mistress before whom all things would be pacified.

When some fifteen years later, the newly ordained Don Bosco set out to do Mary’s work, Italy was at its lowest spiritual ebb. The freemasons were stamping out the religious orders one by one. Garibaldi and his red-shirted thugs were soon to march on Rome. The anti-clerical and depraved spirit of Italian youth was a byword.

In such an atmosphere this favoured son of Mary serenely set about multiplying churches, schools and works of charity. In his own lifetime he gave to Mary over 2000 priests, the two mighty Salesian Congregations, and a Third Order. And everywhere he went he championed Mary’s name. He wrote books and pamphlets to show the timeliness of Mary’s help in history. He preached sermons and organized novenas to propagate this devotion. He spread abroad her medals and pictures. To all he gave the special blessing of Our Lady, Help of Christians, at times with miraculous results. It got to the point where the natural and the supernatural were so interwoven in his life that it was hard to tell them apart. People began to call Mary, Help of Christians, “Don Bosco’s Madonna.”

To crown it all he erected in Turin a magnificent Basilica to Mary, Help of Christians with a painting over the high altar of Our Lady royally regarding the Church and the Apostles. To build it Don Bosco drew heavily on the bank of faith. When the first heavy payments of several thousand lire were due, Don Bosco upturned his purse into the waiting hand of the builder to reveal the princely sum of fourpence. The contractor’s words on that occasion are not on record — perhaps

just as well — but they would hardly measure up in any case to Don Bosco's spirit of faith and sense of humour. He declared solemnly that Mary built the Church herself and that every brick was some token of Mary's help.

When, finally, worn threadbare in Mary's service, Don Bosco lay dying on a winter's morning in 1888, the Angelus bell tolled out from the Basilica he had built nearby. It was the voice of his Madonna calling him home. Those Salesians around his deathbed realized then, as they had never realized before the meaning of Don Bosco's well worn refrain: "If you have devotion to Mary, Help of Christians, you will see what miracles are."

### **THIS DEVOTION IN AUSTRALIA**

How did this devotion, with its root so deep in the historical soil of the old world, come to be transplanted to our newly discovered Southland? Did our early Catholic pioneers see a parallel between the persecuted Church in Europe and the Church in Australia, born in bondage, and turn instinctively to the same Help of Christians?

Like so much of Australia's early Catholic history, the origin of our devotion to Our Lady, Help of Christians, is a puzzle to be pieced together, as best it can, from fragmentary records and conjecture. This much we do know: that when Father Therry was looking for a name for Australia's first Catholic church in Sydney in 1821 he did not look beyond "Mary Help of Christians" — a title that popular voice has shortened to St. Mary's.

In 1844 the Provincial Synod, held at Sydney, appointed Mary, Help of Christians, subject to the approval of the Holy See, as principal Patroness of Australasia. Remarkably enough, the Acts and Decrees of the Synod, published at Sydney by Cunningham, make no mention of this appointment. Yet such a decree did exist, as Monsignor McGovern has shown. He has brought to light a long forgotten petition to the Holy See, made by Archbishop Polding in 1847, that expressly mentions this decree about Our Lady's Patronage. All the Acts of the Australian Synod, and presumably the decree in question, received the approval of the Holy See in 1852, after the documents had been taken on an adventurous trip around the world, mislaid in a Bishop's suitcase.

St. Patrick's College, Manly, has been the unofficial headquarters of the spread of devotion to Mary, Help of Christians, in Australia, and there, most probably, are the best records on this subject. But records can tell us so much and no more. Just who the prime mover of this devotion in Australia was, no historical document will ever tell us.

The names of Father Therry, Archdeacon McEncroe, Archbishop Polding, and Bishop Murphy suggest themselves in turn, with some justification in every case. One interesting suggestion was that the devotion migrated here with Father Jeremiah O'Flynn, who came to Sydney in 1816, when the memory of the triumph of Pius VII was still fresh in the Catholic mind. It is an engaging theory, but one that would be difficult to establish.

Closer to the truth would be the opinion that Father Therry learnt it from his parish priest in his boyhood parish in Cork. This French priest was an exile from the Napoleonic regime, and had fled to Ireland just prior to Napoleon's downfall and the triumph of Mary, Help of Christians. Even here we are still walking largely on the grounds of conjecture. In all probability the solution to this enigma lies buried with the mortal remains of Father John Therry, awaiting the day of resurrection in his own Church of Mary, Help of Christians.

### **IN MELBOURNE**

Melbourne was not to be without its apostle of Mary, Help of Christians. He was the late Father Joseph King, P.P., first pastor of the parish of Our Lady, Help of Christians, East Brunswick. The early parishioners from there still recall how Father King was a latter-day Don Bosco, never letting a chance go by without inculcating a deep devotion to the great Help of Christians.

Not content with erecting the fine church surmounted by its gilt-copper statue of our Patroness, Father King commissioned a local artist, Mr. John Hennessy, to visit Don Bosco's church in Turin. There the artist studied the famous painting over the high altar in detail, and to such good effect that a magnificent replica of it today graces Our Lady's sanctuary in East Brunswick. When one of Father King's former altar-boys was raised to the episcopate in 1956, he chose to adorn his coat-of-arms with Mary's name in token of the devotion learnt in his childhood parish.

Another Melbourne church, one of the diocese's finest, can boast of historical links with this devotion. The splendid Byzantine Church of Our Lady of Victories, Camberwell, takes its name from the Lepanto battle. Its west window, at the rear of the Church, is a masterpiece of devotion and craftsmanship in stained-glass. It depicts Mary victorious at Lepanto, surrounded by the main figures connected with that historic battle.

Several dioceses, Melbourne included, have conducted novenas in recent years for May 24<sup>th</sup>. More and more priests on ferial days offer up Votive Masses, to Mary, Help of Christians, and the laity are making it a habit to ask for her special blessing, found in the Ritual, in times of sickness. For some time now the Hierarchy with Cardinal Gilroy in the lead has made valiant efforts to restore our Patroness to her rightful place of honour. All in all, there are promising signs of a second Spring in our Marian devotion in this country.

### **MARKS OF THIS DEVOTION**

Simply enough, the characteristic marks of this devotion are a good Christian life and a deep loyalty to the Holy See. There is no place for self-satisfying piety here and no new formula of prayers, but rather an insistence on fundamentals — Confession and Holy Communion. These never remain mere sodality practices for the true devotee of Mary, but become vital and effective means of Grace for a good Christian life. Through such a life runs the Holy Rosary like a communication line to Heaven.

Yet the acid test of a true Catholic and devotee of Mary today is loyalty to the Holy See. There is no question of infringing on patriotism, of overstepping the divinely drawn line between God's rights and Caesar's. Loyal Catholics, in fact, always make loyal citizens. When the Red puppet-governments of occupied Europe, or of Red China, scream charges of "Vatican reactionary" or of "subversive loyalties" at a victim, we know at Whom the real charge is levelled. Loyalty to the Holy See is loyalty to Jesus Christ. "He who heareth you, heareth Me. He who despiseth you, despiseth Me."

It is superfluous nowadays to make fine distinctions between official statements and private opinions of the Holy See. The wish of the Holy Father ought to become a command for a true Catholic. And since his authority is vested in the bishops, our loyalty must be extended to them also. Their statements must be defended in public and in private. There is no place for an apologetic attitude, for toning down the Church's forthright condemnation of divorce, immodest dress, unjust education tax, communism and forbidden societies. The Catholic layman and Catholic laywoman are on trial every moment of the day. They will find the courage of their Christian convictions only in the strong Queen of the Church.

### **CENTRE OF THIS DEVOTION**

Just as the name of Fatima will always stir up the well-springs of Catholic devotion to the Immaculate Heart, by reason of its association with Mary's apparitions in 1918, so should the name of Turin strike a familiar chord in the heart of every Catholic in Australia. It was here, in this sizeable city of Northern Italy, that Saint John Bosco was to establish a centre of world-wide devotion to Mary, Help of Christians. It was here that he erected, under Mary's inspiration, the mighty Basilica already mentioned. It was from here, finally, that he wished his Salesian sons to carry on his life's work of spreading devotion to Our Blessed Mother under this title.

For nineteen years Don Bosco carried the idea of this great Church in his mind. A clear blue-print, complete down to the last detail, had already been drawn up for him in a dream vision by no less an architect than the Mother of God herself. Finally, in 1863, he began the work. Although large-scale extensions have been made on the church since World War II, the original plan already covered a vast area. The dominant feature was, of course, to be the magnificent cupola, surmounted by the bronze statue of Our Lady. On each side of the large central dome was a smaller one. Regarding these two smaller domes there is a curious, but significant, little detail. The small dome on the left bears the engraving "Lepanto—1571." The official biographer of Don Bosco records how he himself saw the original plan which the saint had made. The dome on the right bore a plaque, on which was inscribed an incomplete date, 19--. It would seem that the saint had some foreknowledge of a later-day victory of Our Lady, comparable in importance to that of Lepanto. Be that as it

may prudence, or humility, eventually prevailed and the saint was content with substituting for the original plaque the laurel wreath that adorns the dome today.

This eloquent spokesman — with temerity, we might almost call him “showman” — of Our Lady was so effective in his fund-raising campaign for the Basilica that it was paid for on time to the last lira, although the contractor, as we have seen, was at his wit’s end at times.

To the casual reader there might seem to be a touch of simony in some of this jovial saint’s dealings. With a mischievous twinkle in his eye Don Bosco stood beside the sick-bed of more than one well-to-do Catholic in Turin, asking them how much they would contribute towards Our Lady’s church if she were to cure them. And yet behind the apparently light veneer there was a solid wall of faith and devotion, and the sick were the first to recognize it. Often enough they did regain their health — and the saint would gain his donation.

It was not all miracles, however. Far from it. Many a harassed parish priest of today will find consolation knowing that Don Bosco lost whole nights organizing fetes and lotteries, and in sending out circular letters for an appeal. The day of the Basilica’s consecration, June 9th, 1868, saw Don Bosco’s cup full to the top and flowing over. No effort had been spared, and the festivities were graced by the presence of the highest church and state dignitaries. A choir of 500 voices, set at different parts of the Basilica — one section was in the cupola — gave an exquisite rendition of the unison and polyphonic Marian motets composed especially for the occasion by the Salesian musician, Cardinal John Cagliero. There were many full hearts in the packed Basilica that morning, but none fuller than that of the greying priest who knelt, head in hands, at the back of the Sanctuary. He was thinking of a bewildered little shepherd boy and the Lady who had been given him as a guide in his dream many years before.

In this Marian city and centre began the Archconfraternity of Mary, Help of Christians, founded by St. John Bosco in 1869 and enriched by Pope Pius IX with many indulgences. No Australian pilgrim should feel that his tour of Catholic Europe is complete without kneeling in prayer at the shrine in Turin — a shrine that is closely bound to our country’s Patroness.

### **THE CELEBRATION OF THE FEAST DAY**

The first country in the world to celebrate the Feast of Mary, Help of Christians, on a nation-wide scale was Australia, and that a bare forty years after the institution of the feast of Pope Pius VII in 1815. An Australian “Ordo”, or liturgical calendar, now preserved in Sydney, records as early as 1852 that the Church in Australia kept May 24<sup>th</sup> as a double of the first class in honour of its principal Patroness.

The story of Pius VII’s deliverance from Napoleon’s hands has already been told, and with it the institution of the feast on Mary 24<sup>th</sup>, 1815. Although the feast was intended to be purely local in its character, proper to the diocese of Rome, many dioceses of the Catholic world gradually came to recognize the universality of the title and, following Australia’s lead, to claim a share in the celebration of this feast of Mary.

There is an impressive list of reasons counselling the extension of this feast to the Universal Church, although, up to the present, this has not taken place. The distinctive quality and the timeliness of the title “Help of Christians” are apparent to all Catholics today, while the fact that May 24<sup>th</sup> is a free day in the universal calendar, and that until recently there was no feast of Our Blessed Mother in May, are extra arguments for its extension to the whole Catholic world. (The Feast of the Queenship of Mary on May 31<sup>st</sup> was recently instituted, but this title in no way derogates from the title, Help of Christians. All Mary’s titles are complementary.)

The hierarchies of Australia, South America, and the U.S.A. have lent their support to the extension of the feast by submitting, in recent years, formal petitions to the Holy See. May it please Divine Providence to reserve the extension of the feast to the great Marian Pontiff, Pope Pius XII. In his very first Encyclical, “Summi Pontificatus,” he invoked Mary, Help of Christians, with particular devotion. Now, once again, at this critical hour of Church History, the title is pregnant with meaning. It shows us Mary as the strong arm of the Church with the God-given mission of safeguarding Christ’s Vicar on earth.

## **THE LITURGY OF THE FEAST**

There is a militant note ringing through the Mass and Divine Office of May 24<sup>th</sup>. The social character of Mary's help stands out defiantly, for example, in the Secret prayer of the Mass: "For the triumph of the Christian religion, we offer up to Thee, O Lord, the sacrifice of propitiation, and may the Virgin, our helper, by whom the victory was won, obtain that it may avail unto our salvation."

Nevertheless, if Mary is the Help of the Church and of the Christian people, considered collectively under its head the Pope, she is also the Help of every Christian considered individually. The Church does not want us to forget this. Thus she passes directly from the thought of social mediation to that of individual help. ". . . O God, who has set the Blessed Virgin Mary as a help of Christendom . . . .grant that we may triumph over the enemy at the hour of our death."

The crowning gem of the liturgy of May 24<sup>th</sup> is the proper hymn for Matins, the "Saepe Dum Christi". It sings of Mary suddenly appearing out of the blue to save the Church in a crisis, of the churches throughout the world hung with tokens of Mary's victories. It calls upon the virile youth of the Church to praise the strong Queen of Heaven who has brought back the Pontiff to the See of Peter after five years of exile. In a final, magnificent plea Mary is asked to lead the Supreme Pastor and his flock to the ever-green fields of Heaven. For Australians, in particular, the Feast of our Patroness ought to be a prelude to the eternal feast that we hope to celebrate one day at Mary's feet.

## **THE BLESSING OF MARY**

The blessing given a person in the name of Mary, Help of Christians, is unique. No other blessing like it can be found in the Roman Ritual. All other Marian blessings are bestowed on objects such as scapulars, rosaries, medals, cords, etc. To bless a person liturgically in Mary's name the priest has only the formula in honour of Mary, Help of Christians.

It was composed by Saint John Bosco and approved by the Sacred Congregation of Rites on 18<sup>th</sup> May, 1878. When Pope Leo XIII, in fact, was presented with a sick relative to bless, he referred him to Don Bosco in Turin to receive the newly approved blessing of Our Lady, Help of Christians. And so it happened as the Pope had intimated: after the blessing of the Saint, the child walked and spoke distinctly, although he had been at death's door but a few moments before.

This blessing contains a threefold invocation to the Help of Christians. After an opening "Hail Mary," the priest recites one of the oldest Marian prayers in the ay Church: "We fly to thy patronage, O Holy Mother of God; despise not our petitions in our necessities, but deliver us always from all dangers, O glorious and blessed Virgin." In the third place comes the invocation: "Mary, Help of Christians, pray for us," followed by a prayer. Finally the person is sprinkled with holy water, and the priest gives the Blessing in Mary's name. What a consolation in the moment of sickness to remember that the Church has given her official approbation to this blessing of the sick in the name of our country's Patroness!

## **DON BOSCO'S DREAM**

In one of his remarkable dream visions that Pope Pius IX commanded to be put in writing, Don Bosco was given a wonderful insight into Mary's help towards the Church. The dream took place in 1862, and subsequent history has lent it an almost apocalyptic interest.

On May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1862, Don Bosco found himself the witness of a titanic sea battle. A perfectly rigged ship was beset on all sides by an enemy fleet, and began to give way before a violent bombardment. Surprisingly enough the ammunition of the enemy mainly took the shape of books and writings and the air was thick with the curses and blasphemies of their crews. Suddenly the captain of the harassed ship fell mortally wounded, to the profane delight of his ungodly adversaries.

Immediately a new captain filled the vacant post, and, fighting valiantly, guided his stricken vessel to two very high columns that had suddenly risen up from the waves. With the ship anchored between these two columns the whole tide of the battle changed. The enemy ships began to labour under the ever rising sea, and many went down. Some went so far as to turn their guns on their own craft, and, in utter confusion, the remnant of their once formidable fleet turned tail and fled.

A great calm came upon the sea, and in that tranquil moment Don Bosco observed that it was the Sovereign Pontiff who was the commander of that all conquering ship, quite obviously the Catholic Church. He also noticed now, for the first time, that on the top of one column was a statue of the Immaculate Virgin, with the inscription "Help of Christians" at her feet. Over the other column, which was of much larger proportions, was an immense Communion Host, with the words: "Salvation of those who believe."

The Catholic Church never claims our credence for a private vision or dream, such as that just narrated, but in the light of the world-wide Communion Crusade launched by St. Pius X some fifty years later, and in the light of the present apostolate towards Marian devotion, it is certainly, at the very least, a fascinating account in its opportuneness today.

### **OUR OWN PICTURE**

Australia may at last boast of its own picture of the national Patroness. Every member of the Australian hierarchy has recently received a magnificent painting of Mary, Help of Christians, enframed by the stars of the Southern Cross and surmounting the outline of Australia on a map of the world, while smaller prints have also been put into circulation.

In this inspiring and symbolic picture the features of Mary are identical with the features shown on the face of Don Bosco's Madonna in Turin. The same serene, majestic countenance has been kept, while her left hand supports, mother like, an appealing Child Jesus. She is queenly, for, while crowned with a brilliant diadem, she holds in her right hand the royal sceptre, a mark of her universal queenship, and a token in particular of her help towards the land that lies like a vigil-lamp at her feet. There is a touch of brilliance and devotion in the setting of the Southern constellation around our Patroness like a crown of glory. A familiarity, or, for that matter, a passing acquaintance with the picture, will help our imagination fix an image of Mary when that peculiar "Christian constellation" comes out nightly over our homeland, giving a literal rendering to St. Bernard's famous motto: "Respice stellam; voca Mariam" — "Look up at the star; call upon Mary."

### **AUSTRALIA'S NEED OF MARY**

We do not need to be a Jeremias or a prophet of doom to be awake to our country's peril today. The trouble is that we have overslept badly. Now we are shocked to find that communism is a far more menacing and sizeable thing in this country than the odd Yarra-Bank theory we once believed it to be. We have at long last realized that there is a Near East as well as a Far East, and that neither is so very far away. All is not well economically, and there is discontent in the political field. At times, a certain lawlessness in the industrial world makes us wonder whether Australia has lost all traditional sense of fair play and decency. But these blotches, after all, are only symptoms of a deeper and far more malignant malady. It infects our very homes and walks unrecognized by broad daylight in our city streets.

With his usual insight, Archbishop Mannix has both diagnosed the sickness and prescribed the remedy. If she wants to continue as a nation at all, Australia must first prove herself a Christian nation. Her national life and her Christian life will stand or fall together. In an upright, moral life, and in that alone, will our country find that inner well-being and outer security that she needs so badly. That is why His Grace has ordered special prayers to Mary, Help of Christians, for the welfare of Australia as a Christian nation. It would be a travesty of the word to designate as Christian a nation that countenances loose censorship on literature and films, wide-open divorce laws, and excessive interest on finance schemes. Such a nation has no need of an invader. It has sown within itself the seeds of its own destruction.

Irreligion and public immorality, however, have always been vulnerable targets for the powerful arms of Mary most holy. She calls today, as never before, for a crusade of Christian modesty and family Rosaries. She is looking for a great army of Don John's of purity and Don John's of prayer to win the battle for a Christian Australia.

### **MARY'S OWN COUNTRY**

Australia is far too young to have her Loreto or Walsingham, and God has not seen fit to bless us yet with a Lourdes or La Salette. Yet, even so, our land can boast of her national shrines — of some living monuments to Mary in her modest

womanhood, in her clean living men, and in her upright youth. They have guarded well their precious heritage, handed down by political convicts who brought the Rosary to these shores in the pockets of their prison greys, or by gold-diggers who gave their precious earnings to be struck into gold medals of Mary Immaculate, at the Definition of the Dogma in 1854.

We have thumbed through Church history, and we have seen the name of Mary stamped on every victory. Perhaps we do not have to look so far afield or turn the pages of history so far back. 'In retrospect, only a miracle saved Australia in those disorganized days of 1941-42. Too much emphasis has been placed on the Coral Sea Battle — heroic as it was — and not enough on the timely intervention of her whom the Holy Ghost has appointed as our country's Patroness.

The night is dark over our Southland once again, and the sunset before the dark was a deep, foreboding red. And yet we have firm grounds for optimism. History, and Church history in particular, has a peculiar way of repeating itself. It may well be that Our Lady, Help of Christians, is keeping till the dawn her latest and greatest victory for this land that is called her own.

### **PRAYER TO MARY, HELP OF CHRISTIANS**

O Mary, powerful Virgin, great and illustrious defender of the Church, Help of Christians, terrible as an army drawn up in battle, thou alone hast triumphed over all the heresies of the world. Thou extraordinary Help of Christians protect us from the enemy in our struggles and in our difficulties, and at the hour of death take us with thee to heaven.

Mary, Help of Christians, pray for us.

### **Blessing of Mary Help of Christians.**

The Priest, vested in surplice and white stole, says:

V. Our help is in the name of the Lord.

R. Who made heaven and earth.

Hail Mary, etc.

We fly to thy patronage, O holy Mother of God; despise not our petitions in our necessities, but deliver us from all dangers, O ever glorious and blessed Virgin.

V. Mary Help of Christians.

R. Pray for us.

V. O Lord, hear my prayer.

R. And let my cry come unto Thee.

V. The Lord be with you.

R. And with thy spirit.

Let us pray

Almighty and everlasting God, Who didst prepare, through the cooperation of the Holy Ghost, the body and soul of the glorious Virgin and Mother Mary, so that she would merit to become the worthy dwelling-place of Thy Son; grant that through the intercession of her whose commemoration we joyfully celebrate, we may be freed from present evils and from eternal death.

Through the same Christ our Lord.

Amen.

( The persons are sprinkled with holy water.)

May the blessing of Almighty God, + Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, descend upon thee (you) and remain for ever.

Amen.

(The Priest here gives the blessing.)

## **Devotions for the 24<sup>th</sup> of each Month.**

### **NOVENA TO MARY, HELP OF CHRISTIANS**

1. O Holy Mary, powerful help of Christians, I have recourse with faith to the throne of thy mercy. Hear the prayers of this poor sinner who implores thy succour to avoid sin, and the occasions of sin.

Hail Mary, etc. Glory be to the Father, etc.

Mary, Help of Christians, pray for us.

2. O Holy Mary, Mother of goodness and mercy, who hast oftentimes, with thy visible patronage, delivered Christians from the assaults and plunders of the Mohammedans; defend, I beseech thee, my soul from all assaults of the devil, the world, and the flesh, so that I may be victorious over the enemies of my soul.

Hail Mary, etc. Glory be to the Father, etc.

Mary, Help of Christians, pray for us.

3. Mary, most powerful Queen, who alone didst triumph over the many heresies which endeavoured to tear away a great many children from the bosom of our Holy Mother the Church, help me, I beseech thee, to keep firmly to my faith, and to keep my heart unsullied among so many snares and the poison of perverse doctrines.

Hail Mary, etc. Glory be to the Father, etc.

Mary, Help of Christians, pray for us.

4. O Mary, my sweetest Mother, who hast been the Queen of Martyrs on account of so many heroic acts of courage and fortitude exercised on earth, I beseech thee infuse into my heart the necessary strength with which to persevere as one of thy clients, that, treading under foot all human respect, I may be able to practise openly and fearlessly my religious duties, and to show myself, on every occasion, a devout child to thee.

Hail Mary, etc. Glory be to the Father, etc.

Mary, Help of Christians, pray for us.

5. Dear Mother Mary, who, in the triumph of Pope Pius VII, showed thy powerful patronage, take under thy protection the whole Church, and especially her supreme Head on earth, the Holy Father. Defend him evermore from the assaults of so many of his enemies, deliver him from temporal sufferings, and ever assist him so that he may safely steer to the haven the barque of St. Peter, and triumph over the proud billows which strive to submerge it.

Hail Mary, etc. Glory be to the Father, etc.

Mary, Help of Christians, pray for us.

6. O Mary, Queen of Apostles, take under thy powerful protection the Bishops, Priests, and all the children of the Catholic Church; obtain for them the spirit of union, of perfect obedience to the Roman Pontiff, and of fervent zeal for the salvation of souls; especially I beg of thee to extend thy loving patronage to Missionaries, that they may be able to bring all races of the earth to the true Faith of Jesus Christ, so to make one fold under one Shepherd.

Hail Mary, etc. Glory be to the Father, etc.

Mary, Help of Christians, pray for us.

7. O Mary, gracious and bountiful Mother, who with thy efficacious intercession has saved Christian people from plagues and from other corporal scourges, help us and deliver us now from the pest of impiety and irreligion, which in many ways seeks to find an entrance into our souls to turn us away from the Church and the practices of religion. I beseech thee, watch over the good that they may persevere, strengthen the weak, and call to repentance poor sinners, that truth and the kingdom of Jesus Christ may triumph here on earth, so that thy glory and the number of the elect may be increased in Heaven.

Hail Mary, etc. Glory be to the Father, etc.

Mary, Help of Christians, pray for us.

8. O Mary, pillar of the Church and help of Christians, I ask of thee to keep me firm in my holy faith, and to preserve in me the liberty of the children of God. With the help of grace, I promise neither to soil nor to enfeeble my soul with sin,

nor take part in any society condemned by the Church. I promise obedience to the Sovereign Pontiff, and to the Bishops in communion with him, desiring to live and die in the bosom of the Catholic Faith, wherein only I can hope with certainty to attain eternal salvation.

Hail Mary, etc. Glory be to the Father, etc.

Mary, Help of Christians, pray for us.

9. O most benign Mother, who in every age didst wish to be the Helper of Christians, assist me with thy invincible aid in life, but particularly at the hour of my death, so that, after having loved and praised thee on earth, I may deserve, to come and sing thy mercies forever in Heaven.

Hail Mary, etc. Glory be to the Father, etc.

Mary, Help of Christians, pray for us.

Graciously permit me to praise thee, O sacred Virgin. Grant me strength against thine enemies.

Let Us Pray.

O Almighty and merciful God, Who, in the person of the Blessed Virgin Mary, hast miraculously given an everlasting protectress to defend Christian people, graciously grant that, fortified by such an aid, and striving onward in life, we may be victorious over the wicked one in the hour of death. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Mary, Help of Christians,  
Bring succour and peace to Australia**

Nihil Obstat:

W. M. COLLINS, Censor Dioc.

Imprimatur

✠ DANIEL MANNIX,

Archiepiscopus Melbournensis.

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