

Veneration of saints in general:

- How it started, veneration of martyrs – natural to pray to them after they had died as we believe in eternal life – practice of celebrating eucharist at their tombs
- Continues today – did you know that altars are made of stone and contain relics of 3 saints, at least one martyr?
- Today we describe the church as a ‘communion’ – we share with one another the gifts of the Holy Spirit, as we are used to doing when we pray for others, especially in difficulty or when they need special grace. And we are used to asking one another for prayer.
- So why would we not make friends with some of the greatest Christians who have ever lived? Why would you not ask them for their intercessions, which they long to give you? Why would you not let them inspire you with their lives, and why would you not pay attention to their teaching, the fruits of deep prayer and sometimes great suffering – and for those who like a bargain, it’s all totally free, you can take as much as you like. Why not let them be your companion as you walk this pilgrimage through life, and let them, who have gained the eternal reward, guide you towards it?
- So that is all ‘veneration of the saints’ means – making a spiritual friendship with profoundly holy people. If you haven’t thought of doing it, I strongly commend it. If you don’t know where to start, pray about it! You could try talking to the saint you are named after, or the saint who specialises in some problem or difficulty you have, or one of the saints we are about to talk about.

Many great saints have had a deep devotion to Our Lady, and it is evident from their lives that this devotion shaped what they did, and that Our Lady led them towards her son. You could say that she is one reason why they became saints. And that is what she wants to do for us – to lead us to her son, and to thereby help us to become saints. So we are going to look at a few of these characters. We only have time for a few, and only to give a very short reflection on each. If you want to know more, there are plenty of resources available – this is only supposed to be a short taster.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux

St. Bernard was born toward the end of the 11th century, and is a great Doctor of the Church. You could think of him like a ‘repeater circuit’, amplifying and handing on the insights of the Church Fathers from the first millennium to the second millennium. Especially about Mary. His great charism was his power of preaching and persuasion.

So who was St. Bernard? He was born into an aristocratic and wealthy family, and as a youth, had all the advantages that made the world attractive to a young man, and a young man attractive to the world. However, even as a child, he had had a vision of the infant Jesus, and this seemed to inspire in him a deep wonder at the Incarnation. Perhaps it was this that made him see the moral danger of his worldly advantages – lukewarm faith and indifference to the things of heaven. Whatever the reason, he became attracted to devoting his life to contemplation of God, and the most pure way possible, which at the time, was to join the reformers of monasticism at Citeaux Abbey (from which the Cistercians get their

name). His friends and family tried to dissuade him, but they did not reckon with Bernard's own powers of persuasion – four of his brothers, an uncle and a close friend ended up joining him in the monastery!

Soon his great gifts of learning and teaching were recognised, and he was asked to found a new Abbey at Clairvaux, which went on to found more than 60 daughter houses (some of you might have visited the ruins of one of them at Rievaulx in Yorkshire). He became renowned for his great holiness and wisdom, and was soon called upon for preaching and helping people resolve their worldly problems – advising bishops on difficult matters in their churches and determining disputes between princes. He did not mince his words either – this is what he said to one churchman (and I quote it because it seems somehow to sum up much of his character): *“You may imagine that what belongs to the Church belongs to you while you officiate there. But you are mistaken: for though it be reasonable that one who serves the altar should live by the altar, yet it must not be to promote either his luxury or his pride. Whatever goes beyond bare nourishment and simple plain clothing is sacrilege and theft.”*

He was a highly influential person, and involved in many fascinating and historically important events and controversies of his time – we don't have time to go into them here but very worthwhile studying.

Despite his great influence his involvement in worldly affairs in general caused him suffering – he just wanted to be alone to contemplate God and await heaven. In fact, one of Bernard's own spiritual children, Blessed Eugenius II, was elected Pope, and Bernard wrote to him begging him always to reserve time for self-examination and daily prayer, applying himself to this still more than to his business. (Characteristically, he also wrote to the cardinals who elected him, saying “May God forgive you for what you have done ...”).

Bernard had a lifelong devotion to Mary, and it was perhaps his desire to imitate her, in “pondering these things in his heart” that engendered his love for, and deep knowledge of the sacred scriptures that was the foundation of his wisdom and his preaching - it is said that he could hardly talk without quoting scripture. So I would like to finish by giving St. Bernard the last word by quoting from one of his great homilies:

When the storms of temptation burst upon thee, when thou seest thyself driven upon the rocks of tribulation, look at the star, call upon Mary. When buffeted by the billows of pride, or ambition, or hatred, or jealousy, look at the star, call upon Mary. Should anger, or avarice, or fleshly desire violently assail the frail vessel of thy soul, look at the star, call upon Mary. If troubled on account of the heinousness of thy sins, distressed at the filthy state of thy conscience, and terrified at the thought of the awful judgment to come, thou art beginning to sink into the bottomless gulf of sadness and to be swallowed in the abyss of despair, then think of Mary. In dangers, in doubts, in difficulties, think of Mary, call upon Mary. Let not her name leave thy lips, never suffer it to leave thy heart.

Let me leave you with one thing to remember about St. Bernard. He is attributed with the saying ‘*De Maria, numquam satis*’ which roughly translated means ‘*Of Mary, never enough*’.

Fr Stephen – I think Bernard of Clairvaux is pretty amazing. Who have you got?

St. Louis de Montfort.

St Louis Marie de Montfort (St LM) was born in 1673 and died in 1716 aged 43yrs. He is most famous for the book he wrote called the 'True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin', which is one of the most influential pieces of work ever written on Mary. He wrote it after 12 years of being a priest and just 4 years before he died. It was the fruit of his lived experience and not just an academic exercise. As he says in his own words: "I have taken up my pen to write down what for many years I have been teaching with success both publicly and in private missions." St LM was canonised by Pope Pius XII in 1947. In his speech, the Pope said that St LM's teaching on true devotion to Mary "aims essentially at union with Jesus under the guidance of Mary". He said "The greatest force behind all his apostolic ministry and his greatest secret for attracting and winning souls for Jesus was his devotion to Mary. All his activity depended on this devotion; in it he placed all his security; and he could not have found a more efficacious weapon for his age."

The opening line of St LM's book is the key premiss to all his teaching on Mary. This is how it reads: "It was through the Blessed Virgin that Jesus Christ came into the world, and it is also through her that He must reign in the world."

Having made that statement, he then makes it very clear that Mary is a "mere creature fashioned by the hands of God." And he says, compared to God "she is less than an atom, or rather simply nothing." However, he then points out: "I declare that, considering all things as they are, because God has decided to begin and accomplish his greatest works through the Blessed Virgin ever since He created her, we can safely believe that He will not change His plan in the time to come, for He is God and therefore does not change in His thoughts or His way of acting."

What St LM is saying here about Mary, is that God did not choose her simply as a means for Him to become a physical presence in the world (that is to say, He just borrowed her body, as it were) and that was all, but that He chose her for a mission which goes far beyond than just that.

St LM is so confident and convinced that what he teaches about Mary is totally theologically sound and solid doctrine. He says: "this devotion could not be condemned without overthrowing the foundations of Christianity."

He argues that because of Divine choice, Mary plays an essential and integral part in the birth and formation of all Christians. He writes: "If Jesus Christ the head of humanity, is born of her, the predestinate, who are members of this head, must also of necessary consequence be born of her."

St LM was given the title of 'Apostolic Missioner' by Pope Clement XI, and was directed by him to stay in North West France and to "teach the Christian doctrine to people and children alike, and make them renew their baptismal promises."

So this is what St LM spent the rest of his days doing. Every parish mission he carried out, he would promote the practice of what he called "The perfect consecration to Jesus" (or what he said could rightly be called the "perfect renewal of the vows and promises of holy baptism"). This consecration, he explained, is achieved through the act of consecrating oneself to Mary, because "the more one is consecrated to Mary, the more one is consecrated to Jesus. A true devotion to Mary he tells us "makes for the most effective consecration to him (Jesus). To go to Jesus through Mary, he points out, is to follow Our Lord's way, since: "Mary is the means Our Lord chose to come to us, she is also the means we should choose to go to Him." The underlying point that he makes throughout his teachings on Mary, is that by having a childlike dependency on her, we are imitating Christ himself. Just as she was involved in the birthing process of Jesus (initiated at the Incarnation) she is also involved in the birthing process of all Christians (initiated at Baptism). It is the Divine Maternity of Mary, which forms the unifying principle of St LM's theology of Mary.

The phrase that I leave with you as a reminder of St Louis Marie de Montfort is:

AD JESUM PER MARIAM
(To Jesus through Mary)

St. Bernadette of Lourdes

Bernadette is probably most famous for the apparition of the Blessed Virgin that she saw in Lourdes in 1858, so, before I talk about Bernadette, just a word about apparitions of Mary in general.

Firstly, there have been quite a few of them – Guadalupe in 1531, Lourdes, Fatima (1917) and others. The Church is very sceptical about these – she is always cautious, and the would-be seers of apparitions are not always welcomed as such with open arms. On the contrary the default position is to assume that they may be mistaken, lying, dreaming or hallucinating. However, if, after thorough investigation, the reports seem to be genuine, the Church may declare the apparition 'worthy of belief' – not that you should believe, they are not part of our faith or the teaching of the Church, but that we might find them inspiring or helpful to our devotion.

I think the second thing to mention is that we talk about them as 'apparitions', not as visions. Remember that Our Lady is, according to the doctrine of the Assumption, the first human being to receive the full fruits of Christ's resurrection, and therefore dwells in heaven in bodily form like Christ. So when people see her, it makes sense to say that they are seeing her as a real physical manifestation, not just as a spiritual vision.

So now to Bernadette. Why have I chosen to talk about her, why am I attracted to her? It seems to me that Our Lady chooses to appear to people who have a humble station in life, who are poor, not learned, who do not seek to be mystics (on the contrary are often down-to-earth, practical and matter-of-fact people), and who have no outward appearance of

deserving such an honour. Even in her choice of who to appear to, Mary seems to be telling us about the things of heaven and about herself.

This was Bernadette, the daughter of a poor family who had fallen on hard times and were living in a basement provided free of rent by a relative. She was a sickly child. She had not much education (she spoke only the local dialect of Occitan and only learned French later) and probably had not had much teaching about the faith. However as a young girl she did take a step in faith by asking to receive her first communion. Perhaps it was this simple act of faith by a weak and humble soul that made Mary choose her.

Whatever the reason, one day she was collecting wood by the river when she heard a noise like the wind, and she looked and saw a beautiful woman standing in a grotto in the cliff. The lady smiled and spoke to her. There were many apparitions over the course of the next few weeks, in which the lady made various requests. One of these was for a chapel to be built at the grotto. Obviously Bernadette had no means, and no idea how to go about this task, so she started talking to her priest. He was, of course quite sceptical. It is important to note that Bernadette was not making any claims herself about who the lady was or what the apparition meant. Eventually the priest told her to ask the Lady who she was. This Bernadette did, and the lady replied "*I am the Immaculate Conception*". Think about it: this dogma had only been formalised and declared less than 4 years previously in 1854. It seems incredibly unlikely that Bernadette would have heard the phrase 'Immaculate Conception' or understood its meaning, but even if she had, think about the deep mystery of Mary's answer – she did not say "I was immaculately conceived" but "*I am the Immaculate Conception*" – immaculate conception is her very name, her heavenly identity, the name the angel Gabriel gave her when he addressed her "Hail Full of Grace".

Over the next few months, the apparitions attracted great interest and even controversy. Learned people interviewed Bernadette. Through it all, she never wavered from reporting exactly what she had seen and heard – her account has a 'ring of truth'. For example, when she first saw the apparition, her immediate action was completely practical – to ask her friends what they had seen. For a long time she would only refer the apparition as a "small young lady" or "lady in white" and made no claims about it whatever, but just answered all questions with a child-like directness. At one point she even gently rebuked her interviewer for putting words into her mouth. Eventually her simple honesty won over the sceptical Church and local population.

However, Bernadette did not want fame. She was taken in by a local convent, where she progressed her education, and started sharing in the nuns' work of caring for the sick – even though they often had to care for her during her own bouts of sickness. Eventually she asked to make her own profession as a nun, and was accepted into the order where she spent the rest of her very short life caring for the sick and working as a sacristan.

She continued to detest any fame surrounding the apparitions: when one bishop visited her she likened herself to a broom – got out to be used for a job, and then put away in the cupboard.

She was not canonised for seeing the Blessed Virgin – her apparitions are a free and undeserved gift, and are for all her children, not just those whom she appears to. Bernadette was canonised for simple faithfulness, humility and charity shown by how she handled the apparitions, and by her subsequent quiet life as a nun.

She is truly a saint for those of us who need to be reminded of the message. So one thing to remember about Bernadette: holiness is to be found in doing your humble duty in whatever vocation God has given you (as a parent, husband, wife, priest, religious, child, teacher, doctor, nurse, ...) - however you are living out our baptismal promise, her life teaches us to do it with simple, down-to-earth, humility and love.

St John Paul II

In his book “Gift and Mystery” in which he reflects upon his vocation to the priesthood and on the meaning of the priesthood, St JP II talks about his devotion to Mary and how it developed from his childhood where he first learned the traditional devotions to her in his family and local parish. He recalls there was a side chapel in the parish church dedicated to Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Nearby to his home there was also a Carmelite monastery where great numbers of people would go and where he was enrolled with the Brown Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel at the age of 10yrs, which he had always worn since then. When he was an adolescent he joined a “Living Rosary” group in a Salesian parish, where they prayed to Mary under the title of Our Lady Help of All Christians. Later, he recounts, that when his priestly vocation was developing, a change took place in his understanding of devotion to the Mother of God. He reflects that he was already convinced that Mary leads us to Christ but, at that time he began to realise also that Christ leads us to his Mother.

He remembered that, at one point, he began to question his devotion to Mary, believing that, if it became too great, it might end up compromising the supremacy of the worship owed to Christ. At that same time, he says, “I was greatly helped by a book by St Louis Marie de Montfort entitled ‘Treatise of True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin’. There I found the answers to my questions. Yes, Mary does bring us closer to Christ; she does lead us to Him, provided that we live her mystery in Christ.” St JP II describes St LM as an outstanding theologian and, says his Mariology is rooted in the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word of God. He thanks St LM for helping him to discover the immense riches of Marian devotion from new perspectives.

Later when he became Pope he was to adopt as his Papal motto the Latin words “Totus Tuus” (“Totally Yours”), which are taken from St LM’s prayer of consecration to Jesus through Mary.

During his pontificate, on the 25th March 1987 the Feast of the Annunciation, St JP II published an Encyclical Letter entitled ‘Redemptoris Mater’ (Mother of the Redeemer). It is a reflection on the role of Mary in the mystery of Christ and on her active and exemplary presence in the life of the Church. The following is an excerpt from it which speaks about the Maternal Mediation of Mary:

“The Church knows and teaches with St Paul that there is only one mediator: ‘For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a ransom for all.’ (1 Tim 2:5-6) ‘The maternal role of Mary towards people in no way obscures or diminishes the unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power.’ (Vat II Lumen Gentium 60); it is mediation in Christ.....Mary’s mediation is intimately linked with her motherhood.

The teaching of the Second Vatican II Council presents the truth of Mary’s mediation as a ‘sharing in the one unique source that is the mediation of Christ himself’. Thus we read: ‘The Church does not hesitate to profess this subordinate role of Mary. She experiences it continuously and commends it to the hearts of the faithful, so that encouraged by this maternal help they may more closely adhere to the Mediator and Redeemer’.”

The one phrase I leave with you as a reminder of St John Paul II is his Papal motto:

TOTUS TUUS
(Totally yours)

St. Maximilian Kolbe

Thank you Fr. Stephen for that beautiful reflection on St. John Paul II. That leads me to our next saint, St. Maximilian Kolbe. If you have been on Alpha you may have heard about the end of his life in the Auschwitz concentration camp. There was an escape and, as a reprisal, the guards selected ten prisoners at random to be executed by being sent to the starvation bunker. As the people were selected, one man broke down and begged the guards not to send him to the bunker – he was a young father with a wife and children. Hearing this, Father Kolbe immediately stepped forward: “I am a Catholic priest”, he said, “I have no wife and children to care for, take me in this man’s place.” Surprisingly perhaps, the guards granted his request and released the man, called Franciszek Gajowniczek. Kolbe spent the next couple of weeks ministering to the spiritual needs of his fellow prisoners in the bunker, singing psalms and hymns and thanking God, helping them as much as he could to prepare for a happy and holy death. He outlived all of them. Eventually, needing the bunker for other prisoners, the guards killed him by lethal injections of carbolic acid, on 14 August 1941, the eve of the feast of the Assumption. Just over 40 years later, St. Pope John Paul II canonised Maximilian Kolbe in 1982. There was one elderly man in St Peter’s square that day who was very moved by the event – his name was Franciszek Gajowniczek.

When I first heard that story I was unable to begin to imagine how any person, even a very courageous and holy person, could do what Kolbe did. I tried to imagine that exact moment, seeing the scene, hearing those words, and making that decision in that fraction of a second. I could get nowhere. Now, having studied some of his life, I think I have come a little closer to understanding. This incident in Auschwitz is what he is often remembered for, but it was the culmination of a great pilgrimage.

Like all saints, Maximilian did not start off being a saint. He was the son of a rather poor family of farmers. By all accounts he was a rather wayward and unruly little boy, and one day he exasperated his mother so much that she declared “Maximilian, whatever will become of you!”. He was cut to the heart by these words and asked himself “What will become of me?” Being brought up a devout Catholic, he naturally turned to Our Blessed Lady, and asked her “What will become of me?” He could not let the question go. He went to the church and prayed to her again “What will become of me?” he asked her over and over again. Then she appeared to him. She bore two crowns, one white and one red. Whether or not he understood at the time, the white crown was the crown of purity, and the red crown was for martyrdom. She asked him whether he wanted them. He said that he did.

Maximilian went on to enter seminary and become a Franciscan priest. Early on in his career he was very clear about two things. Firstly that he was consecrating his life to Christ through Mary in the way of St. Louis de Montfort. Since he was so devoted to Mary he must have taken her advice to “ponder these things in his heart” and he must have recalled those crowns and wonder what they meant. Which leads to his next youthful ambition – to be a great saint. In fact his formula for consecration to Jesus through Mary asks her to make us fit instruments for bringing the greatest possible glory to God. For him, the greatest

possible glory was nothing less than the conversion of the whole world. He founded the Militia of the Immaculata which he envisaged to be an army of evangelists under the generalship of Mary herself, leading all people to Christ. He founded a Franciscan friary which had over 600 priests. He used to teach his brothers a very simple formula: $w + W = S$, which means our will (small w) combined with God's will (big W) results in sainthood. The easiest formula in the world to learn, and perhaps the hardest to live.

Or is it? Mary's whole purpose in the Order of Grace is precisely to make living this formula as easy as it can be, to make our cross light, our greatest burdens and sufferings joyful, even easy to bear. This is what she offers those who turn to her and say, like young Maximilian, "What will become of me?"

So now you see, perhaps Kolbe's amazing gift to Franciszek in that moment, seems a bit more comprehensible. This was the answer to his prayer: "What will become of me".

So what is the one thing to remember about St. Maximilian Kolbe. Not the self-sacrificial love before and in the bunker, because that is so striking that you will probably remember it anyway. No, I ask you to recall the formula " $w + W = S$ " - easy to remember and hard to live, unless you plead with Our Blessed Mother "What will become of me?"