

6th Sunday Easter Year “C”

May 5, 2013

Readings: Acts 15: 1-2, 22-29; Revelation 21:10-14,22-23; John 14:23-29

At a very early age, it became apparent that I had little appreciation for what constituted a beautiful flower. I distinctly remember proudly presenting a handful of dandelions to my mother, complemented with a smile from one side to the other. Graciously, as mothers do, she thanked me for my gift, and I went happily on my way. It was hardly a fitting gift to present to one’s mother, but since I was only four or five years old, she cut me some slack.

As the tender rose springs up among prickly thorns
But does not offend in any way, since its beauty obscures
its thorny branches,
So holy Mary, the new virgin descending
from the branch of Eve,
Makes pure the old virgin’s offense.¹

On this first Sunday of May, a month during which we honor the Mother of God and the unique contribution she offered in salvation history, it is fitting to speak of the Blessed Mother, known in the Litany of Loreto under the title of Mystical Rose. Perhaps without even fully realizing the full extent, the figure of the Rose is ever present all around us in this magnificent Cathedral, as we gather to offer fitting honor to Mary, the Mother of God.

The above quoted lines I spoke came neither from Scripture nor written by a saint or renowned theologian— but from a 5th century poet by the name of Sedulius. Hardly a household name—he was a convert, possibly a monk, and thoroughly steeped in the faith of the Church. But he introduced us to the comparison of the Blessed Mother to the Rose, arguably nature’s most beautiful flower.

¹ Sedulius, *Carmen Paschale*, II, 28-31. English trans. Gambero, *op. cit.*, p. 284

Though certainly present in Palestine, the rose was only sparingly mentioned in the Old Testament, and even then only in the Septuagint, its Greek version. In ancient pagan times the flower symbolized the next world. The Romans even observed a feast of the dead, known as Rosalia.

Gratefully, different imagery developed and in Christian times the beauty of the Rose was more fully appreciated until the rose finally became privileged as the “queen of flowers.” Can you see where this is going? The symbolism only became more complex when writers such as the aforementioned poet Sedulius contrasted the flower’s beauty with the sharp thorns equally visible. He may have done more than any theologian or Pope before him to draw this beautiful comparison of the Rose with the Mother of God, whom we honor this month both with our prayers and our most beautiful flowers.

The rose represented beauty and the season of spring and love, which, as we know this year, is far too late and brief.² Mary became associated with the passage from the Song of Songs: “I am the Rose of Sharon, the lily of the valleys.” (Song 2:1). Later, the term Rosary was used to characterize the collected spiritual gifts offered to the Virgin. All of this symbolism served to solidify her unique and exalted place in salvation history, carried out in humility and in absolute conformity with the will of God.

Today our gaze turns towards Mary as mother, she who has made possible our joy, our hope and our redemption by means of her unequivocal “Yes” to God. And indeed, Mary would also experience first hand the ‘prick’ of the thorns as much as the fragrant scent of the petals. Mary leads us down the good path to holiness and purity, the path of acceptance of God’s will in our lives, not counting the cost of discipleship. The Rose thus becomes the perfect symbol.

² “The Christian Symbolism of the Rose,” Rev. Theodore Koehler, S.M. University of Dayton, Ohio (1986)

We face many daunting challenges in society today, including political challenges to our deepest held convictions about the nature of the institution of marriage, challenges to the security of life we have come to expect, economic struggles to name a few. I encourage you to make the Rosary a regular part of your spiritual life, praying for the grace to confront these in a spirit of faith and hope.

We are all enveloped in the beauty of three Rose windows. Of Gothic origin, in this artistic creation “the universal symbolism of the rose probably found its highest illustration.”³ Behind you, looking to the east, is the Resurrection window where in the center may be seen the Lamb, He who will shepherd and lead us to the springs of life-giving water. To your right, the North window honors numerous saints including the North American Martyrs whose missionary vocation led them to give the ultimate witness, that of their lives. Mary is at the center of this window under the title of Queen of Martyrs. To your left on the Selby side, the South Window has Jesus the Teacher in the center.

Today, let us re-commit ourselves to being witnesses to the world of the manifold gift of a Savior, brought forth through the singular cooperation of a woman filled with grace. She, who is often referred to as the Mystical Rose, is the perfect flower of all humanity and the example for us of fruitfulness. “In coming to know the Mystical Rose of Jesse’s stem, we can be drawn more fully into the beauty of God’s plan for us, and can find ourselves more healthily attached to Christ.”⁴ This month especially, may we come to see Mary more and more as “our life, our sweetness, and our hope.”⁵

³ “The Christian Symbolism of the Rose,” Rev. Theodore Koehler, S.M. University of Dayton, Ohio (1986)

⁴ Bishop Robert Morlino, Catholic Herald, Diocese of Madison, 10 May 2012.

⁵ From the 11th century prayer, “Hail, Holy Queen,” recited at the end of the Rosary.