

Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God
January 1, 2018 (10:00am)

Sub tuum praesidium

Readings: Numbers 6: 22-27; Galatians 4: 4-7; Luke 2:16-21

Most Catholics do not instinctively look towards Egypt for inspiration, as we much more readily think of Bethlehem as the birthplace of our faith. And rightly so, for indeed it was. And yet the ancient roots of our Christian faith quickly reached to North Africa and as we begin a new calendar year, we do so under the protection of Mary, the Mother of God.

In the heart of Manchester, England, a city known more today for its 116-year-old championship soccer club than anything else, rests a papyrus fragment in the *John Rylands Library*. Little larger than an iPhone 6 Plus, it contains Greek letters written in brown ink. Dated to the mid-3rd century, it contains a prayer to the Blessed Mother, the oldest prayer to Mary in existence. The fragment was acquired in Egypt in 1917.¹

It was there that the brief prayer to Mary was composed. We pray most fervently when we are in need, and like many prayers, it was born in time of difficulty due to Roman persecution.

In the mid-third century, horrible persecutions were being unleashed all across the Roman Empire, and the monks of Egypt composed a hymn to the Blessed Mother begging for her protection. The Greek original came down to the Western Church in its Latin version, the *Sub tuum praesidium*. The prayer thus precedes the complete *Ave Maria* by several centuries in Christian prayer.

The prayer reads: “We fly to thy protection, O holy Mother of God: despise not our petitions in our necessities, but deliver us from all evil, O glorious and blessed Virgin” (from the *Liturgy of the Hours*). In the fragment, the hymn calls Mary *Theotokos* (“she who gave birth to God”) two centuries before the Nestorian heresy arose. Recall, Nestorius had cast doubt on the correctness of the title “Mother of

¹ cf. Rev. Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*: trans. from the original Italian by Ignatius Press, pub. 1999, p. 69)

God," believing it was only appropriate to call her the mother of Jesus. Nestorius was led to make this error by his difficulty in admitting the unity of Christ's person and by his erroneous interpretation of the distinction between the two natures—divine and human—present in him.²

This would become the key word employed by the bishops in the **Council of Ephesus** that for all-time has defined the reality of Mary's irreplaceable role in salvation history. St Augustine comments on the Wedding Feast of Cana: "For if the Mother were fictitious, the flesh would also be fictitious, the death, false the wounds of the passion and the scars of the Resurrection."³

That definition of Mary as Mother of God was nearly two centuries after this prayer was composed. The phrase Mother of God was not a fifth century theological invention, but already part of the deposit of faith lived and experienced in the liturgical prayer of the people.

This should not surprise us, as often common practice precedes formal definition. The Law of prayer is typically ahead of the Law of belief. In the Greek version of the prayer, Mary is called "only blessed," a sign of her special election. She is called "only pure", arguably a reference to her perpetual virginity. This is consistent with Catholic practice that formal definition often follows in time the received tradition and its acceptance.

Our second reading from Galatians reminds us: "When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." Indeed, she ransoms us, she who brought forth

² See General Audience, Pope John Paul II, Wednesday 27 November 1996

³ Augustine, (*Tract. in Ev. Ioannis*, VIII, 7) Si enim falsa mater, falsa caro, falsa mors, falsa vulnera passionis, falsae cicatrices resurrectionis;

the King. She guards us, she protects us, just as the prayer indicates—under your protection we take refuge.⁴

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. Indeed, she leads us down the good path, the path to holiness and purity, the path of acceptance of God’s will in our lives, not counting the cost of discipleship.

The title of Mary as “Mother of God” and “Protectress” is most appropriate, as the earliest artistic motifs of Mary depict her cradling Jesus gently on her lap. She bore him not only on Christmas morning, but her tender gaze remained fixed upon our Lord throughout his infancy and childhood, ever striving to be a loving mother according to her humble vocation.

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. As we commemorate the beginning of a new Civil Year, we beg God’s blessing and protection upon our endeavors and upon our nation. We beg also for the maternal intercession of the *Theotokos* who desires nothing more now than to lead us to her Son.

As we look ahead to 2018, let us face the challenges of our day and this year in a spirit of faith and hope. May Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all seasons and of all time, bless us this day and all throughout the new year. (See Papyrus image next page)

⁴ The prayer is used antiphon in the Coptic liturgy at Vespers during Christmas time.



Sub Tuum Praesidium

(Oldest Prayer to the Blessed Virgin, ca. 250-280 A.D.)

Under thy protection we seek refuge,
Holy Mother of God;
Despise not our petitions in our necessities,
but from all dangers
deliver us always,
Virgin Glorious and Blessed.

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