

LITANY OF LORETO - 2

The Gospels tell of only one prophecy made by Our Lady. It was made at the time of the Visitation. ***"My soul does magnify the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for He has regarded the low estate of His handmaiden, for behold henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for He that is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name."*** (Lk. 1. 46-49)

The Catholic Church has honoured that prophecy, and continues to bring Our Lady's glory before us. On August the 15th and 22nd we have two feasts of The Blessed Virgin Mary, The Assumption of **Our Lady into Heaven** and the **Queenship of Mary**, during the year we have The **Birthday of the Virgin Mary**, **Our Lady of Sorrows** and the Feast of **Our Lady of Ransom**. In fact, the whole year, is punctuated by her feasts, **The Immaculate Heart of Mary, the Immaculate Conception, the Mother of God**, showing the way her soul magnifies the Lord and how The Almighty has done great things for her. From age to age we have called her "Blessed". Not only feasts but pious practices, shrines, pictures, statues and prayers make known to the world that the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, loves her Blessed Mother and proclaims her honour to all. Everyone should know she is blessed for we get grace through her. As we glorify the Son we give glory to the Father, so too when we honour the mother we honour the Son.

One way of honouring her is by recitation of her litany. Some writers think that the first litany to Our Lady may have been said in apostolic times. Perhaps the oldest existing copy of a litany to Our Lady is contained in an Irish Manuscript dating from about A .D. 750. The litany which the Church has approved, (in 1587) for public recitation is known as the Litany of Loreto. In nearly its present form it was composed to be sung in the shrine of Loreto in Italy, where the house of Nazareth is traditionally venerated. It is very widely known. The litany has a poetic feel about it, one title overlaps another, one recalls another and amplifies it. The titles are not so much intended to convey information, as to stir the emotion, praise and love. The whole of the litany amplifies the three titles which appear at the outset "Holy Mary", Holy Mother of God", and "Holy Virgin of Virgins". **"Holy Mother of God"** Our Lady's greatest title is expanded in eleven invocations. She is **Mother most pure, chaste, inviolate, undefiled**. These four titles draw out more fully the meaning of Our Lady's Immaculate Heart. "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God," said Our Lord. Our Lady was clean of heart in the sense that she was free from all self-seeking. Her heart was utterly filled with the love of God. Her whole personality was entirely devoted to God. Her spotless purity was one consequence of that. Her chastity in her love for St. Joseph was another. This purity of heart comes from her fullness of grace and therefore she is inviolate, a mother in whom motherhood and virginity each reach their perfection. She is also, undefiled by any stain of sin. Some may remember that the litany used to contain the title **"Mother most amiable"**, but you will see that the modern version has replaced this with the true and more

easily understood meaning of **"Mother most loveable"**. **"Holy Virgin of Virgins"** is developed into six invocations. The first, **"Virgin most prudent"** may seem a strange title for Our Lady. Prudence has come to mean an almost timid caution. But the virtue of prudence is something quite different. The Catechism of the Catholic Church makes this plain (para. 1806). The truly prudent soul is one that is devoted to an ideal of virtue and wisely chooses all those courses of action which best lead to the ideal. The martyrs were far from cautious and timid, but they were most prudent. Their prudence consisted in their clear decision to serve God rather than men. Oh that all of us should have this sort of prudence! How vocations would increase! **"Virgin most venerable"** means Virgin most worthy to be venerated. **"Virgin most renowned"** means, Virgin most worthy to be praised and proclaimed.

The titles that follow develop the title "Holy Mary" and are all inspired by Scripture, mostly the Book of Wisdom, and the Song of Songs. Nevertheless, in some cases, the poetic language obtained from Scripture does not necessarily keep the same meaning. **"Mirror of Justice"**. Justice here has the Scriptural meaning of supernatural holiness. This reaches its highest point in Our Lord, and Our Lady is the perfect mirror of that holiness. **"Seat of Wisdom"**. In Scripture, Wisdom is called the brightness of eternal light, the unspotted mirror of God's Majesty, the image of His Goodness. This Wisdom is firstly Our Lord, the Second Person of the Trinity, but it is also the spirit of wisdom, the gift of the Holy Spirit which we receive at baptism. Mary is the seat of wisdom in that her womb was the throne of the Wisdom of God made Flesh. She was also the seat of wisdom in that she most fully possessed the gift of the Holy Spirit. Why do we call her a **"Spiritual Vessel"**? Vessel is a Scriptural word meaning any kind of being, whether a person or a thing. But a vessel is also a receptacle of some kind, and so here Our Lady is the spiritual vessel, the vessel of pure crystal in which there is no sin to darken or obscure the light of grace. She is the "Vessel of Honour", a vessel worthy to be put in the highest place of honour after her Son, who has given her the greatest honours and safeguarded her from the dishonour of corruption in the tomb. She is a **"Vessel of Devotion"**, most singularly and uniquely devoted to God. The **"Mystical Rose"**, again has overtones of Scripture which says of the Wisdom of God "I grew to my full stature as a palm tree in Cades, as a rose bush in Jericho." (Eccl. XXIV 18.) The humble bride in the Song of Songs speaks of herself as a wild rose on the lowland plain. In a mysterious way Our Lady's surpassing wisdom and equally surpassing humility, flower together in the image of the mystical rose. In the darkness of this world the fragrance of her virtues fills His Church, the garden of God. Using another type of flower from the same Song of Songs, you will find the prayer we say at the end of our meetings echoes this idea, " He made you a lily of purity and renunciation whose exquisite fragrance now scents the heavenly courts and the entire Church here below."

"The Tower of David", the citadel which rose on the height of Zion as a protection for the Holy City, inspired the thought of Our Lady as the protection and strength of all Christians. She is also the "Tower of Ivory", strong yet at

the same time delicate. She is the "House of Gold" "See where wisdom has built herself a house", says the Book of Proverbs. Our Lady is the Tabernacle in which the Incarnate Wisdom of God was made Flesh, and we refer to her as gold because that is the most precious of all material. She is the **"Ark of the Covenant"**. The Covenant or agreement between God and His chosen people was symbolised by the Ark and kept in the Holy of Holies. The Ark was made of shittim wood an incorruptible wood of the acacia family. The ancient writers of the Church used to love to see in this a symbol of Our Lady's Assumption into Heaven, for her body was not to see corruption. Here too, keep in mind the thought of the Ark of Noah, in which men took refuge at the Flood; for Our Lady is the **Ark of the new Covenant** which bore the One who was to start the human race anew. And so with this title the note of hope and confidence is stressed and developed in the six praises that follow: **"Gate of Heaven", "Morning Star", Health of the Sick", "Refuge of Sinners", "Comfort of the Afflicted and Help of Christians"**.

To crown all the titles that have gone before, she is called Queen. **"Queen of all Angels "** as well as all human beings who have served God, the **patriarchs, prophets, apostles, martyrs, confessors, virgins**. In a word she is **Queen of all saints**. The titles include all creation under her sovereignty. We all belong to her as her subjects because we have been given to her by her Son. As the years go by our knowledge of and our love for Our Lady develops and increases. The last four titles are examples of this. **"Queen conceived without Original Sin "** was added after the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception by Pope Pius IX in 1854. **"Queen Assumed into Heaven "** was put in after the dogma was declared by Pope Pius XII in 1950. It was put in that place because it follows so aptly on the privilege of her Immaculate Conception. POPE LEO XIII the great Pope of the Rosary added **"Queen of the Most Holy Rosary"**, (he wrote 9 encyclicals on it!) and **"Queen of Peace "** recalls the date of the First World War when Pope Benedict XV commended the warring nations of Europe to the Blessed Mother of God.