

One hundred years of the Legion: Honour to the Most Holy Name of Mary

It's with great rejoicing that we come together at this time when we're celebrating one hundred years of Mary's Legion, to give thanks, and to pray blessings upon the Legion as we move forward in hope and trust into our second century. Who would have imagined one hundred years ago the blessings that would flow from that meeting described in simple terms in the opening pages of the *Handbook*?

'This army, now so considerable, had the most humble of beginnings. It was not a thought-out organisation. It sprang up spontaneously. There was no premeditation in regard to rules and practices. A suggestion was simply thrown out. An evening was fixed, and a little group came together, unaware that they were to be the instruments of most loving Providence.' (p. 9)

It reminds us of the humble beginnings of a far greater event. If at the time of the Annunciation, someone had been standing outside Mary's house, they couldn't have dreamt that within the walls at that moment, the Incarnation of God himself was taking place, as Mary said her simple 'Yes' to the Angel. God often likes to do the greatest things with the least fanfare.

We read, 'That first enrolment of legionaries of Mary took place at Myra House, Francis Street, Dublin, Ireland, at 8 p.m. on 7 September, 1921, the eve of the feast of Our Lady's Nativity.' This 'seemed at the time less appropriate than the following day would have been.' Yet it was later realised that 'not the least exquisite touch of Mary's hand had been shown in the moment of the Legion's birth. Of the evening and the morning was the first day made (*Gen* 1:5), and surely the first, and not the last fragrances of the feast which honours her own Nativity were appropriate to the first moments of an organisation, whose first and constant aim has been to reproduce in itself the likeness of Mary, thus best to magnify the Lord and bring him to men.' (pp. 10-11)

In our centenary meeting today, we're providentially gathering on 12 September: liturgically a Sunday in Ordinary Time, but also in the calendar every year, the Memorial of the Most Holy Name of Mary. A name most beloved, of course, to legionaries – so we can meditate on that.

The bond between a person and his or her name leads us to an instinctive affection for the very names of those persons we particularly love. So we venerate in a special way the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary. One of the liturgical regulations is that whenever during the Mass the names of Jesus or Mary or the saint of the day are spoken, a bow of the head is made. (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal* 275) So you may have noticed the priest doing that.

In English we say *Mary*, and of course other languages have other versions, such as *Maria* in Italian and Spanish or *Marie* in French. These come from *Maria* in Latin, which in turn comes from the New Testament Greek *Mariam*, and finally, in the Aramaic that Jesus and Mary spoke themselves, *Maryam*. (Behind this is the Hebrew *Miriam*, the name of Moses' sister.) We hear with loving affection all these variations on the same name of our Blessed Mother.

In Latin, *mare* means 'sea', with its plural *maria* ('seas'); this coincidence inspired Mary's title, *Stella Maris*, 'Star of the Sea', deriving from St Jerome. St Louis de Montfort, in *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, gives this beautiful interpretation: 'God the Father gathered all the waters together and called them *maria* [meaning, the seas]. He gathered all His grace together and called it *Maria* [Mary].' (n. 23)

The Feast of the Most Holy Name of Mary originated in Spain in 1513, but its connection with 12 September and extension to the Church worldwide came later. In July 1683, armies of the Ottoman Empire at the peak of its expansion advanced upon Vienna and besieged the city, and after two months it was near capitulation. Pope Blessed Innocent XI had persuaded John Sobieski, King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania, to come to the city's aid. At the famous Polish Marian shrine of Jasna Góra in Częstochowa, Sobieski placed his forces under the protection of Mary, and on 15 August, the army raced towards the Danube.

They approached the besieged city through the difficult hills of the Vienna Woods, and on 12 September 1683, their outnumbered infantry relief forces (some 60,000) were battling the besiegers (some 140,000). But in the late afternoon came the decisive blow: in the largest cavalry charge in history, 18,000 horsemen, led by Sobieski, stormed down the slopes upon the Ottoman lines. In less than three hours the invaders were vanquished, and Vienna was saved. An Ottoman historian of the time called it his Empire's greatest-ever defeat; and Sobieski was hailed as saviour of Christian Europe. In thanksgiving, the Pope extended the Feast of the Most Holy Name of Mary to the Church worldwide, still celebrated today on the anniversary.

Just as at Lepanto on 7 October 1571 (the origin of the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary), so also at Vienna in 1683, Mary Queen of Peace wins battles – not of course in wars of aggression, but defending God's People against unjust attack, saving and preserving them for times of peace. And that's a sign as well of how she wins *spiritual* battles for us.

So as we meet on this day, we trustingly invoke the beautiful and most holy Name of Mary, powerful against the forces of evil that threaten God's People in our own time, powerful in guiding and protecting her beloved Legion. In union with all the angels and saints, in union with our Beloved and Blessed Mother, we come before God in joy – to praise, bless and thank him for these hundred years. May the Most Holy Name of Mary be everywhere loved, so that with her, we may love even more the Most Holy Name of Jesus.