

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Our Lady of Sorrows, Queen of Martyrs

Many of us grew up hearing the various titles given to the Blessed Mother. Many churches around the diocese carry those names: Our Lady of Peace, Our Lady of Grace, Our Lady of Mercy, among others. Most of them are pretty self-explanatory.

But what about Our Lady of Sorrows? This title, whose memorial is observed on September 15, is the namesake feast for our parish. Curious about its history, I decided to do a little digging. I got out my shovel and went to work.

According to the Catholic Encyclopedia online, this memorial is in honor of the seven sorrows of Mary: the presentation in the temple (when it was predicted her heart would be pierced by a sword); the flight into Egypt; the loss of Jesus in Jerusalem; the meeting of Mary and Jesus on the way to Calvary; the crucifixion; the taking down of Jesus' body from the cross; and His burial. These seven sorrows were adapted by the seven founders of the Servite Order as their principal devotion in 1239.

In 1413, the devotion was given a date: the Friday after the third Sunday of Easter. (Confused? It gets worse.) Until the sixteenth century, the feast was celebrated only in North Germany, Scandinavia and Scotland. Its date changed often—sometimes before Easter, sometimes after, usually on a Friday. In 1668, the Servites—who started the whole thing 400 years earlier—were given September 15 as a formal feast day. That seems to have stuck. In 1814, Pope Pius VII extended its observance to the whole Latin Church.

Since then, different countries and cultures have adapted different ways of honoring the seven sorrows. But some places still take liberties with the date. In Rio de Janeiro, they have a special observance on the last Sunday in May. India and Portugal honor the sorrows on the third Sunday of October.

A special form of devotion in Spanish-speaking countries, under the title “N.S. de la Soledad,” is linked to the feast and commemorates the solitude of Mary on Holy Saturday. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, its origin goes back to Queen Juana, “lamenting the early death of her husband, Philip I, in 1506.”

But the date of September 15 is firmly fixed now—and concludes a special octave in the Church calendar devoted to the Blessed Mother. The octave begins on September 8, with the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, passes its middle point on the 12th with the Most Holy Name of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and concludes on the 15th with Our Lady of Sorrows. Interestingly, the feast that comes on the 14th is the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (commonly called the Triumph of the Cross). Thus, a feast of triumph is followed by one of sorrow—much the way that Christmas is followed the next day by the Feast of St. Stephen, the Church's first martyr.

For most of us, though, this day of prayer to Our Lady is a reminder of what she endured in bringing Christ into the world. She shared in a unique way in Jesus' life and death—and rejoices now for eternity in His resurrection. She stands before all of us who suffer and who sorrow as a figure of unwavering hope—and steadfast consolation.

In one of the suggested Gospel readings for this feast, Jesus from the cross speaks to John, and to all of us: “Behold your mother.”

On this day, we do—and do so with special gratitude and love for the Lady of Sorrows, and the Queen of Martyrs.

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