

About the Solemnity of Our Lady, Help of Christians

The Virgin Mary has often been invoked in times of religious strife under the title of Help of Christians. In thanksgiving for the release of Pope Pius VII from captivity in 1814, this feast was established the following year on the anniversary of his restoration.

Pope Pius VII reigned from 1800 to 1823. Much of his papacy overlapped with Napoleon's rule in France (1804-1814/15). Pius VII wanted to make peace with Napoleon and to reach a compromise with the state as long as it was compatible with the principles of the Church. Overriding some opposition within his staff, Pius made a bold decision and negotiated the celebrated Concordat of 1801 with Napoleon. This Concordat established a complete reorganization of the dioceses in France and made Roman Catholicism the State religion in France. Pius renounced Church property which had been already been seized by the state and asked the remaining bishops to resign their French sees.

In 1802, certain articles were appended to the Concordat which forbade the exercise of any papal jurisdiction in France without the permission of the government. Pius protested and tried to use the occasion of Napoleon's formal consecration (2 December in Paris) to have the articles modified. Pius was unsuccessful and the relationship between Pius and Napoleon deteriorated very quickly. Rome was occupied by French troops in 1808, and Napoleon declared the Papal States annexed to France in 1809.

Pius bravely excommunicated the invaders on 10 June 1809 and was taken prisoner in July of that same year. He remained in exile until the successful invasion of France by the allies in 1814.

Our Lady Help of Christians

24 May



What can we learn about Mary as Help of Christians?

The role of Church and State and the Catholic Church being a State religion have been a challenge for the Church for a long time. The idea in each case starts out well but becomes a problem when governments wish to interfere with the way the Church runs its affairs. Even government funding for Church schools has been the subject of contention.

Well-meaning as Pius VII was (and with the benefit of hindsight for those of us living now looking back on past events), it would have been better for him not to negotiate with Napoleon. In the end it got him nowhere, other than finding himself in a lot of strife. Thankfully, he came to his senses and turned to prayer and asked Mary's intercession.

The first Australian provincial synod held in Sydney in 1844 placed the Church in Australia under Mary's patronage under the title Our Lady, Help of Christians. The fledgling colonies and its peoples needed Mary's help and we are no different today. Let us pray through Mary's intercession for an end to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We too must fulfil our civic duty, but it should not compromise our lives as Catholics. In our times of trial, we can turn to Mary for her intercession. Australia has been placed under her patronage. Let us continue to call on Mary and follow the humble example she gives to us in the Gospel, so that we may follow Christ more authentically in our daily lives.

The Collect

Almighty, ever-living God,
who placed the love of Our Lady, Help of Christians
in the hearts of those
who brought the Catholic faith to these shores,
grant, through her intercession,
wisdom to our leaders and integrity to our citizens,
so that, under her protection,
Australia may know harmony, justice and peace.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading Luke 1:39-56

The Almighty has done great things for me

Mary set out and went as quickly as she could to a town in the hill country of Judah.

She went into Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth.

Now as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting,
the child leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.
She gave a loud cry and said, 'Of all women you are the most blessed,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord?

For the moment your greeting reached my ears,
the child in my womb leapt for joy.

Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the
Lord would be fulfilled.'

And Mary said:

'My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord
and my spirit exults in God my saviour;
because he has looked upon his lowly handmaid.
Yes, from this day forward all generations will call me blessed,
for the Almighty has done great things for me.
Holy is his name,
and his mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear him.
He has shown the power of his arm, he has routed the proud of heart.
He has pulled down princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly.
The hungry he has filled with good things, the rich sent empty away.
He has come to the help of Israel his servant, mindful of his mercy
– according to the promise he made to our ancestors –
of his mercy to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months and then went back home.

Antiphon

Blessed are you, O Virgin Mary, by the Lord God Most High,
above all women on the earth; for he has so exalted your name
that your praise shall be undying on our lips.

Hymn to Mary, Help of Christians

O God, you placed Mary's love
in the hearts of those who came
to these shores from far away,
that the Gospel they acclaim:
*Mary, we cry to you today,
help our nation, please, we pray.*

Through Mary's intercession,
for our leaders, Lord, we pray;
for citizens of this land,
protect us from harm each day:
*Mary, we cry to you today,
help our nation, please, we pray.*

May Australia always know
harmony, justice and peace,
by the way we live the faith,
in this land may it increase:
*Mary, we cry to you today,
help our nation, please, we pray.*

Mary, like you may we sing
the Lord's praises every day
for the great things that He does
as we follow in His way:
*Mary, we cry to you today,
help our nation, please, we pray.*

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