

## **"Our Lady, Untier of Knots"**

*Address to 2015 Rosary Rally (English)*

*October 10, 2015, San Francisco*

The recent visit of Pope Francis to our country was a moment of tremendous grace for all of us, and I think we all still feel deep gratitude to our Holy Father for his pastoral outreach to us here in the United States, and especially his understanding of the very many struggles that families are dealing with these days, and the challenges that people of faith face in living a life of whole-hearted devotion to Jesus and of integrity with his teachings. Pope Francis' presence and words of encouragement are a tremendous support for us all.

You may be aware that Pope Francis has a particular devotion to an image of the Blessed Mother under the title, "Our Lady, Untier of Knots." The idea was first expressed in a painting by the baroque German artist Johann Georg Melchior Schmidtner around the year 1700. The image depicts the Blessed Virgin Mary standing on the crescent moon surrounded by angels, with the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove hovering above her as she unties knots into a long strip and at the same time rests her foot on the head of a "knotted" snake.

This is not just a touching devotional idea; its theological roots go back very far. In fact, they go back to the very beginning, for the serpent represents the devil, and Mary's treatment of him fulfills the prophecy in Genesis 3:15, which we just heard in our Mass earlier this morning: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel."

The great bishop and theologian of the second century, St. Irenaeus, in his classic work *Against Heresies*, sees in this scene in Genesis a parallel between Eve and Mary, and describes how "the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the Virgin Mary set free through faith" (Book V, Chapter 19).

Like me, you may sometimes find that your rosary beads get tangled up. If I get frustrated when trying to undo them, the problem only gets worse. If I approach the problem calmly and patiently, the chain of beads becomes untangled almost without effort.

This is a wonderful lesson for our lives, and for the importance of the Rosary. And, I believe, it is a lesson Pope Francis wants us to learn. He fostered this devotion in Argentina, and, happily, we can claim to have a special connection with it here in the United States, for the image of the Blessed Mother standing on the crescent moon is the usual way of depicting Mary under her title of the Immaculate Conception – the Patroness of the United States.

As we pray through the joyful, luminous, sorrowful and glorious mysteries, we contemplate with Mary the great events in her Son's life. By means of this

contemplation we see fulfilled the words of St. Paul: "God has given us the wisdom to understand fully the mystery, the plan He was pleased to decree in Christ" (Eph 1:9).

When we see the combination of light and shadow in the lives of Jesus and his Mother, we are in a better position to understand the joys and sorrows in our own lives, and in the events taking place in the world around us. We see so much anger and frustration around us, and it is easy for us to get all worked up over it. When we do, the tangled knots in our lives only get worse. The prayerful recitation of the Rosary is a powerful antidote to this: the rhythm of the words and the images of the mysteries of Christ's life that each decade suggests soothe us, calm us, and allow us to be open to the breath of God's Holy Spirit.

When we conclude this prayer, we possess the serenity that allows us to untangle the knots in our lives calmly. Or better yet, to allow God to do the job. What disobedience has tied into the knots of sin and selfishness is undone by a faith like Mary's. Let us ask her to intercede for us, so that we might have a perfect obedience like hers, and then by faith be freed.