

WHO IS OUR LADY HELP OF CHRISTIANS?

One of your friends asks you: WHO IS OUR LADY HELP OF CHRISTIANS? What do you respond? Maybe you say she is Mary, the mother of Jesus ...she is the Patroness Saint of my parish in Waldorf. This is correct, but your friend may want to know more: "Yes, I know that the title Our Lady refers to Mary, the mother of Jesus. But why is she called Help of Christians?" I must confess that until I was assigned to OLHOC, I would have been unable to answer this deeper, follow-up question. I had no idea what is the origin of such title of Mary. I may have vaguely remembered that it is one of the titles of Mary mentioned in the long Litany of Mary (sometimes prayed at the end of the Rosary). However, I had never heard of any other Catholic church with such name until I came to Waldorf as a newly ordained priest 10 years ago...

As part of our "Celebrating 40 years", I asked our OLHOC Marian Group (meets every First Saturday after the 9 am Mass - everyone welcome to join): "What can the Marian Group do to celebrate our first 40 years as a parish?" Many ideas were put forward (some of them already being implemented)" but one intrigued me: "Let us research and write about *The Origin of Our Lady Help of Christians*". One of the members of the Marian Group took the lead and prepared a 6-page note that was circulated to the entire group. We are now considering how to disseminate the key messages of this note to the entire parish and maybe present a different Marian theme for each month from December (Advent and Christmas) through May (month of Mary and Feast of OLHOC on Sunday May 24 when Archbishop Wilton Gregory will visit our parish).

From the write-up on our website (part of Welcome) and my own research, it is clear that originally the title "Help of Christians" was established to promote the devotion of Mary as the one protecting all Christians, including the Pope, against any attack (physical, moral, spiritual) from non-Christians. This is the direct link with the major naval battle of Lepanto on October 7, 1571, which was miraculously won by the allied forces of Pope Pius V against the much larger fleet of the invading Turkish forces. Pope Pius V had ordered fasting and public prayer (Rosary and Litany for Victory). He therefore declared that Mary had protected the Christians and he established October 7 as the Feast Day of "Our Lady of Victory"! His successor changed the name of that Feast Day to "Our Lady of the Rosary" as the Rosary was seen as the key factor for this major Victory against the threatening Islamic Invasion. One can say that the titles of Our Lady Help of Christians, Our Lady of the Rosary and Our Lady of Victory are closely related, all protecting Christians against evil attacks.

At the beginning of the 19th century (about 250 years after the battle of Lepanto), Rome was once again threatened by invaders. This time it was the troops of Napoleon, French Emperor, which conquered most of Europe. Napoleon

arrested Pope Pius VII and then annexed Rome and the Papal States. The Pope remained prisoner for about six years. Only after the defeat of Napoleon at Leipzig in 1814, was Pius VII released. He attributed his release to the protection of Mary. On May 24, 1814, he entered Rome and he declared May 24, the Feast Day of Our Lady Help of Christians. Saint John Bosco, shortly afterwards promoted the devotion to Our Lady Help of Christians while dedicating his life to assist very poor children, mostly orphans, in their education. He founded the Salesian Order of Priests and The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. He built a large church dedicated to Our Lady Help of Christians in Turin (Northern Italy). This church is today recognized as a Basilica.

Our Lady, Help of Christians, is still today mentioned in the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary (also referred as the Litany of Loreto), among 50 different titles of Mary including Holy Mary, Holy Mother of God, Mother of Christ, Mother of the Church, Comforter of the Afflicted, Queen assumed into Heaven, Queen of the Most Holy Rosary, Queen of Peace.

The National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., has a major chapel dedicated to Our Lady Help of Christians (in upper church). This is where 10 years ago, I discovered St John Bosco' powerful prayer to Mary Help of Christians. As we celebrate our 40th Anniversary, let us pray with St John Bosco:

*Mary, Help of Christians,
You listen with a Mother's love
To all who look for your guidance.
I ask you to keep all those I love
In your tender care.*

*Give me the strength
To face up to life's difficulties
And protect me
From all spiritual and bodily harm.*

*Grant me an abundance of love
So that I, too, may be a help to others,
Sharing with them in their time of need,
And caring for them
In their moments of distress.
Amen.*

Mary, Help of Christians, pray for us!

One in Christ,
Father Alain

