Forty Years of U. S. Christmas Stamps

Many countries have occasionally issued special postage stamps for Christmas, but the first to issue a regular annual series of Christmas stamps was Australia in 1957, with the Vatican following in 1959. The United States began its Christmas stamp series in 1962, and, since 1966, a “Madonna and Child” stamp has been issued every year.

The American “Madonna and Child” stamps have all been from works of art in museums in the United States. In the last thirty-five years, about half of the representations were from the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. In large part, the representations have been from the artists of the Italian Renaissance -- Raphael, della Robbia, Botticelli. One American, John Singleton Copley (1976), and one woman, Elisabeth Sirani, have been included.

In 1995, the U.S. Postal Service announced that it would discontinue the “Madonna and Child” stamp. After protests from many groups, including the intervention of President Bill Clinton, the Postmaster General Marvin Runyon reversed the decision, announced only six days earlier, and said that it would continue the popular stamp.

The Meaning of Christmas

“The birth of Christ in Bethlehem is not a fact that remains in the past. Before him, in fact, the entire human story is placed. Our today and the future of the world are illuminated by His presence . . . Jesus is the true novelty that surpasses any expectation of humanity and so will remain forever, through the happenings of the historical eras.”


“Mary, the Virgin of welcome, is the figure and model of the Church, which must be a welcoming home for all men and peoples. To assume our humanity, God willed to knock on the door of the heart of Our Lady, receiving a “yes” full of faith and love. May she help us to be open to the needs of brothers and sisters, in particular of all those who are in great difficulties.”

Liturgy and Devotions: All Part of Catholic Prayer and Worship

This past year saw two documents which have helped to clarify the relation between liturgy and devotions, an issue which has many implications for Marian devotion. In the post-conciliar period, liturgy and devotion sometimes had a stormy relationship. The first document was the Directory on Popular Piety and Liturgy (from the Congregation for the Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, December 20, 2001) and the second, Pope John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter, Rosarium Virginis Mariae (October 16, 2002).

The discussion over the distinction between the liturgy and the “popular devotions” began in the 1940s, with Pius XII’s encyclical on the liturgy, Mediator Dei (1947). Liturgy was defined as the “public worship of the Church carried out by its official ministers,” which included the Mass, the sacraments, and the Divine Office. All other prayers and ceremonies of Catholic life — not enumerated, but which included the Rosary, litanies, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, Stations of the Cross, pilgrimage — all fell under the category of “devotional exercises” and “pious practices.”

Vatican II’s first document, that on the liturgy, spoke much of matters directly related to the liturgy — the Mass, the sacraments, the language, the liturgical books, and the liturgical calendar. In the words of the council, the liturgy was “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed and the font from which all its power flows” (SC 10). Little was said about those expressions of devotion, which were not strictly speaking liturgical (no reference was made, for example, to the rosary). The council only directed that “pious exercises should be drawn up so that they harmonize with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some way derived from it and lead the people to it, since in fact the liturgy by its very nature is far superior to any of them” (SC 13).

Much of the turmoil in the decade after the council dealt with a correct reading and interpretation of the council’s directive on liturgy and popular devotion. Because of the superior position which the council assigned to the liturgy vis-a-vis popular devotion, the advocates of the liturgy sometimes displayed a condescending attitude toward popular devotion, practices to be tolerated but not encouraged. Those associated with popular devotions, not understanding how to undertake the reform called for by the council, generally resisted changing them. The “eclipse of popular devotion” which followed Vatican II was perhaps more responsible for the “Marian crisis” than the placement of the Virgin Mary in the eighth chapter of Lumen Gentium.

For some, the solution was to raise a popular devotion to the level of the liturgy. In 1969, Fr. Patrick Peyton, C.S.C., known throughout the Catholic world for his promotion of the Rosary, wrote an impassioned letter to Pope Paul VI asking that the Family Rosary “be raised to a higher level of efficacy . . . by proclaiming it a liturgical prayer.”

A change in attitude towards popular devotions began in the 1974 Synod of Bishops on Evangelization. Pope Paul VI’s letter, Evangelii nuntiandi, spoke of popular devotions as “particular expressions of the search for God and for faith,” which manifest “a thirst for God . . . an acute awareness of profound attributes of God: fatherhood, a loving providence and constant presence.” Furthermore, “they engender interior attitudes such as patience, the presence of the Cross in daily life, detachment, openness to others.” The Pueblo documents and others from the Latin American Episcopal Conference continued developing the role of popular devotions both as part of the new evangelization and for the inculturation of Catholic values.

The 2001 Directory of Popular Piety and Liturgy, which has been long in the making, is a synthesis of postconciliar developments on liturgy and devotions. It has two main divisions: Principles and Guidelines for the Harmonization of Popular Piety with Liturgy. The Guidelines include a survey of the liturgical year and its feasts, showing the wide array of practices and customs which have arisen in various cultures to mark different seasons and feasts. Popular piety has filled the lacunae of the sober Roman liturgy. For example, popular devotions in discreet ways acknowledged Mary’s presence in the passion and resurrection of Christ, even though no reference was found in the official liturgy.

The first section of the Directory -- Principles -- tries to clarify the terms related to popular piety, difficult because even official documents do not employ a consistent vocabulary. “Exercises of piety” are recognized prayers and practices (such as the rosary), which, although not part of the liturgy, are in harmony with it, and are found in approved customs and books. “Devotions” are external practices and objects pointing to a relation to Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. “Popular piety” include customs and practices rooted in a specific culture; finally, “popular religiosity” are expressions of the innate religious experience common to all humanity. The Principles offer a fine historical survey outlining the relation between liturgy and devotions. If, at certain times (for example, the late medieval period), devotional practices seem to overwhelm and almost obliterate the liturgy, there were other times (for example, 18th century Josephinism), when devotions were excluded from the church’s life.
Devotions which spontaneously arose from religious enthusiasm, or which have been overlaid with specific historical associations, may require direction, purification, and completion. A frequently cited reference in the Directory is Paul VI's 1974 letter on Marian devotion (Marialis cultus) whose guidelines for the reform of Marian devotion are applicable to all popular devotions: they were to be centered on Christ, the Incarnation, the Trinity, with a Scriptural, liturgical, ecumenical dimension, and aware of the anthropological implications.

A balance between liturgy and devotion is suggested, one which recognizes the primacy of the liturgy and the value of devotions. Liturgy is the center of the Church's life, and popular devotions extend the liturgy to personal consciousness -- to our homes, families, and daily activities. Liturgy usually involves the official ministers, whereas devotions offer opportunities for participation of different charisms and personal involvement to a degree not possible in liturgy. Liturgy and devotions are two parts of Christian worship. Each has a service to render. The spirit of the liturgy should form and permeate the popular devotions, while devotions encourage a consciousness of the divine presence and assistance in daily life.

Pope John Paul's Apostolic Exhortation on the Rosary can be read from many perspectives, not the least of which is as an example of a sound relation between liturgy and devotions. The letter has a personal tone, a conversation from a spiritual guide and father, an invitation "to investigate or rediscover the value of the "Rosary." The rosary has been part of the pope's life; he says it "has accompanied me in moments of joy and in moments of difficulty. To it I have entrusted any number of concerns; in it, I have always found comfort." It is a "way of embracing all the things that make up the lives of individuals, families, nations, the Church, and all humanity." It is also a simple prayer, which marks "the rhythm of human life," and each of its mysteries "sheds light on the meaning of our own existence" (#26).

The rosary shows how a devotion can respond to our deep human and spiritual needs. A characteristic of our age is the desire for spirituality and a contemplative type of prayer. The rosary is a method of contemplation (#28), a means to an end. In view of the helplessness which most experience in face of the violence in society, it is a prayer asking for the "gift of peace" within our communities, countries, our world. "How could one possibly gaze upon the face of the Risen Christ, or of Mary Queen of Heaven, without yearning to make this world more beautiful, more just, more closely conformed to God's plan?" Lastly, it provides a type of informal, familiar prayer within our families and communities.

The letter suggests a "pastoral approach" to the rosary, and encourages adaptation to varying circumstances and capacities. There are different ways to begin and conclude the rosary. Visual representations of the mystery are encouraged, as are listening to and silently pondering the word of God. A "phrase" referring to the mystery may be included in the Hail Mary, after the name of Jesus. Some reflections relating the mystery to daily life are encouraged.

A recurring theme throughout the letter is the harmony between the rosary and the liturgy. The first objection that the letter considers is that "the centrality of the liturgy necessarily implies giving lesser importance to the rosary." Yet, the letter maintains, the "rosary does not conflict with the liturgy...it sustains, serves as preparation for and an echo of the liturgy, allowing full and interior participation in the liturgy" (#4).

The spiritual life is not limited to the liturgy, but also involves prayer in common, prayer "in their own rooms," all part of the Apostle's exhortation "to pray without ceasing." The rosary is part of the varied panorama of "ceaseless prayer." "If the liturgy, as the activity of Christ and the Church, is a saving action par excellence, the Rosary too, as a 'meditation' with Mary on Christ, is a salutary contemplation...It ensures that what the liturgy makes present is profoundly assimilated and shapes our existence"(13). Parish communities can celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours, a liturgical exercise, and also the Rosary: "These two paths of Christian contemplation are not mutually exclusive; they complement one another" (#41).

The pope's letter on the rosary contains personal insights on the prayer which has been part of Catholic life for the last millennium. It also points out the mutual benefits which the liturgy and a devotion bring to each other -- both are centered on the mystery of Christ, one celebrated in liturgy, and the other encountered in contemplative pondering with Mary.

1 See "Sacramentals" in The Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1667-1679.
2 A similar approach to the Rosary was suggested by Paul VI and in recent years by other church documents. To avoid confusion, Paul VI indicated that the term "rosary" should be limited to describe the traditional form, but there were other possibilities, which for lack of a better term could be called "rosary-like." Among them are Cardinal Leon-Josef Suenens' Fiat Rosary and the programs given in Celebrations for the Millennium, 1998.
Book Notes


Rowan Williams, soon to be installed as Archbishop of Canterbury, has written a small and beautiful book on prayer, icons, and Mary. Icons are not simply “works of religious art,” but “theology in line and color.” Rather than simply gaze on them, we must “read what the icon writer has written.” Important in these meditations is William’s great sensitivity to the “lines and directions” within the icon.

Three icons are considered: the One Who Points the Way; the Virgin of Loving Kindness, and the Virgin of the Sign. In the first, Mary points away from herself to Jesus, whose eyes are directed to Mary, while Mary’s eyes look toward us. In the icon, Jesus is not an isolated figure but one in relation with others. We are invited to enter with Jesus “into his own self-forgetful engagement with the human world” and not simply contemplate him as a divine but isolated individual.

In the Virgin of Loving Kindness, the Infant clinging to Mary points out that God cannot be separated from the world he created, that he is passionate for our company. Mary’s somber gaze directed toward us speaks of the many levels of the divine presence, which mold, challenge, and transform.

The Virgin of the Sign, with the representation of Christ within the body of Mary, is an image of the Church. Christ is concealed in the center of the Church; the image encourages the Church to trust in the God hidden in its life. Rowan concludes that “Imaging Mary in words and pictures has always been one of the most powerful ways of imagining the Church.”

This work, a “spiritual gem” and appropriate for the Christmas season, is, as Bishop Kallistos Ware mentions in the Introduction, “to be read not once only but many times.”


The Dombes Group (Group des Dombes) is little known in the English-speaking world, and this work, which was published in French in 1998-99, did not appear in English until 2002. Founded in 1937 by Paul Couturier, the Dombes Group represents a “spiritual” approach to ecumenism, involving not only discussion of doctrinal matters, but also common prayer and the “call to conversion” addressed to the churches. Couturier established the Week of Prayer for Church Unity, a practice first suggested by Fr. Paul Watson, founder of Graymoor.

This document on Mary is the result of seven years of meetings, assignments, and discussions (1991-1998), and it is now presented to the churches for their study and consideration. The Dombes Group’s method is to study a topic, review the Scriptural and historical development, identify the areas of agreement and disagreement. Suggestions for convergence are offered, and finally a “call to conversion” is addressed to each church—a conversion which involves attitudes, teachings, and practices.

The first of the four sections, an “ecumenical reading of church history,” presents the Virgin Mary of the early creeds and church councils. During this period there was no controversy about her role. Only at the end of the first millennium did issues arise that would later cause disagreements. The second section, the “ecumenical reading of the Scriptures,” is a review of relevant Scriptural passages within the framework of the three principal articles of the Creed. Underlying this approach is the conviction that all the Scriptures are “spiritual” and receive a fuller meaning when considered within a statement of basic beliefs. The third and fourth sections, “controversies” and “the call to conversion,” deal with four points: 1) Mary’s cooperation with the saving work of Christ (a frequently recurring theme in Catholic theology); 2) the two Marian dogmas defined in 1854 and 1950; 3) the perpetual virginity of the Virgin Mary; and 4) the invocation of Mary in liturgical and popular devotion.

Although the Virgin Mary was not the cause of the separation between the churches in the West, she has unfortunately become the sign of separation. The Dombes work concludes that, “at the end of our historical, biblical and doctrinal study, we do not find any irreducible incompatibilities, despite some real theological and practical divergences.” Finally, “our entire work has shown that nothing about Mary allows her to be made the symbol of what separates us” (#337). The work deserves wide diffusion in ecumenical and academic circles.
Books Recently Sent to the Marian Library


Carmel and Mary: Theology and History of a Devotion. Edited by John F. Welch, O. Carm.


Novissima Mariana

- The newly-formed Advisory Board for “The Mary Page” of the Marian Library / IMRI met for two days, November 1-2, to discuss the future development of this important resource. The thirteen members of the Board represent various technological, pastoral, and theological competencies. The Mary Page, begun in 1997, contains thousands of pages of information divided in several major sections: resources, FAQ, research, significant ecclesial documents, pastoral programs. The meeting was subsidized by a contribution from the Mariological Society of America.

- At present, the Advisory Board is composed of the Rev. Johann G. Roten, SM; Rev. Benedict O’Cinnsealaigh; Rev. Sam Maranto, CSSR; Bro. John Samaha, SM; Rev. Gerald T. Chinchar, SM; Rev. Robert Hughes, SM; Sr. Mary Catherine Nolan, OP, STD; Dr. Ron Novotny; Dr. Deyanira Flores; Mr. Michael Duricy; Sr. M. Danielle Peters; Mr. Alejandro Cañadas; Sr. M. Jean Frisk; Ms. Kris Sommers; and Ms. Virginia Kimball.

- On Saturday, November 16, 2002, Fr. Frank Leo (Archdiocese of Montreal) successfully defended his dissertation (for the degree of S.T.D. with specialization in Marian studies) entitled “The Virgin Mother in the Sermons of Fra Girolamo Savonarola.”

- Again this Christmas season, Crèches International (Marian Library / IMRI) will sponsor crèche exhibits at different locations. This year’s exhibits can be seen at the Marian Library, at Bergamo Center / St. John Gallery, the Dayton Art Institute, St. Peter in Chains Cathedral (Cincinnati), and the John Paul II Cultural Center (Washington, DC). Call the Marian Library for information on dates and times for each exhibit.

- Recent exhibits in the Marian Library were “The Madonnas of Europe: A Great Photographer on Pilgrimage to famous Marian Shrines in Europe, by Janusz Rosikon,” and “God Bless America: Artistic Variations on 9-11,” by John Solowianiuuk.

- In his annual meeting with pontifical academies in Rome on October 29, 2002, Pope John Paul continued his call for a more profound theological study and research on the Virgin Mary. Recalling that 2004 will mark the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of the dogma of Mary’s Immaculate Conception, the pope said that the two Marian pontifical academies are called to offer their contribution so that it will be “an occasion of renewed theological, cultural and spiritual effort to communicate to the men and women of our time the most authentic meaning and message of this truth of faith.” This year’s award for a theological dissertation was given to Rosa Cali, alumna of the Marianum School of Theology of Rome, for her doctoral thesis entitled “Anti-Mariological Texts in the Exegesis of the Fathers from Nicaea to Chalcedon.”

- A decade ago, Lourdes had five million visitors a year. Last year, the number increased to six million. Lourdes has announced a five-year thematic program which will focus on the five realities of Lourdes: 2002: the Water of the Spring; 2003: a Gathering of every Nation and People; 2004: the Rock; 2005: the Infirm and their Caregivers; 2006: Light.

- The Mariological Society of America’s 53rd annual program, “The Marian Dimension of the Christian Life,” was held at the Cardinal Spellman Retreat Center, Riverdale (Bronx), New York, May 22-25, 2002. The Cardinal Spellman Retreat Center overlooks a beautiful part of the Hudson River, and the advantage of having a meeting in New York City is the opportunity to encounter the rich variety and vitality of the local church. The opening Mass of the
program was celebrated by Edward Cardinal Egan, Archbishop of New York City, who extended a warm welcome to the Mariological Society and spoke of the great diversity of ministries present in the city. Other representatives of the church of New York who addressed the Mariological Society were Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., the eminent and “model” American theologian, who resides at Fordham University; Fr. Benedict Groeschel, F.R., known for his appearances on the Eternal Word Television Network; Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, a former Lutheran pastor, now Catholic priest, founder and editor of the influential journal, First Things. An afternoon of the meeting was spent at The Cloisters, the branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art devoted to medieval art, which includes many representations of the Virgin Mary. The conferences given at the meeting will be published in Marian Studies, vol. 53 (2002), available in the spring of 2003.

A rare collection of art from the Vatican will be coming to the Marian Library in September, 2003: “The Mother of God: Art Celebrates Mary.” The 38-piece exhibition includes pieces dating from the 4th century to the 20th century. Works from several cultural groups are represented: Africa, China, Korea, Greece, Central Europe, Russia, Brazil and the Solomon Islands. Except for a stay at the John Paul II Cultural Center (Washington, DC), the exhibit has not been seen in the United States. Contributions to help defray the cost of transporting, insuring, and securing the art should be marked “Vatican Exhibit” and sent to Marian Library/IMRI.

Beginning a Stamp Collection?

Interested in Collecting Marian Postage Stamps?

Collecting stamps dealing with religion is way of learning religion, art, geography, and history. In 1969, the dean of Marian philatelists, the late Fr. Aloysius S. Horn of Freemont, Ohio (Diocese of Columbus) encouraged those beginning a stamp collection to consider Marian stamps. “There is wide field open to you. Over the past several years many countries have issued stamps, which depict the Madonna in Art, some after masterpieces in their own national galleries or museums, and some after the Louvre, etc. True, some of the issuing countries are considered suspect, yet the stamp does reproduce a masterpiece, which is a delight to behold, particularly for those of us who never expect to see the original in person. The question may arise as to how one would mount a collection of Madonna in Art. Perhaps these few suggestions may be of some benefit. It could be divided into: pictures, sculptures, stained glass, woodcarvings, etchings and engravings, tapestries. It could be further divided by School: Italian, Spanish, French, Flemish, German, Oriental; or it could be segregated by period: Medieval, Goth, Renaissance, Baroque, Modern. One could mount the stamps by the artist, thus covering his life with a showing of his works. So, if you are looking for a new area of collecting -- how about the ‘Madonna in Art'? You will find a most fascinating and interesting area.”

Marge Yefchak - at the Shrine of Our Lady of Peace, Santa Clara, California.

The Marian Library/IMRI lost a valued associate, volunteer, and worker in Mrs. Marjorie A. Yefchak, who, after suffering a stroke the previous week, died on August 19, 2002. She was largely responsible for the library’s annual Creche exhibits, and its ongoing art exhibits in the Marian Library Gallery. Her “eye for harmony and beauty” in displaying works of art greatly enhanced the exhibits. Hundreds of her well-crafted digital photographs of nativity scenes and religious art are available for the enjoyment of people worldwide through the Mary Page website.

The Rosary Year
October 2002 – October 2003

25th Anniversary of Pope John Paul II’s Pontificate
40th Anniversary of the Opening of Vatican II, Oct. 11, 1962
120th Anniversary of the First of Pope Leo XIII’s Twelve Encyclicals on the Rosary, 1883.
Contribute to the Marian Library’s Future

Five years ago, a fund-raising appeal from the University of Notre Dame Libraries stated, “On average, the cost to acquire, catalog and shelf one library book is about $80.00.” For the Marian Library, the cost is even higher. The actual price of a book is only a small part of the total cost. Researching information on the book and author, processing the order, cataloging, classifying, labeling, and shelving—all are part of the final cost. In addition, the ongoing conversion of the Marian Library’s collection into an online catalog is a costly undertaking.

We are grateful to many who have assisted this project during the last sixty years. We recall Arthur W. Clinton, Jr., a 1953 graduate of the University of Dayton, who died in 1992, and remembered the Marian Library with a generous bequest in his will. These contributions, including a major one from the Marianist Province of Cincinnati, have allowed us to establish an endowment to acquire books, support the cataloging project, and provide other services (including the printing and mailing of this newsletter).

Your contribution to the Marian Library/IMRI is recognized as a contribution to the University of Dayton. Among the Marian Library’s great needs are support for the cataloging project; scholarships for those wishing to pursue Marian studies; furnishings for the library and art exhibits; maintenance of the Mary Page; support for digitalization projects.

We know that you receive many worthy requests for assistance. We invite you to share in our unique mission of gathering and providing the resources to study and make known to all the “marvelous deeds of God” come to us through Christ, born of the Virgin Mary.
Friends of The Marian Library and IMRI

2003

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