

Second Sunday of Lent
March 5, 2023
Year of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Ark of the New Covenant

*“Under your mercy we take refuge, O Mother of God. Do not reject our supplications in necessity, but deliver us from danger, [O you] alone pure and alone blessed.” (Translation of prayer entitled **Sub Tuum Praesidium**, from the Rylands Library papyrus circa 259 AD.)*

We last reflected upon the early connection of Mary as the “New Eve, Mother of the Living” which had been made by our first Christian ancestors. Today, I would like to move forward in both time and location in our Christian history. The place will be the Roman civilizations located in North Africa, with special attention to Alexandria, Egypt and the first great Christian theological school associated with the city. The time will be from, roughly, 150-300 AD. As Christianity spread, due to the relative safety and ease one would possess living within the Roman Empire, we find its growth blossoming early in the northern part of Africa. This era of time proudly offers us the wisdom and writings from minds such as Tertullian (the first Christian writer to use the word “Trinity” to describe God), Saint Cyprian of Carthage, Saint Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Saint Anthony and later Saints Athanasius and Cyril also of Alexandria.

It is within this period that we have the first and earliest written prayer specifically addressing the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus, Mother of God. The prayer, ***Sub Tuum Praesidium*** (Under your Protection), found written in Greek upon a fragment of papyrus in the John Rylands Library (Manchester, England) dating to circa 259 AD. Although many of the ancient texts have been lost to our modern times, what we do possess, informs of a move in the understanding of the role of the Blessed Mother in the salvation of humanity. A reason for these more clearly defined statements may have been a result of the rise of Gnosticism. Gnosticism, loosely held, that man’s salvation came more from knowledge. It is this mysterious knowledge of the divine which held greater sway upon the salvation of the individual as opposed to the way the individual chose, rather, to live their life. The Christian thinkers and religious leaders, specifically tied to the theological school in Alexandria, sought to combat this heresy by offering Mary as an example. She is someone who knew Jesus intimately. She does this as His earthly mother and also His disciple. Her humble life, glorified by His Presence within her womb, would continue on after His salvific mission (Passion, Death, and Resurrection) was complete. She would also be honored as an archetype and model of the Church for as often as the Church holds to her virginal/immaculate faith in Jesus as God and preaches the mystery of His saving action; she gives birth to new children whom she nurtures with spiritual milk, the refreshment of the Sacraments.

Origen, considered the “Father of Eastern Theology,” was one of these powerful African intellectuals. It was he whose writings affirmed Mary as both Virgin Mother and Ever Virgin.

In his Commentary on John, we find two statements which highlight his feelings, apparently rather spicy feelings, toward those who would deny these two principles:

“If someone believes that he who was crucified under Pontius Pilate was a holy person, who came to bring salvation to the world, but does not believe in his birth of the Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit, thinking instead that he was born of Joseph and Mary, then this person lacks an indispensable condition for possessing the complete faith. . . . There is no child of Mary except Jesus, according to the opinion of those who think correctly about her.” (Origen, Commentary on John)

My dear people, the writings of the North African Christians, many who would go on to die for the faith in subsequent persecutions, provide us a window, early on, of the development of the Christian teachings concerning the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is here that they would stress her holiness, through their reading of Sacred Scripture. They desired to imitate her humility through their own daily lives. They saw in her a model and example of how Christians are called to live the virtues of her Son, courageously even to the point of offering their lives in union with His own Death. For instead of dismissing Mary’s vital role with Salvation History, they embraced it and her. This is a historical fact that must be continually witnessed to—early Christians asked for the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary in their prayers. As we still believe and profess to this day, Mary as Mother of Jesus holds a special place, a unique place in His Sacred Heart. He has given her to us, and we to her as He died upon the cross. She only wants us to be reconciled with her Son who gave His life as a ransom for our own. She will never ask for anything contrary to His Divine Will for our good. Therefore, why should one persist this day in not embracing this Most Blessed Gift given to humanity? Allow these final words of Origen to be our conclusion to this point: “If Mary is proclaimed blessed by the Holy Spirit [through the mouth of Elizabeth], then how can the Lord have rejected her?” (Origen, Homily on Luke).