

Catholic Devotions

A means of permeating everyday life with prayer

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Catholic popular devotions are an expression of the religious sense of the people. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) defines this 'religious sense' as piety, one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Besides sacramental liturgy and sacramentals, catechesis must take into account the forms of piety and popular devotions among the faithful. The religious sense of the Christian people has always found expression in various forms of piety surrounding the Church's sacramental life, such as the veneration of relics, visits to sanctuaries, pilgrimages, processions, the stations of the cross, religious dances, the rosary, medals, etc. (CCC, #1674, 1994)

Popular devotions have developed gradually over years, perhaps centuries, as people sought ways of living out their faith. They have arisen in the encounter between the Catholic faith and the spiritual needs of a culture. The different forms of Marian devotion provide an excellent example of the impact of various historical and cultural contexts on a popular devotion. Pope Paul VI (1974) explained in the Apostolic exhortation *For the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary* (*Marialis cultus*), that the Church

... does not bind herself to any particular expression of an individual cultural epoch or to the particular anthropological ideas underlying such expressions. The Church understands that certain outward religious expressions, while perfectly valid in themselves, may be less suitable to men and women of different ages and cultures. (MC, #36)

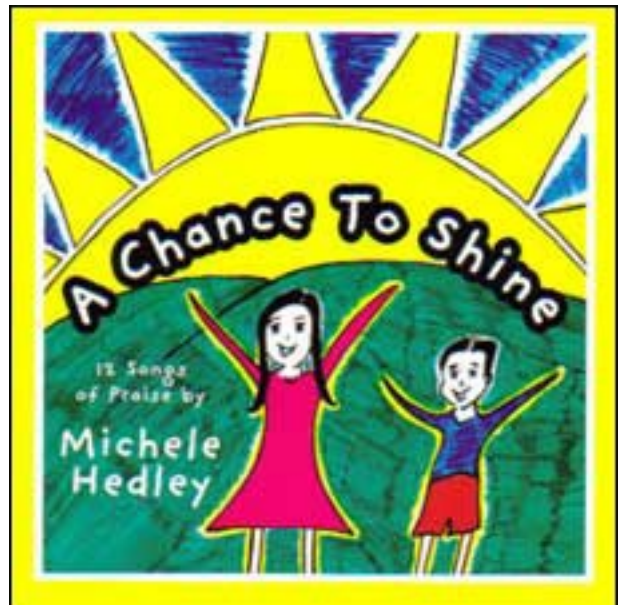
In a document issued by US Bishops Conference (2003), *Popular Devotional Practices: Basic Questions and Answers*, the Bishops stated that devotional practices play a crucial role in helping to foster prayer as part of our daily lives. Catholic devotional practices are a means of permeating everyday life with prayer to God. Examples include pilgrimages, novenas, processions and celebrations in honor of Mary and the other saints, the rosary, the *Angelus*, the Stations of the Cross, the veneration of relics, and the use of sacramentals.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council recognized the importance of popular devotions in the life of the Church and encouraged pastors and teachers to promote sound popular devotions.

Popular devotions of the Christian people are to be highly commended, provided they accord with the laws and norms of the Church

(SC, #13, 1963)

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As an expression of popular religious sense, the potential and limitations of Catholic devotions must be acknowledged. In *Evangelii nuntiandi* (EN, 1975) Pope Paul VI describes the importance of 'well oriented' devotions. With an orientation determined by the 'pedagogy of evangelisation' Catholic popular devotions can be "rich in values" and,

...manifests a thirst for God that only the simple and the poor can know. It makes people capable of generosity and sacrifice even to the point of heroism, when it is a question of manifesting belief. It involves an acute awareness of the profound attributes of God: fatherhood, providence, loving and constant presence. It engenders interior attitudes rarely observed to the same degree elsewhere: patience, the sense of the cross in daily lives, detachment, openness to others, devotion. (EN, #48, 1975)

There is also a warning of the limits:

Popular religiosity... is often subject to distortions of religions and even superstitions. It frequently remains at the level of forms of worship not involving the true acceptance by faith. It can lead to the creation of sects and endanger the true ecclesial community. (EN, #48, 1975)

Leachman (2006) describes popular devotions as meeting points between the local culture and the explicit celebration of faith in the Church's public liturgy. In popular devotions 'faith meets culture, and culture meets faith'. They contribute to a sense of building up Catholic identity, to a sense of community, and they have a bearing on hospitality, culture and the evangelising potential of parish communities. Popular devotions are 'activities, skills and practices' that assist individuals in entering more deeply into the Christian mystery. In providing valuable opportunities for evangelisation and education in faith, Catholic popular devotions should be part of a catechetical program for children and young people.

The role of the catechist is to provide an *objective contextual presentation* of Catholic popular devotions. Some features of such a presentation will include:

- **A clear connection between the practice of Catholic popular devotion and the deepening of one's own faith and that of the community of believers**

While carefully clarifying them in the light of faith, the Church fosters forms of piety that express an evangelical instinct and a human wisdom and that enrich Christian life. (CCC, #1679, 1994)

- **The development of an understanding that Catholic popular devotions extend the liturgical life of the Church, not replace it.**

Catholic devotions should be drawn up that harmonise with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some way derived from it and lead people to it, since in fact the liturgy by its very nature is far superior to any of them. (CCC, #1675, 1994)

- **Education *about* Catholic popular devotion:**

In learning about Catholic devotions a student will develop an awareness of the history of devotional practices and their place in the Catholic tradition over the centuries; the diversity of devotional practices; and the relationship of popular devotions to the local culture and the Church's universal teaching.

- **Education *in* Catholic popular devotions:**

The catechist can provide age and stage appropriate experiences of a current Catholic popular devotion relevant to the local context. Some examples include the Stations of the Cross (Way of the Cross), Marian devotions, such as the rosary, and devotional practices related to the saints. These experiences of devotional practices are encouraged as a 'stimulus to the interior life'. (Ecclesia in Oceania, #37, 2001)

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