

Devotions

Written by W.J.Pais

Popular Devotions

Devotion, in the language of ascetical writers, denotes a certain ardour of affection in the things of God, and even without any qualifying prefix it generally implies that this ardour is of a sensible character. On the other hand, by the term "devotions" in the plural, or "popular devotions", we commonly understand those external practices of piety by which the devotion of the faithful finds life and expression. The efficacy of these practices in eliciting feelings of devotion is derived from four principal sources, either

1. by the strong appeal which they make to man's emotional instincts, or
 2. by the simplicity of form which puts them within the reach of all, or
 3. by the stimulus of association with many others in the same good work, or
 4. by their derivation from the example of pious persons who are venerated for their holiness
- .

No doubt other reasons besides these might be found why this or that exercise brings with it a certain spiritual unction which stimulates and comforts the soul in the practice of virtue, but the points just mentioned are the most noteworthy, and in the more familiar of our popular devotions all these four influences will be found united.

Historically speaking, our best known devotions have nearly all originated from the imitation of some practice peculiar to the religious orders or to a specially privileged class, and consequently owe most of their vogue to the fourth of the influences just mentioned. The Rosary

, for instance, is admitted by all to have been known in its earliest form as "Our Lady's

Psalter

". At a time when the recitation of the whole hundred and fifty Psalms was a practice inculcated upon the

religious

orders and upon

persons

of

education

, simpler folk, unable to read, or wanting the

necessary

leisure, recited instead of the Psalms a hundred and fifty Pater nosters or supplied their place more expeditiously still by a hundred and fifty Hail Marys said as salutations of

Our Lady

. The

Rosary

is thus a miniature

Psalter

. Again, at a time when the most ardent desires of

Christendom

centred in the Holy Land, and when lovers of the Crucified gladly faced all hardships in the attempt to visit the scenes of the Saviour's Passion, those unable to accomplish such a journey strove to find an equivalent by following

Christ's

footsteps to Calvary at least in spirit. The exercise of the

Stations of the Cross

thus formed a miniature

pilgrimage

. Similarly, the wearing of a

scapular

or a girdle was a form of investiture for people living in the world, by which they might put on the livery of a particular religious institute; in other words, it was a miniature habit. Or again, those who coveted the merits attaching to the recitation of the day and night hours of the

clergy

and the

monks

supplied their place by various miniature Offices of devotion, of which the

Little Office of the Blessed Virgin

and the Hours of the Passion were the most familiar.

Even devotions which at first sight suggest nothing of imitation prove on closer scrutiny to be illustrations of the same principle. The triple Hail Mary of the Angelus probably owes its actual form to the *Tres preces* said by the monastic orders at Prime and Compline as far back as the eleventh century, while our familiar

Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament

has almost certainly developed out of an imitation of the musical rendering of the

antiphons

of

Our Lady

, notably the

Salve Regina

, which to the popular taste were the most attractive feature of the monastic office. To classify these practices of

piety

, and especially those others which concern the observance of special times and seasons, for example, the

consecration

of the month of May to

Our Lady

, or of the month of June to the Sacred Heart, is not easy; for the

pious

ingenuity of the faithful is fertile in new devices, and it is difficult to decide what degree of acceptance warrants us in regarding a new devotion as legitimately established. The

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dedication of May and June just referred to, and that of November to the Holy Souls, is recognized everywhere, but there is far less unanimity about the consecration

of October, for example, to the

honour

of the

Guardian Angels

. This devotion is no

doubt

indicated in many

prayer

books, but it has been in a measure obscured of late years by the special

papal

commendation of the

Rosary

in October, while

Indulgences

are also granted for the novena and other exercises in

honour

of

St. Francis of Assisi

during the same month. We may note that the

consecration

of March to

St. Joseph

, of September to the Seven Dolours, and, less directly, that of July to the Precious Blood, are also recognized by the grant of

indulgences

.

Again, there are other devotions whose popularity has been limited to certain periods or certain localities. For example, the various sets of "Little Offices" (e.g. of the Passion or of the Blessed Trinity), which occupy so much space in the printed Horæ and Primers of the early sixteenth century, are hardly heard of at present. The "Seven Blood-Sheddings" or the "Seven Falls" of our Blessed Lord, once so much honoured, have now passed out of recollection. Similarly the exercise of the Jesus

Psalter

, which was incredibly dear to our ancestors in the old penal days, seems never to have spread beyond English-speaking countries and has never been

indulgenced

. On the other hand, the prevalence of more frequent Communion since the sixteenth century has introduced many new practices of devotion unknown in the

Middle Ages

. The Six

[Sundays](#)

of St. Aloysius, the Five

[Sundays](#)

of St. Francis's

[Stigmata](#)

, the Seven

[Sundays](#)

of the Immaculate Conception, the Seven

[Sundays](#)

of St. Joseph, the Ten

[Sundays](#)

of

[St. Francis Xavier](#)

, the Ten

[Sundays](#)

of

[St. Ignatius Loyola](#)

, and especially the nine Fridays in

[honour](#)

of the Sacred Heart are all in various degrees authorized and familiar. And, as these last examples suggest, there is everywhere a tendency to multiply imitations. We have now not one

[Rosary](#)

, but many

[rosaries](#)

or chaplets (of which imitations perhaps the best known is the

[Rosary](#)

of the Seven Dolours), not one

[scapular](#)

but many

[scapulars](#)

, not one

["miraculous medal"](#)

but several. Neither must we always expect to find consistency. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Seven Dolours and Seven Joys of

[Our Lady](#)

were commonly Five Dolours and Five Joys (see "Analecta Bollandiana", 1893, p. 333), while this last reckoning probably owed much to the great popularity of the devotion to the

[Five Wounds](#)

. On the other hand,

[indulgences](#)

, which may be found in the

[Raccolta](#)

, have been granted to certain

[prayers](#)

in

honour

of the Seven Sorrows and Seven Joys of St. Joseph.

It must not, however, be supposed that devotional extravagances are suffered to multiply unchecked. Although the Holy See as a rule refrains from intervention, except when abuses are directly denounced to it (the practice being in such matters to leave the repression of what is unseemly or fantastic to the local ordinary), still, every now and again, where some theological

principle is involved, action is taken by one of the

Roman Congregations

, and some objectionable practice is prohibited. Not very long since, for example, the propagation of a particular form of

prayer

was forbidden in connexion with the so-called "Brief of St. Anthony". The history of the slow recognition by the

Church

of the devotion to the Sacred Heart might very well serve as an illustration of the caution with which the

Holy See

proceeds in matters where there is question of any

theological

principle. The precise number of

Christ's

blood-sheddings, or of Mary's joys, the fashion or colour of

scapulars

,

medals

, or badges, the

veneration of Our Lady

under one particular invocation rather than another, are obviously matters of subordinate importance in which no great harm can result if some measure of freedom is allowed to the pious

imagination

of the

faithful

.

No good purpose would be served by attempting a catalogue of approved Catholic devotions. It may be sufficient to note that the list of

indulgenced

prayers

and practices provided in the

Raccolta

or in the larger works of Beringer and Mocchegiani afford a sufficient practical indication of

the measure in which such practices are recognized and recommended by the [Church](#)

. Most of the principal devotions are dealt with separately in THE CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA, whether we regard different objects and motives of devotion--such as the [Blessed Sacrament](#)

(See

[EUCHARIST](#)

), the

[Passion](#)

, the

[Five Wounds](#)

, the

[Sacred Heart](#)

, the Seven Dolours, and, in a word, the principal mysteries and festivals--or, again, devotional practices--e.g., the

[Angelus](#)

,

[Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament](#)

, the

[Rosary](#)

, the

[Stations of the Cross](#)

--or, again, confraternities and associations identified with particular forms of devotion--e.g., the Confraternity of the Bon Mors or that of the Holy Family.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus

Devotion to the Sacred Heart is but a special form of devotion to [Jesus](#). We shall [know](#) just what it is and what distinguishes it when we ascertain its object, its foundations, and its proper

[act](#)

.

Devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary

Just as [devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus](#) is only a form of devotion to the adorable Person of [Jesus](#), so also is devotion to the Holy Heart of Mary but a special form of [devotion to Mary](#)

Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary

Devotion to [Our Blessed Lady](#) in its ultimate analysis must be regarded as a practical application of the [doctrine](#) of the [Communion of Saints](#).

Seeing that this [doctrine](#)

is not contained, at least explicitly in the earlier forms of the [Apostles' Creed](#)

, there is perhaps no ground for surprise if we do not meet with any clear traces of the cultus of the Blessed Virgin in the first

[Christian](#)

centuries. The earliest unmistakable examples of the "worship" — we use the word of course in the relative sense — of the

[saints](#)

is connected with the veneration paid to the

[martyrs](#)

who gave their lives for the Faith. From the first century onwards,

[martyrdom](#)

was regarded as the surest sign of election. The

[martyrs](#)

, it was held, passed immediately into the presence of

[God](#)

. Over their

[tombs](#)

the

[Holy Sacrifice](#)

was offered (a practice which may possibly be alluded to in Revelation 6:9) while in the contemporary narrative of the

[martyrdom](#)

of

[St. Polycarp](#)

(c. 151) we have already mention of the

["birthday"](#)

, i.e. the annual commemoration, which the

[Christians](#)

might be expected to keep in his

[honour](#)

. This attitude of mind becomes still more explicit in

[Tertullian](#)

and

[St. Cyprian](#)

, and the stress laid upon the "satisfactory" character of the sufferings of the

[martyrs](#)

, emphasizing the view that by their death they could obtain

[graces](#)

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and

blessings

for others, naturally and immediately led to their direct invocation.