

Celebrating Mary in the month of August

If asked to list Marian feast days in August, most Catholics would respond with only “the Assumption.”

If asked what other Marian feast days are in August, most Catholics would go blank. That is probably because the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary is a holy day of obligation in the United States, and so our attention is drawn to it because we are required to go to Mass that day.

But there are other feast days of Mary throughout the month that we don't want to overlook.

Special days honoring Mary have been part of Catholic Tradition since the end of the first century.

Frescos of Mary both with and without Christ are found in the Roman catacombs.

Since that time, devotion to Mary has grown to include holy days we customarily observe during the liturgical year. Marian feasts come under the doctrine of the Communion of Saints, in which we are called to honor those who have been raised up to perfection.

Mary's role is primary to that of the saints, and so the Church assigns feasts in her honor to emphasize her role in salvation history.

The Marian feasts in August give us glimpses into the life of Mary and her role as Mother of God and Mediatrix of graces.

There are many ways to commemorate Mary's feasts – from attending Mass, to making a holy hour or just saying an extra Rosary. We may even want to celebrate with a special dinner or desert.

Aug. 2

Our Lady of the Angels

On this day we commemorate the dedication of the church of Portuincula (little portion of land), near Assisi, Italy. During St. Francis' life, there stood at this place a small ancient church that dated back to the sixth century. St. Francis loved this church because it was there that he recognized his vocation.

In 1211, St. Francis acquired the church from the Benedictines, repaired it and made it the first church of the Franciscan Order. Since wonderful angelic voices frequently were heard there, it was called Our Lady of the Angels. Five years later, St. Francis received the Portuincula Indulgence from Pope Honorius as a gift for the chapel's dedication. On his deathbed, St. Francis placed the church into the special care of his fellow Franciscans, and in the 16th century, the little chapel was enshrined as the Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels. In 1921, Pope Benedict XV gave the privilege of the indulgence to all visitors for one year, and later legislation granted the indulgence to all the faithful on Aug. 2 of each year (or on the following Sunday) with permission of the local bishop.

Aug. 5

Our Lady of the Snows

This day marks the Dedication of St. Mary Major Basilica in Rome, also known as Our Lady of the Snows. The memorial commemorates the dedication of the basilica originally erected on the Esquiline Hill in Rome by Pope Liberius in the fourth century. Some years later, Pope St. Sixtus III dedicated the church to Our Lady because the divine motherhood of Mary had just been proclaimed as an article of faith during the Council of Ephesus. The Basilica of St. Mary Major is the most

significant Marian cathedral in the Western world.

Celebrating Saints

In the 1963 document Sacrosanctum Concilium (“Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy”), the Second Vatican Council outlined the reasons behind the Church’s celebration of the feasts of saints.

“By celebrating the passage of these saints from earth to heaven the Church proclaims the paschal mystery achieved in the saints who have suffered and been glorified with Christ; she proposes them to the faithful as examples drawing all to the Father through Christ, and through their merits she pleads for God’s favors” (No. 104).

“In celebrating this annual cycle of Christ’s mysteries, holy Church honors with special love the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, who is joined by an inseparable bond to the saving work of her Son. In her the Church holds up and admires the most excellent fruit of the redemption, and joyfully contemplates, as in a faultless model, that which she herself desires and hopes wholly to be” (No. 103).

The title Our Lady of the Snows dates back to a legend of the Middle Ages that tells us of a rich, childless couple who wanted to make Mary the heiress of their fortune. They prayed continuously in order to discover Mary’s wish for them.

On the night of Aug. 4, the Blessed Virgin made her wish known to both the couple and Pope Liberius – she wanted a shrine built on the spot on the Esquiline Hill that they would see covered with snow the next morning. Accompanied by clergy and laity, the pope walked in procession to the spot and found a site covered with snow, in spite of the intense heat of August in Rome. Pope Liberius immediately ordered the building of the Marian church on that spot.

Pope St. Sixtus III had the original church replaced by a newer, larger one in 432, and observation of the feast of Our Lady of the Snows began in that church in 435. Henceforth, the

feast was extended to all of Rome, and in 1568, Pope Pius V extended it to the universal Church.

Inside the basilica is one of the most ancient pictures of Mary, *Salus Populi Romani* ("Salvation of the Roman People"), which Pope Francis has visited several times since his election.

Tradition attributes the picture to St. Luke and replicas of it have spread throughout the world. It also is installed as an image of grace in Ingolstadt, Germany, under the title "Mother Thrice Admirable."

Aug. 13

Our Lady, Refuge of Sinners

This feast dates back to the time of St. Germanus of Constantinople in the eighth century.

This title depicts Mary as the New Eve. Eve was the instrument for the fall of humans into original sin and their subsequent suffering. Mary, on the other hand is the instrument for the salvation of humans and their healing by her agreement to become the mother of the Redeemer.

Mary's position as Jesus' mother gives her special intercessory abilities, particularly in interceding for his mercy for sinners.

Aug. 15

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

As far back as the fifth century, the Church in Jerusalem celebrated a feast of Mary on Aug. 15, which became known in the Eastern Church as "the day on which Holy Mary expired." In the seventh century it was introduced to the Western Church as the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It's one of the

most ancient feasts of Mary and commemorates her death and her assumption, body and soul, into heaven. Although Mary's death is not documented, Tradition holds that she died at age 72 in either Ephesus or Jerusalem. Pope Pius XII proclaimed the dogma of the assumption on Nov. 1, 1950. A legend says that the apostles found flowers upon opening Mary's tomb.

Aug. 22

Queenship of Mary

Pope Pius XII decreed and instituted the feast of the Queenship of Mary on Oct. 11, 1954, in his encyclical, *Ad Caeli Reginam* ("To the Queen of Heaven"). Originally, the feast was celebrated on May 31 and was reassigned to Aug. 22 in the revised Roman Calendar of 1969.

"Mary, too, as mother of the divine Christ, as his associate in the redemption, in his struggle with his enemies and his final victory over them, has a share, though in a limited and analogous way, in his royal dignity. For from her union with Christ she attains a radiant eminence transcending that of any other creature; from her union with Christ she receives the royal right to dispose of the treasures of the Divine Redeemer's Kingdom; from her union with Christ finally is derived the inexhaustible efficacy of her maternal intercession before the Son and His Father," Pope Pius XII wrote (*Ad Coeli Reginam*, No. 39).

Whether we celebrate August's Marian feast days in a big way or a small one, taking time to reflect on their history and meaning can help us to better understand Mary's vital role in our salvation. Spending time with her – in private reflection or formal prayer – can increase our love for her and obtain for us graces for our sanctification.

Marge Fenelon writes from Wisconsin.