

This House of Prayer

3rd in a series of 5

August 13, 2006

Our Cathedral is a tangible invitation to prayer and reflection. In this Year of Prayer and Renewal, we visit different places in the Cathedral, and explore how they call us to prayer. This week, we celebrate the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and we take a closer look at the Shrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

MARY: MOTHER OF THE CHURCH

Many can still remember when Pius XII proclaimed the dogma of the Assumption in 1950. But it was anything but a new concept! The faithful have long believed that at her death, Mary was taken body and soul into heaven, and a feast has been celebrated in her honor on August 15 since the fifth century.

Mary's Assumption is also our feast day. In Mary's birth into heaven, we see our final destiny, when our bodies will be raised, and we, too, will share in the resurrection. When Mary goes home to heaven, heaven becomes our home: "there is even room in God for the body. Heaven is no longer a very remote sphere unknown to us. We have a mother in heaven.... Heaven is open, Heaven has a heart" (Pope Benedict XVI).

Mary, Mother of the Church, is also an image of the Church. Her Assumption, as the preface of the day tells us, was "the beginning and the pattern of the Church in its perfection." In Mary, we have the perfect model of discipleship. In Mary's Assumption, we, the Church, have one foot in heaven already. And in Mary's prayers, we have help, guidance, and protection along the way.

THE SHRINE OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

The shrine to the Blessed Virgin Mary dates from 1994. Designed by parishioner and architect Susan Jones, it is easy to see why this shrine is one of the most popular places to pray in the Cathedral. The Chapel speaks to Mary's motherhood. The curve of the railing creates an almost womblike space, which invites us forward. The image of Mary with the Child Jesus is not remote or high above us; instead, she is just at eye-level, and when we kneel down we come even closer to her. The fragrant beeswax candles seem to surround both Mary and her child, and us, with gentle light. On the ceiling of this chapel are stars—a traditional emblem of the Blessed Virgin Mary. These stars have another meaning as well: they form an accurate star map of the night sky over Seattle on December 22, 1994, the night of the Cathedral's dedication.

The image of Mary with the Child Jesus in this Chapel is considerably older. It probably dates from the middle of the 19th century. It was carved by an Italian craftsman, and the design was inspired by a medieval altarpiece at the monastery of Blaubeuren, Germany.



Mary gazes at us, holding the Child Jesus, who reaches towards us with the fruit that recalls humanity's fall from grace. This graceful mother seems to hold her child out towards us—and that is, of course, exactly what Mary does in the Church. She leads us to Christ.

FOR REFLECTION

The Cathedral has many images of the Blessed Virgin Mary (nine at the last counting!). Which of them speaks to you most deeply?

The lighting of candles before the shrines of the saints is a well-loved Catholic tradition. While there's no "official" interpretation, the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Chartres, France, offers this meditation at the shrine of the historic image of Our Lady of the Pillar: "I light a candle, that my prayer might rise up like a flame, that my spirit might be enlightened by the word of God, that my heart might burn with love, like the heart of the Virgin Mary."

PRAYER

Lord our God,
grant that like Mary we may welcome Christ
by treasuring his words in our hearts
and celebrating with deep faith
the mysteries of our redemption.

The Sacramentary, Mass of Holy Mary, Mother of God

A Year of Prayer and Renewal