

**Celebrating Solemnity of Mary Help of Christians**  
**Australia's patronal feast, in the centenary year of Federation 2001**

WhatThe Australian bishops decided that the centenary of Federation and the beginning of the new millennium provided a good occasion to renew the patronage of the Virgin Mary under the title of Mary Help of Christians. It is one of the main official Church events for the centenary of Federation.

This will involve celebrating the Solemnity of Mary Help of Christians on 24 May 2001 in a special way. It is an opportunity to promote both devotion to the Virgin Mary and awareness of our patronal feast. To assist, the National Liturgical Commission was asked to produce resources which can be used in parish churches and schools. They are published by The Liturgical Commission of the Archdiocese of Brisbane.

HowThis PARISH RESOURCE BOOKLET offers suggestions for the liturgy of the day and some background to the feast.

The central part of the celebrations will be the PRAYER ENTRUSTING AUSTRALIA TO MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS. So that people may take part fully in this prayer, a participation sheet has been produced in colour and is for sale in quantities.

As a memento of the occasion, a COMMEMORATIVE HOLY CARD has been produced for parishes and schools to distribute. It contains a prayer for Australia composed for the feast of Mary Help of Christians.

Finally a POSTER has been prepared. It is printed on a special plastic sheet to avoid tearing and crumpling.

All these resources have been published for the National Liturgical Commission by The Liturgical Commission in Brisbane and are available for purchase from them (see page 4 for order form).

WhenThe best day to use these resources and to take part in the national act of entrusting Australia to Mary Help of Christians is the feast day itself, Thursday 24 May 2001. This should certainly be possible in schools and many other communities.

In order to involve more people, however, parishes may wish to use the Prayer of Entrustment on a Sunday. Because Sunday 20 May is the Sixth Sunday of Easter and Sunday 27 May is the Ascension, the Solemnity of Mary Help of Christians itself cannot be transferred to either of these days. But it would be possible to use the Prayer of Entrustment during the Sunday Masses and to distribute the commemorative holy cards at Sunday Mass.

ImageThe traditional image of Mary Help of Christians has frequently been adapted to emphasise her patronal link with Australia. The image being used in this resource is no exception. While following the traditional form, the artwork has tried to give the image a more contemporary appearance.

As has become customary, the map of Australia is introduced at Mary's feet and the Southern Cross shines in the night sky behind her. The colours have been chosen partly to echo the Australian Green and Gold, and partly to use the image of the Australian sun: A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman robed with the sun... (Rev 12:1). Finally, for the first time, the royal sceptre of power in Mary's right hand has been replaced by an open hand reaching out to help her children. This, it was

felt, might have a greater resonance with contemporary Australia without destroying the beauty of the traditional image. The significance of Mary as Queen of Heaven is adequately expressed in the crown she wears.

**History of the Feast**The first provincial synod of the Church in Australia took place in September 1844. It was a relatively small affair: Archbishop Polding of Sydney and the new bishops of Adelaide and Hobart met with about half the three-dozen pioneer priests in the country. Among their decisions, the Church in Australia was placed under the patronage of the Virgin Mary invoked by the title Help of Christians. This was confirmed by the Holy See in 1852.

The choice of Mary Help of Christians may well derive from the first Catholic chaplain in Sydney, Fr J.J. Therry, who dedicated his church to St Mary in November 1821. At this time the feast of Mary Help of Christians was new and generated considerable interest.

The title Help of Christians was first introduced into the Litany of Loretto by Pope Pius V after a Christian victory in the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. Early in the 19th century, Napoleon occupied Rome, annexed the papal states and imprisoned Pope Pius VII. In thanksgiving for the pope's release and restoration in Rome on 24 May 1814, the feast of Mary Help of Christians was introduced to the Roman calendar on that day.

Fr Therry was ordained in Ireland in 1815 at a time when the Irish Church was quickly adopting devotions to Mary Help of Christians. Our celebration of Mary Help of Christians as our patronal feast therefore symbolises the Roman and Irish heritage which is the foundation of the Catholic Church in Australia.

Mary Help of Christians was adopted as patron of the new Church of Australia at a significant time in our history. British settlement was just over fifty years old, the transportation of convicts was coming to an end, and the first elections in Australian history had been held in 1843. Issues of land, immigration and education had begun to surface and the Church was involved in these social problems. In 1843 Archbishop Polding inaugurated the first Catholic apostolic meeting with aboriginal people in Moreton Bay.

In 2001, the centenary year of Australian Federation, we confront many of the same social problems and the Church has the same need to witness to the values of the gospel. The task of evangelising the Australian culture is more urgent and daunting than ever. Today recourse to our national patron, Mary Help of Christians, is as relevant and necessary as it ever has been.

Prepared by National Liturgical Commission at the request of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and published by The Liturgical Commission, Brisbane 26 January 2001

© The Liturgical Commission, GPO Box 282, Brisbane 4001. All rights reserved.