

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 [Complin](#) 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

Devotions

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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

[indulged](#)

. 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](#)

Devotions

Written by W.J.Pais

and

[blessings](#)

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