



MARY QUEEN OF MARTYRS

The title of Queen of Martyrs is found in the Litany of the Blessed Virgin, approved by papal authority in 1587. Early tradition had maintained that the Virgin's suffering as she witnessed the birth, ministry and passion of her son brought her into a special relationship with his redemptive mission. The image of God the Father holding the body of Christ crucified (called the throne of grace), and the image of Mary holding the body of her son on her lap after he is taken down from the cross, both responded to a Christian need to create a human entry into meditation on divine mysteries. The popularity of this image of Mary with her son, often referred to as a pietá, demonstrates the strength of such traditions that developed out of popular piety.

None of the four Gospels mentions Mary actually holding the body of her son. Reference is simply made to "the women," who had come from Galilee with Christ, being present at his burial and bringing spice and perfumed oils for the entombment (Luke 24:56). Even if the scene is not recorded by Gospel text, its profound truth is rhetorical, bringing the life of Christ full circle: as Mary held her infant son to be adored by shepherds and kings, so she holds out that same body, now in death, to a redeemed humanity. The Christian prays that Mary will be present as comforter at his or her own end, hoping to be held in her arms as was Christ, and brought by her to him in heaven: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death." In the chapel, the meditative nature of this image in the lower scene is shown by the placement of Peter and John on either side, accompanied by angels kneeling in adoration. In the surrounding borders are symbols of Christ's Passion: the three nails, the dice cast by the soldiers for Christ's tunic, the tunic, the spear that pierced his side, the sponge with the wine and vinegar, the pillar and crossed scourges of the flagellation, the hammer and pliers used to remove Christ from the cross, and the ladder that brought his body to the ground.

The central image of Mary as Queen of Martyrs emphasizes her strength in bearing up under intense psychological suffering. Mary's fortitude confirms the belief in the power of the Holy Spirit as comforter of the universal church, Mary in Catholic tradition, is described as seated in the midst of the Apostles as the fire of the Holy Spirit descended in the first Pentecost. The great hymn *Stabat Mater* begins with the lines, *Stabat Mater dolorosa / Juxta crucem lacrimosa*, translated into English metrical rhyme as "At the cross her station keeping, stood the mournful Mother weeping." The central image shows her in her traditional blue garments, holding the crown of thorns and a scroll inscribed INRI, which is an abbreviation of



the Latin sign placed on Christ's cross: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." To the right an angel approaches with a crown. To the left is a heart pierced by seven swords representing the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin. This rhetorical symbol is developed from the prophecy of Simeon when Christ was presented in the Temple. The prophet turned to Mary, saying, "and you yourself shall be pierced with a sword" (Luke 2:35).



At a time before widespread literacy, it was common to develop sequences of concepts in numerical patterns to aid memory. Thus Mary was described as undergoing Seven Joys and also Seven Sorrows, which include the Presentation in the Temple, the Flight into Egypt, the Search for the Boy Jesus in the Temple, the Road to Calvary, the Crucifixion, the Deposition, and the Ascension (Christ again separated from his mother). During the period when the windows were made, the Church encouraged commemoration of the Seven Sorrows not only as a standard feast (September 15th) but even on the Friday of Passion Week.