

SAINT MARY OF EGYPT

The Fifth Sunday of the Great Fast recalls the memory of **Saint Mary of Egypt**, the repentant harlot. Mary tells us, first of all, that no amount of sin and wickedness can keep a person from God if they truly repent. Christ himself has come "to call sinners to repentance" and to save them from their sins (Luke 5:32). In addition, Saint Mary tells us that it is never too late in life to repent. Christ will gladly receive all who come to him even in the eleventh hour of their lives. But their coming must be in serious and sincere repentance.

She probably was born about 344; died about 421. At the early age of 12 Mary left her home and came to Alexandria, where for about 17 years she led a life of public prostitution. At the end of that time, on the occasion of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, she left for Palestine, not with the intention of making the pilgrimage, but in the hope that life on the ship would afford her new and abundant opportunities of gratifying an insatiable lust. In Jerusalem she persisted in her shameless life. On the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross she joined the crowds towards the church where the sacred relic was venerated. Now comes the turning-point of her career. When she reached the church door, she suddenly felt herself repelled by some secret force, she tried in vain many times but was still unable to enter. She went to a corner of the churchyard, and was struck with remorse for her wicked life, which she recognized as the cause of the exclusion from the church. Bursting into bitter tears and beating of her breast, she began to bewail her sins. Just then her eyes fell upon a statue of the Blessed Virgin above the spot where she was standing, and in deep faith and humility of heart she besought Our Lady for help, and permission to enter the church and venerate the sacred wood on which Jesus had suffered, promising that if her request was granted, she would then renounce forever the world and its ways, and would depart were ever Our Lady might lead her. Encouraged by prayer and counting on the mercy of the Mother of God, she once more approached the door of the church, and this time she succeeded in entering without the slightest difficulty. Having adored the Holy Cross and kissing the pavement of the church, she ran back to Our Lady's statue, and while praying for guidance as to her future course, she seemed to hear a voice telling her that if she crossed the Jordan that she would find peace. That same evening Mary reached the Jordan and received Holy Communion in a church dedicated to the Baptist,

and the following day crossed the river and wandered eastward into the desert that stretches toward Arabia.

Here she live absolutely alone for 47 years, subsisting on herbs, when a priest and monk, named Zosimus, who after the custom of his brethren and come out of his monastery to spend the Great Fast in the desert, met her and learned from her own words the strange and romantic story of her life. As soon as they met she called Zosimus by his name and recognized him as a priest. After they had conversed and prayed together, she begged him to promise to meet her and the Jordan on Holy Thursday evening of the following year and bring with him the Blessed Sacrament. When the appointed evening Zosimus, we are told, put into a small chalice a portion of the undefiled Body and the precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and came to the spot that had been indicated. After some time Mary appeared on the eastern bank of the river, and having made the sign of the cross, walked upon the waters to western side. Having received Holy Communion, she raised her hands toward heaven and cried aloud the words of Simeon: (Now dismiss thy servant, O Lord, according thy word in peace, because my eyes have seen thy salvation". She charged Zosimus to come in a year to the spot where they first met, adding that he would find her then in a condition God might ordain. He came but only to find the poor Saints corpse, and written beside in on the ground a request that he should bury her, and a statement that she had died a year before on the very night on which he had given her Holy Communion. He prepared her grave and buried her, having commended himself and the Church to her prayers, he returned to his monastery, where now for the first time he recounted the wondrous story of her life