

## What is a May Altar?

May is a special time in the church calendar when Catholics honour Mary, the mother of Jesus. The month of May is a time to look forward to better weather and enjoy the flowers and plants which are starting to bloom. This is a good time to create a small altar at home, to pay tribute to Mary.

## Creating an Altar to Honour Mary

Choose a room in the home where you can set up your altar. Perhaps a corner of the hallway or an area in a bedroom. Find a flat surface that will act as your altar; a small table or chest of drawers is ideal. You could cover the altar with a cloth, but this isn't essential.

An image of Mary will be your centerpiece. Use a small statue if you have one, or a picture of Mary from a prayer card or prayer book if not. A set of rosary beads or a small crucifix placed on the altar can also help with devotions.

Have a chair or stool nearby to encourage family members to stop by and perhaps offer prayers to Mary during the day. If you have any prayer or Mass cards with images of Mary, these could also be placed on the altar.

## Decorating a Home Altar

Any flowers can be used for a home altar, the main point being to reflect on the joy of the coming summer season. However, there are many plants, which throughout history, have been associated with the Virgin Mary.

The rose and lily are two of the best known flowers with Marian associations. Lily of the Valley, which flowers in May, is known as 'Our Lady's tears' and May hawthorn, sometimes known as 'Mary's flower of May' is a seasonal plant, which was often used for church celebrations in times past. Sweet pea is another flower associated with the Virgin Mary, which will add a beautiful scent to the altar.

Candles can be another addition to your special area, and could be lit during prayer times. Do remove these when not in use if you have children in the house. Creating a home altar to Mary can be a meaningful activity, which creates a special area in your home throughout May, the month of Mary.

## Queen of the May Hymn

Bring flowers of the rarest, bring flowers of the fairest  
From garden and woodland and hillside and vale;  
Our full hearts are swelling, our glad voices telling  
The praise of the loveliest flower of the vale.

REFRAIN: O Mary, we crown you with blossoms today,  
Queen of the Angels and Queen of the May.

Our voices ascending, in harmony blending,  
O, thus may our hearts turn, dear Mother, to you.  
O, thus shall we prove you how truly we love you;  
How dark without Mary life's journey would be.

REFRAIN: O Mary, we crown you with blossoms today,  
Queen of the Angels and Queen of the May.

*(Dates back as far as the 13th Century. In 1883, Mary E. Walsh adapted it to the version we now know.)*

Produced for **tSlí Chríost**,  
c/o Diocesan Offices, Galway Cathedral  
email [tslichriost@eircom.net](mailto:tslichriost@eircom.net)  
[www.galwaydiocese.ie](http://www.galwaydiocese.ie)

Supported by



Aid to the Church in Need



[www.acnireland.org](http://www.acnireland.org)

THIS MAY HONOUR HER WITH

# Our Lady's May Altar



This May you are invited to honour  
Our Lady in a special way  
by erecting a May altar.



## History of the May Altar

Our Lady had been proclaimed officially Mother of God at the Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D. two years before St. Patrick crossed over to Ireland again from France as a Catholic Bishop to establish the Catholic Church in Ireland. Saint Patrick carried with him his devotion to Our Lady. So right from its inception the Catholic Church in Ireland has displayed a profound devotion to Our Lady. In fact Our Lady had such a special place in the Irish Church she had her own special name: Muire, all other Marys were called Maire.

St. Fiacre, an Irish Saint, who is the Patron Saint of Gardeners (and Taxi drivers), is recorded in the 7th Century as having immigrated to France, where he established a garden of healing herbs and flowers around an Oratory of the Blessed Virgin, near Meaux - showing forth both his love for gardening, and also his Marian devotion.



In later Medieval times, Mary Gardens, as they came to be called, became popular, especially in Medieval England. England came to be known as Our Lady's dowry. The Medieval gardeners gave the flowers in their gardens names to associate them with Mary. (e.g. Marigold – Mary's Gold). The earliest record of a garden explicitly called a "Mary Garden" involves a fifteenth century monastic accounting record of the purchase of plants "for Saint Mary's garden" by the sacristan of Norwich Priory, in England. Post reformation and enlightenment devotions to Our Lady with flowers and thirty day prayers date from Italy in the 17th and 18th Centuries (for example: Ferrara, 1784).

May altar devotion was influence and furthered, by Louis de Montfort, a famous French Marian Saint, in his Treatise on True Devotion to Mary, who, among other things, counted the decoration of Marian altars a chief exercise of Marian devotion.

The following descriptions of May altars in the Martin family (of St. Thérèse fame) in late 19th century France gives us a glimpse into a devout families devotion to Our Lady in their home life. First there is a description of the Martin families principal May altar. Next St. Thérèse describes her own personal one.

*"At the beginning of May, the Blessed Mother statue was made the centre of what amounted to a real oratory. A background was constructed of leaves and flowers, mixed with branches of hawthorn which, in return for a liberal alms, a poor woman cut for them out in the country. Lights and baskets of flowers were arranged at Our Lady's feet; nothing was considered too good for her. Mme. Martin wished to see her emerge from the wreaths and petals, and delighted in their fresh beauty.*

*"The eldest daughter, to whom belonged the privilege of arranging this shrine in her own room, declared frankly: 'My May shrine was so pretty that it could stand comparison with that at Notre-Dame. It was quite a business to arrange it at home. Mother was too exacting; more difficult to please than Our Lady! She must have the white hawthorn branches reaching to the ceiling; the walls covered with greenery etc.'*

*How gladly the youngest gathered the best roses from the Pavilion, the cornflowers and marguerites growing beside the country lanes! She kept some for St. Joseph's statue, before which her mother loved to pray."*

*(Story of a Family, by Fr. Stephane-Joseph Piat, O.F.M., page 150)*

*"Since I was too little to attend May devotions, I remained at home with Victoire (a servant of the Martin family), carrying out my devotions with her before my little May altar. This I had arranged according to my taste; everything was so small, the candlestick, the flower pots, etc. Two tapers lit it up perfectly."*

*(St. Thérèse, Story of a Soul, Page 38-39)*

## Examples of Wild Flowers of May

All of nature awakened to new life in springtime is presented to honour Mary, who is herself 'a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys' (Song of Songs 2,1). On May Eve it was the custom for young children to pick posies of fresh flowers. These were used to decorate the dwelling or were placed at the foot of a holy statue or May altar. The flowers in bloom during May (*Bláthanna Bealtaine*) include:

- |                  |   |               |
|------------------|---|---------------|
| Primrose         | – | Sabhaircín;   |
| Gorse            | – | Aiteann;      |
| Cowslip          | – | Bó Bleachtán; |
| Marsh Marigold   | – | Riaschbláth;  |
| Meadow buttercup | – | Fearbán féir  |

As well as buttercups, daisies, ground violets, dandelions, sprigs of pussy-willow and pansies.



## Local Marian Societies

There exist many societies and fraternities that foster Marian devotion in the local community. Among those that should be active in your local community are the **Legion of Mary** and the **third Order Dominicans** and **Franciscans**.

*Mother of the Word  
made Flesh,  
Pray for us.*

