

How We Bring Mary Into Our Community

...And a step-by-step guide for bringing her to yours!
By Mike Solton

On May 1, 2010, a group of Catholics in Sacramento, California organized and held, for the second year running, a public Marian Procession going three-miles through the streets of the inner-city, concluding with offering the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in the Cathedral Church of the Diocese. The Procession began atop a hill at a local cemetery, was then led-out with the stirring sounds of the St. Patrick's Pipe band – a local parish-based bagpipe and drum band. During the majority of the event the crowds prayed the Rosary and sang Marian hymns. About 600 persons attended the Procession; 1,000 showed-up for the Mass, which was followed by Crowning of the statue of Our Blessed Lady. This second-annual event resonated a sense of reverence and piety through the crowd; it was clearly successful in that those attending were clearly proud to witness their Catholic faith in the public arena.

Public expressions of Christianity are necessary weapons against the backdrop of pagan society; it is essential that Catholics come to action, marshal the forces of light and seek to defeat the forces of darkness by publically honoring Our Blessed Lady and pleading her intercession. Father Deharbe's 1901 Catechism says it very succinctly; to the question, "Why are processions held?", Father replies:

1. To make an open profession of the Catholic faith.
2. To honor God publically, and to ask His protection and His blessing upon city and country.
3. To celebrate the victory and the triumph of Christianity.

Where did the idea for such an event come from? Certainly not from my own intuition! Admittedly I am a bit of a dreamer, however, the image of a great Marian Procession parading through the city with a magnificent statue of Our Blessed Lady held high and honored by great crowds – this recurring thought could only have its origins from the great Queen of Heaven, Refuge of Sinners and Help of Christians: Mary Our Mother, Mary Most Holy! And thus, one day, after I realized it could actually become a reality, I prayed hard and went to work. Our first procession was held in May, 2009; the second was May, 2010.

The following outline describes how you can make this happen in your community.

1. PASTOR

Before doing anything, you must meet with your Pastor; gain his full backing and support. But you do not want him overwhelmed and frightened-away by the work and cost. Just make it clear the event will be organized by a lay-parishioner committee, and costs will be handled by parish fundraising. All he needs to do is walk, pray, sing, and offer Holy Mass.

2. BISHOP

Invite your local Bishop or Bishops.

3. SPONSORING ENTITY

You must have a sponsoring entity. You will need this to reserve venues, obtain insurance certificates, municipal permitting and so forth. We used our parish as the sponsoring entity; this will work best by far. A non-parish entity may be feasible, but there will be many challenges. The parish as your legal and known sponsor makes it doable and legitimate for both secular officials and the faithful.

4. PLAN PROCESSION ROUTE

Your starting and ending venues are the event “anchors”. These must be well-known, highly visible and hopefully, aesthetically beautiful places. Our procession began at a well-known, beautiful cemetery atop the crest of a hill; a perfect place to start. I happen to work there, so this made it easy. In your community, you might consider a parish church or city park. It must be very well known and easy to find. Think of a place in your town where most people would say, “I know where that is!”, or, “I’ve heard of that!”

Plan the route itself; the streets you will use. We made ours about three-miles. We also did some math, figuring-out walking speeds, distance and so forth. In the end, we figured it would take the crowds about 1 ½ to 1 ¾ hours to walk the route. So, both years, the Procession began 8:00 a.m.; arrived at the Cathedral 9:40 a.m., with concluding Mass, as scheduled, 10:30 a.m.

Your ending venue is crucial. We used the Diocesan Cathedral Church; ours is very beautiful. I strongly recommend your cathedral for this, if at all possible. When you use the Cathedral it drastically aids the perception the event is for everyone in the Diocese; the Cathedral is the “Parish of the Diocese”. If you use a regular parish for the ending venue, it will be perceived as a parish-specific event, not something for everyone. Our Procession concluded with Mass at the Cathedral and May Crowning of Our Blessed Lady.

Caution! If you are able to use your Cathedral Parish, you may need to book it far in advance. If it is to be a Saturday, as with ours, we generally must schedule a year ahead. This is because the Cathedral has weddings all Saturdays, all year-long.

5. MUNICIPAL PERMIT

Go to your City, Borough, Township or County; special events permitting desk. Ours here in Sacramento was very cooperative and helpful. They will most likely require you to complete a special event permit and pay some fees (ours was \$150). The Permit application may include such questions & comments as-

- Starting and ending locations?

- Event parking? (if it's a residential area, like ours, you may need to alert neighbors with doorstep handbills, explaining the parking may be clogged-up for a while, and the street will be closed a little for a "religious procession")
- Special Event Insurance (Our \$1 mil event policy was procured thorough the Diocese insurance broker)
- How much noise will the event make? (Our answer was "prayer, hymns and some bagpipes & drums". That was no problem; I imagine one gets their attention when the answer is "a Rap Artist band on a flat-bed truck, full-volume, at 6:00 in the morning.")
- Is there food and drink? Alcohol? No problem here! We handed-out Gatorade and water bottles at the start.
- Will you leave a mess and who cleans-up? No problem here, either. The only "mess" was the rose petals sprinkled before Our Lady's statue by the "Little Flowers" girls. The civic officials seemed to think this was "cute", and hardly knew what to say when I asked whether we should go back and pick-up the petals. I imagine they are more accustomed to broken beer bottles, half-eaten hot dogs and the like!
- The Procession must move under Police escort and follow their requirements.
- You are required to have your own security personnel.

6. POLICE & PRIVATE MOTORCYCLE ESCORT

The municipality will likely require your Procession use the streets and a police escort, if they deem your estimated crowd size large enough. Our Processioners numbered about 450 in 2009, increasing to 600 in 2010; that amount requires use of escorts and streets. In our case, we arranged six squad cars; five Officers and a Captain from the City of Sacramento. The street closure was described a "rolling street closure" as opposed to full street closure. "Rolling" works well for this type of event; it means the Police block-off the cross traffic and escort the Procession down the street. So, the section of street for the Procession, maybe 300-yards, is closed, and then re-opened for cross traffic when the Procession is gone.

Our Police were very kind and helpful. In our City, they first ask for "volunteer officers" for special events (although they *are* paid). The first year one of the volunteers had specifically chosen for our event because he heard it was a Marian Procession, he was Catholic, and wanted the honor! Our Police cost for the 2010 event: \$1,902.

We also hired two bikes from a funeral motorcycle escort company; that really took it to the next level! You see, the Police job is to close-off traffic and protect public safety, processioners and pedestrians alike. The escort company helps lead the Procession and integrates well with Police in enabling public and processioner safety. Our escort cost: \$250.

7. RETURN TRIP

You need to consider the return trip. How will everyone get back to their cars after it is all done? This is crucial and many people will (or will not) attend the event based on this. You could arrange a volunteer shuttle service. Some people may use two cars and park one at each end. Do check your public transportation system; turns-out ours in Sacramento worked well; the commuter train service has stations at both ends of our route – the cemetery and the Cathedral. You never know!

8. YOUR VOLUNTEER SECURITY CREW

Your Permit may require you have your own security personnel; ours did. We identified several volunteers to assist with crowd-control security. This was very helpful, not just a formality. These fellows helped convey Police instructions to the crowd, keeping them in-line and out of harm's way. Specifically, making sure no one gets hit by oncoming traffic. No one was. The security personnel should wear some kind of identifying decal or uniform; they need to stick-out. Ours wore bright orange armbands.

9. EVENT RECORDING

You will probably want to record your event. These days, many people will bring their cameras and camcorders, and often do a very good job. Put the word out after if some people would please send their shots and movies to the Planning Committee. You will have plenty. However, if you want a "world class" recording, you may need to find someone with those skills and equipment to match. It can be done.

10. DURING THE PROCESSION

Consider what the crowds will do during the procession route. When and what will they pray? Sing? How will this be communicated and understood? How shall you make this a beautiful and reverent public Christian witness?

Our 2010 line-up went like this:

- Bagpipe and Drum Band
- Girls sprinkling Rose Petals
- Statue of Our Lady, carried high by four vested Altar Boys
- Fourth Degree Knights of Columbus flanking statue carriers
- Altar Boys
- Boy Scouts Honor Guard with U.S. Flag
- Crowds
- Some banners from various parishes
- Priests went along the sides, with Surplice & Stole, hearing confessions the entire route – what a magnificent witness!

The local Catholic Radio affiliate was very generous and helpful! This is Immaculate Heart Radio. They invited our Pastor, Father Matthew McNeely,

F.S.S.P., to their studio where he recorded the Holy Rosary. Then on Procession day, at the appointed time, they broadcast the Rosary for the crowds. People were asked to bring radios and turn them-up when the Rosary began. This insured the Rosary was prayed in unison.

Our 2010 event rolled-out in this order:

- Bagpipe & Drum Music
- 1st Rosary
- Marian Hymns
- 2nd Rosary
- Brief Marian Hymns

11. LOGISTICS

Somewhere in your planning, you must consider logistics. Spend some time thinking about –

- Who is best for what job?
- Who will get the job done? This is the difference between those who are quick with many ideas and suggestions versus those who will go to work!
- Find out who is in charge of what, and go to them.
- Coordinate venues. For example, in our event, we had to coordinate among three places: Our parish, the cemetery and the Cathedral. We had to figure-out and get the proper “stuff” at each place, so everything would turn-up where it needs to be, when it needs to be, and all would run smoothly. Where does Our Lady’s statue spend the night? Where do we put Alter Boy and Priest vestments the night before? And so on.
- Assign “Go-For’s”. Someone who can run back to the parish, cathedral, or wherever; if something turns-up missing.

12. FUNDRAISING

You will need to raise sufficient funds for the Permit, Police, Escort, Marketing, etc. With ours, most of the funds were raised within our Parish. The Pastor made pulpit announcements and we set-up a booth after Masses; this worked. Some of the local Knights of Columbus were also very generous.

13. ADVERTISING & MARKETING THE PROCESSION

This is the most labor-intensive feature. I strongly suggest you find several people to help with this aspect. This is what we did, and it worked very well:

- Public Service Announcements on the local Catholic Radio Affiliate, if there is one. In our area, Immaculate Heart Radio was very generous in this regard.
- Live interview on Catholic Radio, if available.
- Knights of Columbus Councils.
- Catholic Women’s Groups

- Display ad and/or news story in the local Catholic Newspaper.
- Make a high-quality event announcement Poster.
- Send the Poster out through several Catholic e-mail loops.
- Send the Poster out to all Pastors within 50-miles. Include a cover letter from your Pastor inviting them to promote the Procession in their Parish. And include pre-written pulpit and church bulletin announcements. (We found this was a huge help for some of the parishes!)
- Make small flyers or tri-folds and send to everyone. Include a “FAQ” on these; detailing such questions as, “What should I bring?” and “How can I get back to my car?”
- If the Bishop or Bishops are coming, include this in your marketing.
- Secular media? You could try.
- Make a website. List the website on ALL marketing! Use your website for all facts, maps, you name it! Shooting and posting video of the event on your website is a good idea, to promote participation for the next year. Ideally, you could post a new video each year.

14. SOLEMN MASS

Procession concluded with the majestic Solemn Traditional Latin High Mass, at the Cathedral; then Crowning of Our Lady.

Concluding your Procession with a Mass is the best! Then, of course being a Marian event and the month of Mary, a Crowning of our Lady’s Statue is a truly fitting highlight and finish.

15. COUNTER-PROTESTERS

We had none the first year; the second year one angry person told the crowds to leave town!. Both years some people came outside their homes and stores to see what was happening, no complaints. Reportedly, the first year, one fellow standing out front an Episcopal Church reverently blessed himself at the sight of the Procession. Because ours was not published in the secular media, no one would know of it; thus no organized protests. That may change in the future. Still, not to worry; the police escort should be very effective with such matters, as with the March For Life and Walk For Life.

16. WEATHER

PRAY for good weather! Pray and Pray! Both years our Pastor contacted a convent of nuns in Nebraska and requested they pray for good weather for the Procession. These particular nuns have offered good-weather prayers several times for other outdoor processions, with 100% success. Both years we experienced cold, rainy weather on the days before and after the Procession. However, both years the weather on Procession day was perfect; absolutely perfect! Trust Our Lady’s intercession!

17. NEXT EVENT IN SACRAMENTO: Saturday, May 7, 2011! VISIT WWW.BRINGMARY.COM FOR IDEAS.

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