Mary, the mother of Jesus, the mother of God, has been over the centuries a distinctive focus of Catholic piety and devotion. Catholics venerate her under many titles including Queen of Heaven, Our Lady of Lourdes, our Lady of Guadalupe and Mother of the Church.

The title, however, which takes us to the heart of her identity and her vocation, is “mother of God.” In saying that we are pointing to the heart of the mystery of Jesus. He is both human and divine, both true God and true man. Mary gives birth to Jesus as the God-man. She is his mother in regard to both the fullness of his humanity and the mysterious presence in him of God. Mary is our sister as well as our mother. In our case as in hers, to be human is to have a sense of the mystery at the heart of ourselves and of God.

To speak of mystery in a religious context is to evoke something more and different from the simple but real difficulty we experience in trying to understand our psychological , social and cultural differences and our motives for acting in the way that we do.

We are a mystery to ourselves in a still more profound sense. The mystery we encounter in Mary and in the depths of our being is the result of our having been made in the image of God.

To say that God is the mystery, is to say that he goes beyond all that we can know and understand. To be made as we are with a capacity to be in relationship with God means that we share in the mystery that defines his inner being. In the first paragraph of his Confessions, St. Augustine writes, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

Although this sense of being made for God is true of all of us, it is true in a special way of Mary. Beyond the sharing in the life of God that is possible for every human being, Mary was given the honour and the privilege to be associated in the most intimate way possible with the greatest of all miracles, the incarnation of the Son of God, the taking on by God of human nature, of living a human life.

In fulfilling her vocation to be the mother of Jesus, Mary becomes our mother and our guide. She is able and willing to lead us ever more deeply into the mystery of God and of her Son. This is something that all the saints do in their distinctive ways. Mary’s way is that of motherhood. She speaks to us as a woman and as a mother. For those who have or had the experience of a loving and compassionate, tender and forgiving mother, to think of Mary as our mother and to approach her as such in prayer can be an enormous gift.

For those who, for whatever reason, have not had the experience of such a mother, devotion to Mary can help us make up for what is missing in our life. Such devotion can bring us into relationship with the maternal at its best.

The Hail Mary is probably the most commonly prayed Catholic prayer. The first part of it praises Mary as the mother of the Redeemer. The second part is a prayer of petition. “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.” To pray for someone is to be with them, to share in their burdens and fears, to help them in any way we can. So it is with Mary. When in response to our prayer she prays for us, she becomes present to us and we to her. Like a mother, Mary binds our wounds, gives us strength, and accompanies us on our journey back to the mystery from which we have come.

A theme that returns a number of times in the liturgy of Christmas and of the Christmas Season is peace. Jesus is called the Prince of peace. The angelic chorus proclaims, “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favours.”

It is not surprising that Pope Paul VI dedicated January 1,st the feast of Mary the Mother of God, as The World Day of Peace. Every year the pope issues a statement on some aspect of peace and of our pursuit of it. This year’s statement is entitled, “No on can be saved alone. Combatting COVID 19 together, embarking together on paths of peace.”

The emphasis here is on the word “together.” The pope evokes the devastating effects COVID 19 has had on so many people around the globe. “It plunged us,“ Pope Francis says, “into a dark night. It destabilized our daily lives, upset out plans and routines, and disrupted the apparent tranquility of even the most affluent societies.”

In the face of natural and human made disasters, the pope asks, “What then is being asked of us?” To this he answers, “To let our hearts be changed by our experience of the crisis … We can no longer think exclusively of carving out space for our personal and national interests. We must think in terms of the common good, recognizing that we belong to a greater community, and opening our minds and hearts to universal human fraternity,”

Peace, like so much that is precious to us, is fostered in the family. It is there that we learn to recognize the rights and dignity of others. There too that we learn to collaborate with others to serve the common good.

Francis ends his statement with a brief prayer. “May Mary Immaculate, Mother of Jesus and Queen of peace, intercede for us and for the whole world.