

Introduction to the Novena to Mary, Untier of Knots

The Novena to Mary, Untier of Knots was inspired by a German baroque icon. The icon features the Blessed Virgin Mary, surrounded by the heavenly host of angels and under a dove representing the Holy Spirit, undoing knots while crushing the head of the serpent under her heel. (See [Genesis 3:15.](#))

The Ancient Roots of the Novena

Both the icon and the devotion to Mary, Untier of Knots, trace their roots to a passage from a famous work, *Against Heresies*, by a second-century Bishop, Saint Irenaeus of Lyons. In discussing Mary's role as the Second Eve, Saint Irenaeus writes that "the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith."

Pope Francis' devotion to Mary Untier of Knots

During his October 2013 catechesis Pope Francis revealed to the world his special devotion to Mary Undoer of Knots. He spoke of Mary as the "new Eve" who unties the knot of Eve's disobedience. He said that Mary unties other kinds of knots as well – when we do not listen to God or follow His will or lack trust in Him, a kind of knot is created deep within us. The Pope continued, 'These knots take away our peace and serenity and are dangerous since many knots can form a tangle which gets more and more painful and difficult to undo'.

The Holy Father encountered the image of Our Lady Untier of Knots while he was stationed in Germany in 1986 studying for his doctorate. He visited the church of St Peter am Perlach in Augsburg and saw the painting. He was captivated by it and the story behind it. He brought a postcard of the image back to Argentina. As a Cardinal he had the image engraved into a chalice and presented it to Pope Benedict. Later in his life, our Lady Untier of Knots saw him through a very difficult time, deepening his devotion to, and appreciation of our Lady under that title. Because of this, author Paul Vallely titled his biography of Pope Francis 'Untying the Knots'.

During the Novena you will be guided to think about the 'knots' in your life. Then we will petition Mary, Untier of Knots, to undo the knots in our lives - knots such as injustice, disappointment, grief, loss, hopelessness, betrayal, resentment, physical and mental suffering in all its forms. Let us meditate often on the image of Mary Untier of Knots. When you look at it you will see the ribbon in her hands that represents your life – the life that God wants you to live in freedom, holiness and peace. Jesus has told us 'I have come so that you might have life and have it in all its fullness'. St Irenaeus tells us 'the glory of God is the human person fully alive'. God wants each of us to achieve our full potential with him and with each other. Yet he also invites us to follow him, a journey that will lead to the cross. The ribbon in Mary's hand is knotted and each knot holds you back on your journey. And yet, if identified, owned and embraced, each knot can not only be untied and unravelled but by the grace of God lead us to an ever more abundant life; just as Jesus's own acceptance of his cross led him to the glory of the resurrection.

A word on the tradition of Novenas

A Novena is a form of Catholic devotion that involves offering special prayers or services for 9 consecutive days (novena means nine) for a particular intention. This practice can be traced back to apostolic times, when the apostles and Mary gathered in the upper room for 9 days after the Lord ascended to heaven (see Acts 1-2). On the 10th day, the Holy Spirit descended upon them at Pentecost. Over time, particular Novenas to particular Saints or for particular seasons or intentions, began to spring up in every time and place.