

History of the Sub Tuum Praesidium

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The prayer that we often call the “Sub Tuum” is one of the Church’s most ancient, and certainly the oldest prayer known that invokes Mary. In the University of Manchester there is a papyrus copy of this text in Greek that is dated approximately to the year 250AD and comes from the early Christian community of Egypt. So it goes way back.

The term used for Mary in the original Greek is *Theokotos* which means “God-bearer” or “Birth-giver to God”. In Latin version with which we are more familiar this is translated as *Dei Genetrix*. For us Marists, this term goes to the heart of our spirituality and our mission. *Water from the Rock*, our seminal text on Marist spirituality, puts it this way: “Marists understand their project to be a sharing in Mary’s work of bringing Christ-life to birth and being with the Church as it comes to be born.” So while the prayer belongs to all Christians, it certainly has a special significance for Marists. We like to sing it on all important Marist gatherings.

It seems that the ancients first used this prayer in their liturgy as a hymn. And that is what the Church continues to do to this day. It still forms part of the Coptic and Orthodox liturgy, as an antiphon in Vespers at different times of the year. In the Latin or Roman Catholic Church it is also used sometimes as an antiphon in the last office of the day, Compline. But perhaps more commonly in the West it is a devotional hymn or prayer within certain spiritual families, such as ours, the Marists.

Over the centuries it has been put to music in quite different ways – from solemn Byzantine and Gregorian chant to more expansive Baroque and Classical scores. Quite a few composers have had a go at it, including Mozart and Beethoven. The simple version that we commonly sing today comes from a later period.

Saint Marcellin probably learnt to pray the *Sub Tuum Praesidium* in the seminary because it was part of Sulpician custom that all classes ended with a recitation of this prayer. This came into our Marist practice, and it was certainly the case when I was a boy in a Marist school, that before went out to morning recess, to lunch, or at the end of the day, we recited *Sub Tuum* in English. We knew it then by its first five words: “We fly to your patronage.”

In whichever form we recite or sing this prayer we place ourselves into a tradition that goes back to the very origins of Christian spirituality.