

## Fifth Sunday of Easter

### The Madonna

by Rev. Larry Rice, CSP

One of the most common themes in Western art is that of the Madonna and Child—a serene painting of the Blessed Virgin Mary, holding the child Jesus in her arms. But this image, so familiar that it has appeared on US Postal Service Christmas stamps nearly every year since 1966, was not always a staple of Christian art.

For most of the first three centuries of Christianity, the Blessed Virgin was usually depicted as part of a group of apostles, or as part of a Nativity scene; she was almost never alone or a central figure. But in the fifth century, the Council of Ephesus addressed the Nestorian heresy, which claimed that, when Christ died on the Cross, it was only his human nature that experienced suffering and death. By extension, the Nestorians claimed that Mary was the mother only of Christ's human nature and not the Mother of God. The Council of Ephesus reinforced the Church's long-held belief that Mary was the Mother of God and worthy of the Greek title "*Theotokos*." Shortly thereafter, the Empress Eudocia sent a painting of the Madonna and Child home from the Holy Land and had it placed in the Church of Constantinople. This is



the first historical mention of the Madonna and Child as an artistic subject. That painting was taken to Venice in 1202, to the Cathedral of St. Mark.

In subsequent centuries, the Madonna and Child have become one of the most popular themes in Western art. This popularity reflects the Church's veneration of Mary for her role in our salvation and also for her place as an exemplar of the virtues of purity, humility, and faithful acceptance of God's grace.

*Fr. Rice is the vocations director for the Paulist Fathers.*

### Sts. Philip and James the Less

First Century

May 3

Philip and James the Less, son of Alphaeus, are listed among the Twelve Apostles commissioned by Jesus. Philip brought Nathaniel to Christ, had a part in feeding the 5,000, and at the Last Supper, when he asked to be shown the Father, was told by Christ, "Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip?" He may have evangelized in Turkey. Not much is known about James, but "the less" may refer to his height. One tradition puts him in Syria, while another has him martyred in the same Jerusalem persecution as James the Righteous.

