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SPIRITUALITY - In India, the month of September begins a whole series of feasts whose popularity seems to grow stronger with time. There are harvest festivals that date back to medieval India and earlier. There are feasts of goddesses and saints whose celebrations cut across conventional religion. Be they Catholic, Hindu or in between, popular devotions never seem to die. They appeal to something deep-rooted in the human psyche — awe, wonder, and the urgent plea for blessings and healing. Popular religiosity is universal, and all the science and technology in the world has not suppressed it; only changed its external form.

We can see the universality of some religious symbols at play in Mahim, in Mumbai. Mahim is home to a popular shrine to Mary that, every week, attracts numerous non-Catholic devotees. As part of a study into how women respond to popular devotions, the Xavier Institute of Communications in Mumbai asked these non-Catholic devotees at Mahim what it was that brought them to pray to Mary. Doesn't Hinduism have many goddesses and devis of its own? The responses to this question bore a common theme: "None of our devis carries a child, as Mother Mary does. She knows what a mother's worries are – our own devis do not." No doubt about it, Mary's motherhood is her most attractive feature. It's always been so, and so it will be. Mary retains her central place in the Catholic imagination, though over recent decades in the West there has been a slight change in her image.

Last month, The Tablet's James Sweeney reviewed a 2013 book by Alana Harris, Darby Fellow in History at Oxford University, titled *Faith in the Family: A Lived Religious History of English Catholicism, 1945-82*. Harris, writes Sweeney, "finds a story of continuity and change". There

has been a "marked shift in Mary's image – from an icon of motherhood ... to the strong woman of faith". Social changes, both within the family as well as in cultural attitudes, have brought this about. Today, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that one of the transformations of Catholic consciousness after Vatican II was the neglect of ordinary forms of piety, especially Marian devotions. This was well expressed in the (probably apocryphal) conversation between Cardinal Suenens and the theologian, Karl Rahner: "Father Rahner, isn't it curious that despite the liturgical and biblical renewal today there seems to be a loss of faith in our Blessed Mother?" "This is because for many since the Council, faith has become an ideology, an action program, a matter of study, an abstraction. And abstractions don't need a mother." Liberation theology in Latin America made this mistake, and later scrambled to recover many popular practices it had jettisoned, when it was realized how much energy and power they hold.

For at their root devotions are sacramental; that is, through the medium of outward actions – vocal prayers, the singing of hymns, pilgrimages, processions and circumambulations – a relationship is built with God and his saints, a relationship which is intensely personal, experiential and exemplary. The saint we pray to becomes not just our protector but also our model. This fact is made plain by the devotion to Mary displayed by so many non-Catholics at Mahim. As we look up to emulate them, the saints and the devis gaze down upon us with benevolence. There's a connection that is instant and total. This is why popular religiosity is there to stay.

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