



The Holy See

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HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Thursday, 8 December 2005*

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Pope Paul VI solemnly concluded the Second Vatican Council in the square in front of St Peter's Basilica 40 years ago, on 8 December 1965. It had been inaugurated, in accordance with John XXIII's wishes, on 11 October 1962, which was then the Feast of Mary's Motherhood, and ended on the day of the Immaculate Conception.

The Council took place in a Marian setting. It was actually far more than a setting: it was the orientation of its entire process.

It refers us, as it referred the Council Fathers at that time, to the image of the Virgin who listens and lives in the Word of God, who cherishes in her heart the words that God addresses to her and, piecing them together like a mosaic, learns to understand them (cf. Lk 2: 19, 51).

It refers us to the great Believer who, full of faith, put herself in God's hands, abandoning herself to his will; it refers us to the humble Mother who, when the Son's mission so required, became part of it, and at the same time, to the courageous woman who stood beneath the Cross while the disciples fled.

In his Discourse on the occasion of the promulgation of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Paul VI described Mary as "*tutrix huius Concilii*" - "Patroness of this Council" (cf. *Oecumenicum Concilium Vaticanum II, Constitutiones Decreta Declarationes*, Vatican City, 1966, p. 983) and,

with an unmistakable allusion to the account of Pentecost transmitted by Luke (cf. Acts 1: 12-14), said that the Fathers were gathered in the Council Hall "*cum Maria, Matre Iesu*" and would also have left it in her name (p. 985).

Indelibly printed in my memory is the moment when, hearing his words: "*Mariam Sanctissimam declaramus Matrem Ecclesiae*" - "We declare Mary the Most Holy Mother of the Church", the Fathers spontaneously rose at once and paid homage to the Mother of God, to our Mother, to the Mother of the Church, with a standing ovation.

Indeed, with this title the Pope summed up the Marian teaching of the Council and provided the key to understanding it. Not only does Mary have a unique relationship with Christ, the Son of God who, as man, chose to become her Son. Since she was totally united to Christ, she also totally belongs to us. Yes, we can say that Mary is close to us as no other human being is, because Christ becomes man for all men and women and his entire being is "being here for us".

Christ, the Fathers said, as the Head, is inseparable from his Body which is the Church, forming with her, so to speak, a single living subject. The Mother of the Head is also the Mother of all the Church; she is, so to speak, totally emptied of herself; she has given herself entirely to Christ and with him is given as a gift to us all. Indeed, the more the human person gives himself, the more he finds himself.

The Council intended to tell us this: Mary is so interwoven in the great mystery of the Church that she and the Church are inseparable, just as she and Christ are inseparable. Mary mirrors the Church, anticipates the Church in her person, and in all the turbulence that affects the suffering, struggling Church she always remains the Star of salvation. In her lies the true centre in which we trust, even if its peripheries very often weigh on our soul.

In the context of the promulgation of the Constitution on the Church, Paul VI shed light on all this through a new title deeply rooted in Tradition, precisely with the intention of illuminating the inner structure of the Church's teaching, which was developed at the Council. The Second Vatican Council had to pronounce on the institutional components of the Church: on the Bishops and on the Pontiff, on the priests, lay people and Religious, in their communion and in their relations; it had to describe the Church journeying on, "clasping sinners to her bosom, at once holy and always in need of purification..." (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 8).

This "Petrine" aspect of the Church, however, is included in that "Marian" aspect. In Mary, the Immaculate, we find the essence of the Church without distortion. We ourselves must learn from her to become "ecclesial souls", as the Fathers said, so that we too may be able, in accordance with St Paul's words, to present ourselves "blameless" in the sight of the Lord, as he wanted us from the very beginning (cf. Col 1: 21; Eph 1: 4).

But now we must ask ourselves: What does "Mary, the Immaculate" mean? Does this title have something to tell us? Today, the liturgy illuminates the content of these words for us in two great images.

First of all comes the marvellous narrative of the annunciation of the Messiah's coming to Mary, the Virgin of Nazareth. The Angel's greeting is interwoven with threads from the Old Testament, especially from the Prophet Zephaniah. He shows that Mary, the humble provincial woman who comes from a priestly race and bears within her the great priestly patrimony of Israel, is "the holy remnant" of Israel to which the prophets referred in all the periods of trial and darkness.

In her is present the true Zion, the pure, living dwelling-place of God. In her the Lord dwells, in her he finds the place of his repose. She is the living house of God, who does not dwell in buildings of stone but in the heart of living man. She is the shoot which sprouts from the stump of David in the dark winter night of history. In her, the words of the Psalm are fulfilled: "*The earth has yielded its fruits*" (Ps 67: 7).

She is the offshoot from which grew the tree of redemption and of the redeemed. God has not failed, as it might have seemed formerly at the beginning of history with Adam and Eve or during the period of the Babylonian Exile, and as it seemed anew in Mary's time when Israel had become a people with no importance in an occupied region and with very few recognizable signs of its holiness.

God did not fail. In the humility of the house in Nazareth lived holy Israel, the pure remnant. God saved and saves his people. From the felled tree trunk Israel's history shone out anew, becoming a living force that guides and pervades the world.

Mary is holy Israel: she says "yes" to the Lord, she puts herself totally at his disposal and thus becomes the living temple of God.

The second image is much more difficult and obscure. This metaphor from the Book of Genesis speaks to us from a great historical distance and can only be explained with difficulty; only in the course of history has it been possible to develop a deeper understanding of what it refers to.

It was foretold that the struggle between humanity and the serpent, that is, between man and the forces of evil and death, would continue throughout history.

It was also foretold, however, that the "offspring" of a woman would one day triumph and would crush the head of the serpent to death; it was foretold that the offspring of the woman - and in this offspring the woman and the mother herself - would be victorious and that thus, through man, God would triumph.

If we set ourselves with the believing and praying Church to listen to this text, then we can begin to understand what original sin, inherited sin, is and also what the protection against this inherited sin is, what redemption is.

What picture does this passage show us? The human being does not trust God. Tempted by the serpent, he harbours the suspicion that in the end, God takes something away from his life, that God is a rival who curtails our freedom and that we will be fully human only when we have cast him aside; in brief, that only in this way can we fully achieve our freedom.

The human being lives in the suspicion that God's love creates a dependence and that he must rid himself of this dependency if he is to be fully himself. Man does not want to receive his existence and the fullness of his life from God.

He himself wants to obtain from the tree of knowledge the power to shape the world, to make himself a god, raising himself to God's level, and to overcome death and darkness with his own efforts. He does not want to rely on love that to him seems untrustworthy; he relies solely on his own knowledge since it confers power upon him. Rather than on love, he sets his sights on power, with which he desires to take his own life autonomously in hand. And in doing so, he trusts in deceit rather than in truth and thereby sinks with his life into emptiness, into death.

Love is not dependence but a gift that makes us live. The freedom of a human being is the freedom of a limited being, and therefore is itself limited. We can possess it only as a shared freedom, in the communion of freedom: only if we live in the right way, with one another and for one another, can freedom develop.

We live in the right way if we live in accordance with the truth of our being, and that is, in accordance with God's will. For God's will is not a law for the human being imposed from the outside and that constrains him, but the intrinsic measure of his nature, a measure that is engraved within him and makes him the image of God, hence, a free creature.

If we live in opposition to love and against the truth - in opposition to God - then we destroy one another and destroy the world. Then we do not find life but act in the interests of death. All this is recounted with immortal images in the history of the original fall of man and the expulsion of man from the earthly Paradise.

Dear brothers and sisters, if we sincerely reflect about ourselves and our history, we have to say that with this narrative is described not only the history of the beginning but the history of all times, and that we all carry within us a drop of the poison of that way of thinking, illustrated by the images in the Book of Genesis.

We call this drop of poison "original sin". Precisely on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, we

have a lurking suspicion that a person who does not sin must really be basically boring and that something is missing from his life: the dramatic dimension of being autonomous; that the freedom to say no, to descend into the shadows of sin and to want to do things on one's own is part of being truly human; that only then can we make the most of all the vastness and depth of our being men and women, of being truly ourselves; that we should put this freedom to the test, even in opposition to God, in order to become, in reality, fully ourselves.

In a word, we think that evil is basically good, we think that we need it, at least a little, in order to experience the fullness of being. We think that Mephistopheles - the tempter - is right when he says he is the power "that always wants evil and always does good" (J.W. von Goethe, *Faust I*, 3). We think that a little bargaining with evil, keeping for oneself a little freedom against God, is basically a good thing, perhaps even necessary.

If we look, however, at the world that surrounds us we can see that this is not so; in other words, that evil is always poisonous, does not uplift human beings but degrades and humiliates them. It does not make them any the greater, purer or wealthier, but harms and belittles them.

This is something we should indeed learn on the day of the Immaculate Conception: the person who abandons himself totally in God's hands does not become God's puppet, a boring "yes man"; he does not lose his freedom. Only the person who entrusts himself totally to God finds true freedom, the great, creative immensity of the freedom of good.

The person who turns to God does not become smaller but greater, for through God and with God he becomes great, he becomes divine, he becomes truly himself. The person who puts himself in God's hands does not distance himself from others, withdrawing into his private salvation; on the contrary, it is only then that his heart truly awakens and he becomes a sensitive, hence, benevolent and open person.

The closer a person is to God, the closer he is to people. We see this in Mary. The fact that she is totally with God is the reason why she is so close to human beings.

For this reason she can be the Mother of every consolation and every help, a Mother whom anyone can dare to address in any kind of need in weakness and in sin, for she has understanding for everything and is for everyone the open power of creative goodness.

In her, God has impressed his own image, the image of the One who follows the lost sheep even up into the mountains and among the briars and thornbushes of the sins of this world, letting himself be spiked by the crown of thorns of these sins in order to take the sheep on his shoulders and bring it home.

As a merciful Mother, Mary is the anticipated figure and everlasting portrait of the Son. Thus, we

see that the image of the Sorrowful Virgin, of the Mother who shares her suffering and her love, is also a true image of the Immaculate Conception. Her heart was enlarged by being and feeling together with God. In her, God's goodness came very close to us.

Mary thus stands before us as a sign of comfort, encouragement and hope. She turns to us, saying: "Have the courage to dare with God! Try it! Do not be afraid of him! Have the courage to risk with faith! Have the courage to risk with goodness! Have the courage to risk with a pure heart! Commit yourselves to God, then you will see that it is precisely by doing so that your life will become broad and light, not boring but filled with infinite surprises, for God's infinite goodness is never depleted!".

On this Feast Day, let us thank the Lord for the great sign of his goodness which he has given us in Mary, his Mother and the Mother of the Church. Let us pray to him to put Mary on our path like a light that also helps us to become a light and to carry this light into the nights of history. Amen.

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