



The Holy See

POPE JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 3 September 1997

Mary: model of faith, hope and charity

1. In the Letter to the Ephesians St Paul explains the spousal relationship between Christ and the Church in the following words: "Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the Church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Eph 5:25-27).

The Second Vatican Council takes up the Apostle's assertions and recalls that "in the most Blessed Virgin the Church has already reached perfection", while "the faithful still strive to conquer sin and increase in holiness" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 65).

In this way the difference between Mary and the faithful is emphasized, although both belong to the holy Church which Christ made "without spot or wrinkle". In fact, while the faithful receive holiness through Baptism, Mary was preserved from all stain of original sin and was redeemed antecedently by Christ. Furthermore, although the faithful have been freed "from the law of sin" (cf. Rom 8:2), they can still give in to temptation, and human frailty continues to manifest itself in their lives. "We all make many mistakes", says the Letter of James (3:2). For this reason the Council of Trent teaches: "No one can avoid all sins, even venial sins, throughout his life" (DS 1573). By divine privilege, however, the Immaculate Virgin is an exception to this rule, as the Council of Trent itself recalls (ibid.).

2. Despite the sins of her members, the Church is first and foremost the community of those who are called to holiness and strive each day to achieve it.

In this arduous path to perfection they feel encouraged by her who is the "model of virtues". The Council notes: "Devoutly meditating on her and contemplating her in the light of the Word made man, the Church reverently penetrates more deeply into the great mystery of the Incarnation and becomes more and more like her Spouse" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 65).

So the Church looks to Mary. She not only contemplates the wondrous gift of her fullness of grace, but strives to imitate the perfection which in her is the fruit of her full compliance with Christ's command: "You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). Mary is all-holy. For the community of believers she represents the paradigm of the authentic holiness that is achieved in union with Christ. The earthly life of the Mother of God is characterized by perfect harmony with the person of her Son and by her total dedication to the redeeming work he accomplished.

The Church turns her gaze to the maternal intimacy that grew in silence during life in Nazareth and reached perfection at the moment of sacrifice, and she strives to imitate it in her daily journey. In this way, she is increasingly conformed to her Spouse. United like Mary with the Redeemer's Cross, the Church, amid the difficulties, contradictions and persecutions that renew in her life the mystery of her Lord's Passion, constantly seeks to be fully configured to him.

3. The Church lives by faith, seeing in her "who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Lk 1:45), the first and perfect expression of her faith. On this journey of trusting abandonment to the Lord, the Virgin goes before the disciples, adhering to the divine Word with an increasing intensity that embraces all the stages of her life and spreads to the very mission of the Church.

Her example encourages the People of God to practise their faith and to study and develop its content, by keeping in their heart and meditating on the events of salvation.

Mary also becomes a model of hope for the Church. In listening to the angel's message, the Virgin first directs her hope to the kingdom without end, which Jesus had been sent to establish.

She stands firm near the cross of her Son, waiting for the divine promise to be fulfilled. After Pentecost, the Mother of Jesus sustains the Church's hope despite the threat of persecution. She is thus the Mother of hope for the community of believers and for individual Christians, and she encourages and guides her children as they await the kingdom, supporting them in their daily trials and throughout the events of history, however tragic.

Lastly, the Church sees in Mary the model of her charity. By looking at the situation of the first Christian community, we discover that the unanimity of their hearts, which was shown as they awaited Pentecost, is associated with the presence of the Holy Virgin (cf. Acts 1:14). And precisely because of Mary's radiant charity, it is possible to maintain harmony and fraternal love at all times

within the Church.

4. The Council expressly underscores Mary's exemplary role for the Church's apostolic mission, with the following observation: "The Church, therefore, in her apostolic work too, rightly looks to her who gave birth to Christ, who was thus conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin, in order that through the Church he could be born and increase in the hearts of the faithful. In her life the Virgin has been a model of that motherly love with which all who join in the Church's apostolic mission for the regeneration of mankind should be animated" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 65).

After having co-operated in the work of salvation by her motherhood, her association with Christ's sacrifice and her motherly aid to the newborn Church, Mary continues to support the Christian community and all believers in their generous commitment to proclaiming the Gospel.

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

I am pleased to extend special greetings to the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Malta, Uganda, Malaysia, the Philippines and the United States. May the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you always!

In greeting the Polish pilgrims and visitors attending the General Audience, the Holy Father recalled the outbreak of the Second World War and the tremendous hardships that the Polish people had to endure in that conflict.

Dear friends, today I cannot forget 1 September 1939: the outbreak of the Second World War and the whole experience of the Second World War in our homeland.

Today is 3 September, which then fell on a Sunday. The war was already underway and the German divisions were approaching Kraków.

On this occasion let us especially call upon Mary, Queen of Poland, with the words of the song: "How much you suffered, Mary, at the foot of your Son's cross!". As we recall her sufferings at the cross, we commend to her our country and particularly those who are suffering. We pray that she will shorten their sufferings. And for those who cannot endure them, we ask for the gift of perseverance and victory.

The song to the Mother of God, Queen of Poland, is a sort of historical summary of our experiences in 1939 and throughout the world war, which cost us so much hardship, so many sufferings and sacrifices, in order to achieve the final victory.

Today and in the days ahead we particularly commend our homeland to God. Praised be Jesus Christ!

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