



The Holy See

POPE JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 17 September 1997

Blessed Virgin is Mother of the Church

1. After proclaiming Mary a "pre-eminent member", the "type" and "model" of the Church, the Second Vatican Council says: "The Catholic Church, taught by the Holy Spirit, honours her with filial affection and devotion as a most beloved mother" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 53).

To tell the truth, the conciliar text does not explicitly attribute the title "Mother of the Church" to the Blessed Virgin, but it unmistakably expresses its content by repeating a statement made in 1748, more than two centuries ago, by Pope Benedict XIV (*Bullarium Romanum*, series 2, t. 2, n. 61, p. 428).

In this document my venerable Predecessor, in describing the filial sentiments of the Church, which recognizes Mary as her most beloved mother, indirectly proclaims her Mother of the Church.

2. This title was rather rarely used in the past, but has recently become more common in the pronouncements of the Church's Magisterium and in the devotion of the Christian people. The faithful first called upon Mary with the title "Mother of God", "Mother of the faithful" or "our Mother", to emphasize her personal relationship with each of her children.

Later, because of the greater attention paid to the mystery of the Church and to Mary's relationship to her, the Blessed Virgin began more frequently to be invoked as "Mother of the Church".

Before the Second Vatican Council, this expression was found in Pope Leo XIII's Magisterium, in

which it is affirmed that Mary is "in all truth mother of the Church" (*Acta Leonis XIII*, 15, 302). The title was later used many times in the teachings of John XXIII and Paul VI.

3. Although the title "Mother of the Church" was only recently attributed to Mary, it expresses the Blessed Virgin's maternal relationship with the Church as shown already in several New Testament texts.

Since the Annunciation, Mary was called to give her consent to the coming of the messianic kingdom, which would take place with the formation of the Church.

When at Cana Mary asked the Son to exercise his messianic power, she made a fundamental contribution to implanting the faith in the first community of disciples, and she co-operated in initiating God's kingdom, which has its "seed" and "beginning" in the Church (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 5).

On Calvary, Mary united herself to the sacrifice of her Son and made her own maternal contribution to the work of salvation, which took the form of labour pains, the birth of the new humanity.

In addressing the words "Woman, behold your son" to Mary, the Crucified One proclaims her motherhood not only in relation to the Apostle John but also to every disciple. The Evangelist himself, by saying that Jesus had to die "to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (Jn 11:52), indicates the Church's birth as the fruit of the redemptive sacrifice with which Mary is maternally associated.

The Evangelist St Luke mentions the presence of Jesus' Mother in the first community of Jerusalem (Acts 1:14). In this way he stresses Mary's maternal role in the newborn Church, comparing it to her role in the Redeemer's birth. The maternal dimension thus becomes a fundamental element of Mary's relationship with the new People of the redeemed.

4. Following Sacred Scripture, patristic teaching recognizes Mary's motherhood in the work of Christ and therefore in that of the Church, although in terms which are not always explicit.

According to St Irenaeus, Mary "became a cause of salvation for the whole human race" (*Haer.* 3, 22, 4; *PG* 7, 959), and the pure womb of the Virgin "regenerates men in God" (*Haer.* 4, 33, 11; *PG* 7, 1080). This is re-echoed by St Ambrose, who says: "A Virgin has begotten the salvation of the world, a Virgin has given life to all things" (*Ep.* 63, 33; *PL* 16, 1198), and by other Fathers who call Mary "Mother of salvation" (Severian of Gabala, *Or. 6 in mundi creationem*, 10, *PG* 54, 4; Faustus of Riez, *Max. Bibl. Patrum*, VI, 620-621).

In the Middle Ages, St Anselm addressed Mary in this way: "You are the mother of justification and

of the justified, the Mother of reconciliation and of the reconciled, the mother of salvation and of the saved" (*Or.* 52, 8; *PL* 158, 957), while other authors attribute to her the titles "Mother of grace" and "Mother of life".

5. The title "Mother of the Church" thus reflects the deep conviction of the Christian faithful, who see in Mary not only the mother of the person of Christ, but also of the faithful. She who is recognized as mother of salvation, life and grace, mother of the saved and mother of the living, is rightly proclaimed Mother of the Church.

Pope Paul VI would have liked the Second Vatican Council itself to have proclaimed "Mary Mother of the Church, that is, of the whole People of God, of the faithful and their Pastors". He did so himself in his speech at the end of the Council's third session (21 November 1964), also asking that "henceforth the Blessed Virgin be honoured and invoked with this title by all the Christian people" (*AAS* 1964, 37).

In this way, my venerable Predecessor explicitly enunciated the doctrine contained in chapter eight of *Lumen gentium*, hoping that the title of Mary, Mother of the Church, would have an ever more important place in the liturgy and piety of the Christian people.

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

I am pleased to greet the group sponsored by the "*Foyer Unitas*" Institute in Rome. I pray that your activities will foster greater unity among Christians. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims, especially those from England, Sweden, Norway, Australia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Japan and the United States, I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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