



The Holy See

VIGIL OF THE FEAST OF OUR LADY OF LOURDES *HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II*
Sistine Chapel

Saturday, 10 February 1979 Hail Mary... Today I would like to be in spirit in that corner of France where, for a hundred and twenty-one years, these words have been murmured incessantly by the lips of thousands, of millions, of men and women since the day when, precisely in this place, they were uttered by a child full of amazement. The child was called Bernadette Soubirous, she was fourteen years old, and she was the daughter of modest workers in Lourdes. Hail Mary... It is with these words that, always and everywhere, we greet her who heard them for the first time in Nazareth. On receiving this greeting, she was called by her name; that was how she was called by her family and all those who knew her in the neighbourhood; it was with this name also that she was chosen by God. The Lord called her by this name: Mary! Myriam! However, when Bernadette asked her for her name, she did not answer "Mary", but "Que soy era Immaculada Conception", "I am the Immaculate Conception". Thus, in Lourdes, she called herself by the name that God had given her from time immemorial. Yes, from time immemorial, he chose her with this name and destined her to be the Mother of his Son, the eternal Word. This appellation, "Immaculate Conception", is ultimately far deeper and far more important than that used by her parents or by the people whom she knew; the one that she heard at the moment of the annunciation: "Hail Mary!". Let us pause at this greeting. Millions of human lips repeat it every day, in every kind of language and dialect, in a great many places of the globe. Between the Massabielle grotto and the river Gave, there are also millions of pilgrims who repeat it in the course of the year. Today, I wish to repeat this "Hail Mary" with everyone, becoming a pilgrim in spirit and in heart, while waiting for the opportunity to be in that place personally. I wish to call Christ's Mother by this name which she had on earth. I wish to greet her with this greeting which can be termed a "historic" one, in the sense that it is bound up with a decisive moment of the history of salvation. This decisive moment is, at the same time, that of her act of faith, of her response of faith: "Blessed is she who believed!" (Lk 1:45). Yes, Mary, it is this day, this hour that counts, at the moment when you heard this greeting, with your name: Myriam, Mary! For the history of salvation is inscribed in the time of men marked by the hours, the days, the years. This history also takes on a dimension of faith, in the response given by the human heart to the living God. Among these answers, the one that follows the Angel's "Hail Mary", in Nazareth, marks a peak point: *Fiat!* "Let it be to me according to your word!". Blessed are you who believed! It is Elizabeth who addresses this blessing to Mary. Not at the moment of the Annunciation, but several weeks afterwards, when Mary came to Ain-Karim.

And these words of Elizabeth, who was the person closest to her spiritually, brought forth in Mary a new response of faith: "Magnificat! We are accustomed to the terms of this canticle. The Church has made them hers. She repeats them, following the Mother of Christ, to express her greatest joys or merely to give thanks: "He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name, and his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation... He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree: he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away..." (Lk 1:49-50, 52-53). We often hear these words! We repeat them so often! Let us try once, why not today, to dwell on the admirable transparency of this heart of Mary: God speaks in it and through it. He speaks at a level which transcends man's daily words and perhaps even the words used every day by Myriam, this girl of Nazareth, a kinswoman of Elizabeth and Zechariah, just betrothed to Joseph. Actually, is not Mary, the bride, as it were, of the Holy Spirit? It is certainly the Spirit that gives such transparency to her heart — this simple, humble heart of a girl from Nazareth — thanks to the promises made "to Abraham and to his posterity for ever" (Lk 1:55). God is also mysteriously present in the whole history of men, of the generations that succeed one another, of peoples, capable of bringing forth, in a marvellous way, a transparency, a hope, a call to holiness, a purification, a conversion. In this sense, he is present in the history of the humble..., and of the powerful; yes, in the history of the hungry, the oppressed, the underprivileged, who know they are loved by him and find again with him, courage, dignity and hope; in the history also of the rich, of oppressors, of men sated with everything, who do not escape the judgment of God and are also urged to humility, justice, and sharing, in order to enter his kingdom. God is present in the history of those who are responsible for the consumer civilization which is spreading,, and in that of its victims. He wishes to set man free from the slavery of things and to put him back continually on the way of love of persons — love of God and love of his brothers — with the spirit of purity, poverty, and simplicity. Today I want to meditate on these admirable words of the *Magnificat* with all those who are taking part in this eucharistic sacrifice, with all the pilgrims of Lourdes, with the whole Church. Some people are questioning themselves about the mission of the Church today. But cannot the Church of our time catch sight of the truth about her mission in these words of Mary? Do they not contain what we can, what we want to, what we must, announce, proclaim and carry out in this vast field in which "evangelization" and "human advancement" are linked? Does not the Magnificat make it possible to answer the question of knowing what progress, what advancement, is meant, of knowing also what is understood by "evangelizing", proclaiming the Good News to the men of today? For this "today" with its miseries and its signs of hope constitutes, in all countries, a challenge for the "prophetic" mission of the Church, and at the same time for her "motherly" mission. It is a question of opening hearts and mentalities to Christ, to the Gospel, to its scale of values, to contribute to the elevation of the whole man and of all men, to organize a world less unworthy of man and of God's plan for him, and, at the same time, to prepare the kingdom of heaven. Dear Brothers and Sisters, it is with deep emotion that I celebrate today this Mass in the French language, in the Sistine Chapel. In this way, in the eucharistic liturgy I can unite spiritually with all those who speak this language, and there are a great many of them, spread in many countries, and represented here in Rome and in this assembly. In particular, I can gather in the spirit all the sons and

daughters of the Church of this great French nation, whose history is linked in a special way with the history of the Gospel in Europe and in the whole world. We have the impression that we are in Lourdes, where pilgrims from all countries as well as France flock continually:—in Lourdes which celebrates this year, with Nevers, the centenary of Bernadette's death; — in Lourdes where Mary's message, transmitted by Bernadette, incessantly calls souls to prayer, repentance, conversion, purification, and the glory of the Christian assembly — in a word, to a stronger faith;

— in Lourdes where so many sick persons find, if not a physical cure, at least a Christian meaning for their sufferings, the peace of God's love and the eager welcome of their brothers;

— in Lourdes where every year the French Bishops gather in a plenary meeting which I am happy to greet very cordially from the See of the Apostle Peter;

— in Lourdes which is preparing the 1981 Eucharistic Congress. We have together started to prepare the celebration of the centenary of the first International Eucharistic Congress, which took place in Lille in 1881. Turning towards the land of France, towards the whole Church that is in France, I would like above all to repeat: blessed are you, who received the faith right from the beginning. Do not let your faith fade or dissolve. Strengthen your faith! And let it shine forth! In this spirit of faith, we now approach the altar in order to celebrate the Sacrifice of Christ: the Sacrifice of the Bread that we consecrate and that we break for the life of the world (cf. 1 Cor 10:16; Jn 6:51). This is the theme of the Eucharistic Congress for which we are preparing together: For the life of the world, for the salvation of the world! Amen!

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