



The Holy See

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GENERAL AUDIENCE

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The Church, a bride adorned for her husband

1. Just as in the Old Testament the holy city was denoted by the feminine image of "the daughter of Zion", so in the Revelation of John the heavenly Jerusalem is described "as a bride adorned for her husband" (*Rv* 21: 2). The feminine symbol represents the face of the Church in her various aspects as betrothed, bride and mother, thus stressing a dimension of love and fruitfulness.

Our thoughts turn to the words of the Apostle Paul, who traces the Church's features in a very intense passage in the Letter to the Ephesians: "glorious, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and without blemish", loved by Christ and the model of all Christian married life (cf. *Eph* 5: 25-32). The Ecclesial Community, "betrothed to her one husband" as a chaste virgin (cf. *2 Cor* 11: 2), is presented in continuity with an idea developed in the Old Testament in impassioned texts such as those of the prophet Hosea (chap. 1-3) or Ezekiel (chap. 16) or in the joyful radiance of the Song of Solomon.

2. *To be loved by Christ and to love him* with spousal love is constitutive of the Church's mystery. At its source is a free act of love which the Father pours out through Christ and the Holy Spirit. This love forms the Church and is radiated to all creatures. In this light we can say that the Church is a sign raised among the nations to bear witness to the intensity of divine love revealed in Christ, especially in the gift he made of his own life (cf. *Jn* 10: 11-15). Therefore, "all human beings - both women and men - are called through the Church to be the "Bride" of Christ, the Redeemer of the world" (*Mulieris dignitatem*, n. 25).

The Church must let this supreme love shine, reminding humanity - which often feels alone and

abandoned on the wastelands of history - that it will never be forgotten or lack the warmth of divine tenderness. Isaiah declares in a touching way: "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you" (*Is* 49: 15).

3. Precisely because she is born of love, the Church pours out love. She does so by proclaiming the commandment to love one another as Christ has loved us (cf. *Jn* 15: 12), that is, even to the gift of our lives: "He laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 *Jn* 3: 16). That God who "first loved us" (1 *Jn* 4: 19) and did not hesitate to give his Son out of love (cf. *Jn* 3: 16) spurs the Church to follow the way of love "to the end" (cf. *Jn* 13: 1). And she is called to do so with the freshness of a couple who love each other in the joy of unreserved self-giving and daily generosity, whether the skies of life are springlike and clear, or the darkness and clouds of a spiritual winter loom ahead.

In this sense we can understand why the Book of Revelation - despite its dramatic depiction of history - is filled throughout with songs, music and joyful liturgies. In the landscape of the spirit, love is like the sun illuminating and transfiguring nature, which would remain grey and monotonous without its brightness.

4. Another fundamental dimension of the Church's spousal nature is *fruitfulness*. The love received and given is not confined to the marital relationship but becomes creative and life-giving. In Genesis, which presents humanity as made in the "image and likeness of God", there is a significant reference to being "male and female": "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (1: 27).

The distinction and reciprocity of the human couple are a sign of God's love not only as the basis of a vocation to communion, but also for the purpose of procreative fruitfulness. Not by chance is the Book of Genesis already interspersed with genealogies, which are the fruit of procreation and give rise to the history in which God reveals himself. Thus we can understand how the Church too, in the Spirit who enlivens her and unites her to Christ her Bridegroom, is endowed with an inner fruitfulness by which she constantly brings forth children of God in Baptism and enables them to grow to the fullness of Christ (cf. *Gal* 4: 19; *Eph* 4: 13).

5. These are the children who form that "assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven", destined to inhabit "Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (cf. *Heb* 12: 21-23). Not without reason the Book of Revelation's last words are an intense plea to Christ: "The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come"" (*Rv* 22: 17), "Come, Lord Jesus!" (ibid., v. 20). This is the Church's ultimate goal as she journeys confidently on her pilgrimage through history, while often sensing at her side, according to the image in the same biblical book, the hostile and furious presence of another female figure, "Babylon", the "great harlot" (cf. *Rv* 17: 1, 5), who embodies the "bestiality" of hatred, death and inner barrenness.

As the Church looks at her goal, she nurtures "the hope of the eternal kingdom, that is brought about by participation in the life of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit, given to the Apostles as the Counselor, is the guardian and animator of this hope in the heart of the Church" (*Dominum et Vivificantem*, n. 66). Let us ask God, then, to grant his Church always to be in history the guardian of hope, shining brightly like the Woman of Revelation, "clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (*Rv* 12: 1).

I extend a special greeting to the pilgrims from the Archdiocese of Tokyo led by Cardinal Peter Shirayanagi. I also welcome the groups from Sweden, Ghana and the United States of America. Upon all of you and your families I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.