



The Holy See

CLOSING OF THE 20th INTERNATIONAL
MARIOLOGICAL-MARIAN CONGRESS

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Sunday 24 September 2000

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

1. "He took a child, and put him in the midst of them" (*Mk 9: 36*). Jesus' unusual act, recorded in the Gospel just proclaimed, comes immediately after the warning with which the Teacher urged his disciples not to desire the primacy of power, but of service. This teaching must have cut the Twelve to the quick, for "they had discussed with one another who was the greatest" (*Mk 9: 34*). It could be said that the Teacher felt the need to illustrate such a demanding teaching with the eloquence of an act rich in tenderness. He embraced a child, who - according to the standards of the time - counted for nothing, and, as it were, identified himself with him: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me" (*Mk 9: 37*).

In this Eucharist which closes the 20th International Mariological-Marian Congress and the World Jubilee of Marian Shrines, I would like to consider as a topic for reflection precisely *this extraordinary Gospel image*. From it, even before a moral teaching, stems a *Christological*, and indirectly, a *Marian instruction*.

In embracing the child, Christ first of all discloses the delicacy of his heart capable of the full vibrance of sensitivity and affection. In it there is primarily the tenderness of the Father, who from eternity, in the Holy Spirit, loves him and sees in his human face the "beloved Son" with whom he is well pleased (cf. *Mk 1: 11; 9: 7*). Then there is *the wholly feminine and motherly tenderness* with which *Mary* surrounded him during the long years he spent in the house of Nazareth. Christian tradition, especially in the Middle Ages, often paused to contemplate the Virgin embracing the Child Jesus. Aelred of Rievaulx, for example, addresses Mary affectionately, inviting her to

embrace the Son whom, after three days, she found in the temple (cf. *Lk* 2: 40-50). "O sweetest Lady, clasp the One you love, throw your arms round his neck, embrace and kiss him, and compensate with many delights for the three days of his absence" (*De Iesus puero duodenni* 8: SCh 60, p. 64).

2. "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all" (*Mk* 9: 35). The image of Jesus embracing the child conveys the full vigour of this principle, which finds its exemplary fulfilment in the person of Jesus and then, also, in Mary.

No one can say, like Jesus, that he is the "first". Indeed, it is Jesus who is the the "First and the Last", the "Alpha and the Omega", (cf. *Rv* 22: 13), the reflection of the Father's glory, (cf. *Heb* 1: 3). In the Resurrection, he was given "the name which is above every name" (*Phil* 2: 9). However, in the Passion, he also showed himself "the last of all" and, as the "servant of all", did not hesitate to wash his disciples' feet (cf. *Jn* 13: 14).

How closely Mary follows him in this lowering of himself! She, who had the mission of the divine motherhood and the exceptional privileges which place her above every other creature, feels first and foremost *the handmaid of the Lord* (*Lk* 1: 38; 48), and is totally dedicated to serving the divine Son. With ready availability she also makes herself the "*servant*" of the brethren, as some Gospel episodes - from the Visitation to the Wedding at Cana - clearly show us.

3. This is why the principle enunciated by Jesus in the Gospel also illumines Mary's greatness. *Her "primacy" is rooted in her "humility"*. Precisely in this humility God reached out to her, filling her with his favours and making her the "kecharitomene", the "full of grace" (*Lk* 1: 28). She herself confesses in the *Magnificat*: "He has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden ... he who is mighty has done great things for me" (*Lk* 1: 48-49).

In the Mariological Congress which has just closed, you fixed your gaze on the "great things" wrought in Mary, reflecting on their inmost, deepest dimension, that of her *very special relationship with the Trinity*. If Mary is the *Theotokos*, the Mother of the Only-begotten Son of God, how can we be surprised that she enjoys a quite unique relationship also with the Father and the Holy Spirit?

This relationship certainly does not spare her, in her earthly life, the efforts of the human condition: *Mary lived to the full the daily reality of so many humble families of her time*, she knew poverty, sorrow, flight, exile, misunderstanding. Thus her spiritual grandeur does not make her "distant"; she advanced on our road and was in solidarity with us in the "pilgrimage of faith" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 58). But on this interior journey, Mary cultivated absolute faith in God's plan. Precisely in the abyss of this fidelity is also rooted the abyss of greatness that makes her "humble and exalted more than any creature" (Dante, *Par XXXIII*, 2).

4. In our eyes, Mary stands first of all as the "beloved daughter" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 53) of the

Father. If we have all been called by God "to be his sons through Jesus Christ" (cf. *Eph* 1: 5), "sons in the Son", this is especially true for her, who has the privilege of being able to repeat with full human truth the words spoken about Jesus by God the Father: "You are my beloved Son" (cf. *Lk* 3: 22; 2: 48). Because of her task as mother, she was endowed with an exceptional holiness on which the Father rests his eyes.

Mary has a unique relationship with the second person of the Trinity, the Word made flesh, since she is directly involved in the mystery of the Incarnation. She is his Mother, and as such Christ honours and loves her. At the same time, she recognizes him as her God and Lord, making herself a *disciple with an attentive and faithful heart* (cf. *Lk* 2: 19, 51), and his *generous associate* (*Lumen gentium*, n. 61) *in the work of Redemption*. In the incarnate Word and in Mary the infinite distance between the Creator and creature became a supreme closeness; they are the holy space for the mysterious nuptials of the divine nature with the human, the place where the Trinity is revealed for the first time and where Mary represents the new humanity, ready to take up again, in obedient love, the dialogue of the Covenant.

5. Then what can be said of her relationship with the Holy Spirit? *Mary is the purest "sacrament" in which he dwells*. The Christian tradition recognizes in Mary the prototype of the docile answer to the inner movement of the Spirit, the model of the full acceptance of his gifts. The Spirit supports her faith, strengthens her hope, rekindles the flame of her love. The Spirit makes her virginity fruitful and inspires her canticle of joy. The Spirit enlightens her meditation on the Word, gradually opening her mind to an understanding of the Son's mission. It is once again the Spirit who supports her anguish on Calvary and prepares her, in the prayerful expectation of the Upper Room, to receive the full outpouring of the gifts of Pentecost.

6. Dear brothers and sisters! Before this mystery of grace one clearly sees how appropriate for the Jubilee Year are the two events which this Eucharistic celebration brings to a close: the International Mariological-Marian Congress and the World Jubilee of Marian Shrines. Are we not celebrating the 2,000th anniversary of Christ's birth? It is therefore natural that the *Jubilee of the Son should also be the Jubilee of the Mother!*

It is therefore to be hoped that among the fruits of this year of grace, as well as that of a stronger love for Christ, there should also be that of a renewed *Marian devotion*. Yes, Mary must be deeply loved and honoured, but with a devotion which, to be authentic:

- must be *firmly grounded in Scripture and Tradition*, making the most of the liturgy first of all and drawing from it a sound orientation for the most spontaneous demonstrations of popular piety;
- must be expressed *in an effort to imitate the All Holy* in a way of personal perfection;
- must be *far from every form of superstition and vain credulousness*, accepting in the right way, in accordance with ecclesial discernment, the extraordinary manifestations in which the Blessed Virgin often likes to grant herself for the good of the People of God;

- must *always be able to go back to the source of Mary's greatness*, becoming a ceaseless *Magnificat* of praise to the Father, to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.

7. Dear Brothers and Sisters! "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me", Jesus said to us in the Gospel. He could say to us even more aptly: "whoever receives my Mother, receives me". And Mary, on her part, received with filial love, once again points out the Son to us as she did at the wedding of Cana: "Do whatever he tells you" (*Jn 2: 5*).

Dear friends, may this be the consignment of today's Jubilee celebration, which combines Christ and his most holy Mother in one praise. I hope that each of you will receive abundant spiritual fruits from it, and be encouraged to authentic renewal of life. *Ad Iesum per Mariam! Amen.*

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