



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Mary, eschatological icon of the Church

1. We began our meeting by listening to one of the most famous passages in John's Book of Revelation. In the woman with child, who is giving birth while a bloodred dragon rages against her and the child she has conceived, Christian liturgical and artistic tradition has seen an image of Mary, the Mother of Christ. However, according to the sacred author's primary intention, if the child's birth represents the coming of the Messiah, the woman obviously personifies the People of God, both the biblical Israel and the Church. The Marian interpretation does not conflict with the ecclesial meaning of the text, since Mary is "a type of the Church" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 63; cf. St Ambrose, *Expos. Lc.*, II, 7).

The profile of the Mother of the Messiah is thus seen against the background of the believing community. The dragon, which evokes Satan and evil, rises up against Mary and the Church, as the symbolism of the Old Testament has already indicated; red is the sign of war, slaughter and bloodshed; the "seven heads" with diadems mean immense power, while the "ten horns" recall the impressive strength of the beast described by the prophet Daniel (cf. 7: 7), which too is an image of the abusive power that rages in history.

2. Good and evil thus confront each other. Mary, her Son and the Church represent the apparent weakness and smallness of love, truth and justice. Against them is unleashed the monstrous, devastating energy of violence, deceit and injustice. But the song that closes the passage reminds us that the final verdict is entrusted to "the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ" (*Rv* 12: 10).

Certainly, in historical time the Church can be forced to seek refuge in the desert, like ancient Israel on its way to the promised land. Among other things, the desert is the traditional refuge of those pursued, the secret, tranquil place where divine protection is offered (cf. *Gn* 21: 14-19; 1 *Kgs* 19: 4-7). However, as the Book of Revelation stresses (cf. 12: 6, 14), the woman remains in this refuge for only a limited period. The time of anguish, persecution and trial, then, is not indefinite: in the end liberation will come and the hour of glory.

In contemplating this mystery in a Marian perspective, we can say that "Mary, at the side of her Son, is the most perfect image of freedom and of the liberation of humanity and of the universe. It is to her as Mother and Model that the Church must look in order to understand in its completeness the meaning of her own mission" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Libertatis conscientia*, 22 March, 1986, n. 97; cf. *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 37).

3. Let us fix our gaze, then, on Mary, the icon of the pilgrim Church in the wilderness of history but on her way to the glorious destination of the heavenly Jerusalem, where she will shine as the Bride of the Lamb, Christ the Lord. The Mother of God, as the Church of the East celebrates her, is the *Hodegetria*, she who "shows the way", that is, Christ, the only mediator for fully encountering the Father. A French poet sees her as "creation in its first honour and its final flowering, as it came forth from God at the dawn of its original splendour" (P. Claudel, *La vierge à midi*, ed. Pléiade, p. 540).

In her Immaculate Conception Mary is the perfect model of the human creature who, filled from the very beginning with that divine grace which sustains and transfigures the creature (*Lk* 1: 28), always and freely chooses God's way. On the other hand, in her glorious Assumption into heaven Mary is the icon of the creature who is called by the risen Christ to attain, at the end of history, the fullness of communion with God in the resurrection for an eternity of bliss. For the Church, which often feels the weight of history and the assault of evil, the Mother of Christ is the shining emblem of humanity redeemed and enveloped by the grace that saves.

4. We will reach the ultimate goal of human life when "God will be all in all" (1 *Cor* 15: 28), and - as the Book of Revelation foretells - "the sea [will be] no more" (*Rv* 21: 1), that is, the sign of destructive chaos and evil will be destroyed at last. Then the Church will be presented to Christ as "a Bride adorned for her Husband" (*Rv* 21: 2). That will be the moment of intimacy and unblemished love. But now, gazing precisely at the Virgin Assumed into heaven, the Church already has a foretaste of the joy that will be fully hers at the end of time. Mary accompanies the Church on her pilgrimage of faith through history as "a model of ecclesial communion in faith, in charity and in union with Christ. Eternally present in the mystery of Christ, she is, in the midst of the Apostles, at the very heart of the Church at her birth and of the Church of all ages. Indeed, the Church was congregated in the upper part (of the cenacle) with Mary, who was the Mother of Jesus, and with his brethren. We cannot therefore speak of the Church unless Mary, the Mother of the Lord, is present there, with the Lord's brethren" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,

Communio 28 May 1992, n. 19; cf. Chromatius of Aquileia, *Sermo* 30, 1).

5. So let us sing our hymn of praise to Mary, the icon of redeemed humanity, the sign of the Church which lives in faith and love, anticipating the fullness of the heavenly Jerusalem. "The poetic genius of St Ephrem the Syrian, called the 'lyre of the Holy Spirit', tirelessly sang of Mary, leaving a still living mark on the whole tradition of the Syriac Church" (*Redemptoris Mater*, n. 31). It is he who describes Mary as an icon of beauty: "She is holy in her body, beautiful in her spirit, pure in her thoughts, sincere in her understanding, perfect in her sentiments, chaste, firm in her intentions, immaculate in her heart, eminent and filled with all virtues" (*Hymns to the Virgin Mary*, 1, 4; ed. Th. J. Lamy, *Hymni de B. Maria*, Malines 1886, t. 2, col. 520). May this image shine brightly at the centre of every ecclesial community as a perfect reflection of Christ and a sign raised among the peoples, like a "city set on a hill" and "a lamp put on a stand so that it gives light to all" (cf. *Mt* 5: 14-15).

I extend a special greeting to the members of the Catenian Association of Great Britain, and the Ontario Catholic Supervisory Officers' Association, as well as to the many student groups present. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from Great Britain, Denmark, Canada and the United States of America, I invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty God.