



The Holy See

CELEBRATION OF THE EUCHARIST IN THE BASILICA OF SAINT MARY MAJOR

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Friday, 8 December 1978

1. As I cross the threshold of the Basilica of St Mary Major today for the first time as Bishop of Rome, there rises up before my eyes the event that I witnessed here, in this place, on 21 November 1964. It was the closing of the third session of the Second Vatican Council, after the solemn proclamation of the dogmatic Constitution on the Church, which begins with the words: "Lumen Gentium" (the light of humanity). On the same day Pope Paul VI had invited the Council Fathers to come to this very place, to the most venerated Marian temple of Rome, to express their joy and gratitude for the work completed that day.

The Constitution "Lumen Gentium" is the principal document of the Council, the "key" document of the Church of our time, the cornerstone of the whole work of renewal which Vatican II undertook and of which it gave the directives.

The last chapter of this Constitution bears the title: "The role of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church". Paul VI, speaking in St Peter's Basilica that morning, with his thought fixed on the importance of the doctrine expressed in the last chapter of the Constitution "Lumen Gentium", called Mary "Mother of the Church" for the first time. He called her so in a solemn way, and began to call her by that name, with this title, but above all to invoke her to take part as Mother in the life of the Church: this Church which, during the Council, became more deeply aware of her own nature and her own mission. To lay even greater emphasis on this expression, Paul VI, together with the Council Fathers, came here, to St Mary Major's Basilica, where Mary has been surrounded with special veneration and love for so many centuries, under the title of "Salus Populi Romani".

2. Following in the footsteps of this great Predecessor, who was a real father to me, I, too, come

here. After the solemn act in Piazza di Spagna, the tradition of which goes back to 1856, I come here as a result of a cordial invitation extended to me by His Eminence the Archpriest of this basilica, Cardinal Confalonieri, the Dean of the Sacred College, and by the whole Chapter.

I think, however, that, together with him, all my Predecessors in St Peter's Chair invite me here: the Servant of God Pius XII, the Servant of God Pius IX; all the generations of Romans; all the generations of Christians and the whole People of God. They seem to say: Go! Honour the great mystery hidden from eternity, in God himself. Go, and bear witness to Christ our Saviour, the son of Mary! Go, and announce this particular moment; the turning point in history of man's salvation.

This decisive point in the history of salvation is precisely the "Immaculate Conception". God in his eternal love has chosen man from eternity: He has chosen him in his Son. God has chosen man, in order that he may reach the fullness of good by means of participation in his own life, divine Life, by means of grace. He has chosen him from eternity, and irreversibly. Neither original sin, nor the whole history of personal faults and social sins have been able to dissuade the eternal Father from this plan of love of his. They have not been able to cancel the choice of us in the eternal Son, the Word consubstantial with the Father.

Since this choice was to take form in the Incarnation, and since the Son of God was to become a man for our salvation, for this very reason the eternal Father chose for him, among men, his Mother. Each of us becomes a man because he is conceived and born from his mother's womb. The eternal Father chose the same way for the humanity of his eternal Son. He chose his Mother from the people to whom he had entrusted his mysteries and his promises in a special way for centuries. He chose her from the race of David and at the same time from the whole of mankind. He chose her of royal descent, but at the same time among poor people.

He chose her from the beginning. from the very first moment of conception, making her worthy of the divine motherhood to which she would be called at the appointed time. He made her the first heir to the holiness of her own Son. The first among those redeemed by his blood, which he had received from her, humanly speaking. He made her spotless at the very moment of conception.

Today the whole Church contemplates the mystery of the Immaculate Conception and rejoices in it. This is a special day in the period of Advent.

3. The Roman Church exults in this mystery and I, as the new Bishop of this Church, take part in this joy for the first time. For this reason I longed so much to come here, to this temple, where Mary has been venerated for centuries as "Salus Populi Romani". Do not this title, this invocation, tell us that salvation (*salus*) has become in a peculiar way the heritage of the Roman People (*Populi Romani*)? Is not this the salvation that Christ brought to us and that Christ continually brings to us, he alone? And is not his Mother, who precisely as his Mother was redeemed by him, her Son, in an exceptional, "more eminent" way (Paul VI, Creed), is not she, too, called—by him,

her Son, in a way that is more explicit, simple and powerful at the same time, to take part in the salvation of men, of the Roman people, of the whole of mankind? To lead everyone to the Redeemer. To bear witness to him, even without words, only with love, in which "the genius of the mother" is expressed. To approach even those who put up most resistance, for whom it is most difficult to believe in love; who consider the world a great polygon "in which everyone struggles against everyone" (as one of the philosophers expressed himself in the past). To bring all—that is, each one—closer to her Son. To reveal the primacy of love in man's history. To announce the final victory of love. Is not the Church thinking of this victory when she reminds us today of the words of the book of Genesis: "He (the woman's seed) shall bruise the serpent's head" (Cf. Gen 3:15)?

4. "Salus Populi Romani"! Today the new Bishop of Rome crosses the threshold of the Marian temple of the Eternal City, conscious of the struggle between good and evil, which pervades every man's heart, which takes place in the history of mankind and also in the soul of the "Roman people". In this connection the last Council tells us the following: "The whole of man's history has been the story of our combat with the powers of evil, stretching, so our Lord tells us, from the very dawn of history until the last day. Finding himself in the midst of the battlefield, man has to struggle to do what is right, and it is at great cost to himself, and aided by God's grace, that he succeeds in achieving his own inner integrity" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 37).

And therefore the Pope, at the beginning of his episcopal service in St Peter's Chair in Rome, wishes to entrust the Church particularly to her in whom there was accomplished the stupendous and complete victory of good over evil, of love over hatred, of grace over sin; to her of whom Paul VI said that he is "the beginning of the better world", to the Blessed Virgin. He entrusts to her himself, as the servant of servants, and all those whom he serves, and all those who serve with him. He entrusts to her the Roman Church, as token and principle of all the Churches in the world, in their universal unity. He entrusts it to her and offers it to her as her property!

"Totus Tuus ego sum et omnia mea Tua sunt. Accipio Te in mea omnia!" (I am all yours, and all that I have is yours. May You be my guide in everything).

With this simple and at the same time solemn act of offering, the Bishop of Rome, John Paul II, wishes once more to reaffirm his own service of the People of God, which cannot but be the humble imitation of Christ and of her who said of herself: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord" (Lk 1:38).

Let this act be a sign of hope, as the day of the Immaculate Conception is a sign of hope against the background of all the days of our Advent.

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