



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC PILGRIMAGE TO BRAZIL

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Aparecida (Brazil), 4 July 1980

"Long live the Mother of God and ours, conceived without sin!
Long live the Immaculate Virgin, Our Lady Aparecida!"

1. Since I set foot on Brazilian soil, in the various places through which I have passed, I have heard this canticle. It is, in the sincerity and simplicity of its words, a cry of the soul, a greeting, an invocation full of filial devotion and confidence, to her who, being the real Mother of God, was given to us by her Son Jesus at the last moment of his life (cf. Jn 19:26) to be our Mother.

In no other place does this song assume such significance and such intensity as in this place where the Virgin, over two centuries ago, had an extraordinary meeting with the Brazilian people. Since then, the anxieties of this people lightly turn to this place; since then, the Catholic heart of Brazil beats here. This is the goal of incessant pilgrimages from all over the country and has been called the "spiritual Capital of Brazil".

This is a particularly moving and happy moment of my Brazilian pilgrimage, this one in which, with you who represent here the whole Brazilian people, I have my first meeting with Our Lady Aparecida.

2. Preparing spiritually for this pilgrimage to Aparecida, I read with religious attention the simple and enchanting story of the image we venerate here. The fruitless toil of the three fishermen in search of fish in the waters of Paraíba, in that far-off year of 1717. The unexpected discovery of the body, and then of the head, of the little ceramic image, blackened by the mud. The abundant catch that followed the discovery. The devotion, which began immediately, to Our Lady of Conception as represented by that brown statue, affectionately called the "Aparecida" (the one

that appeared). The abundant graces of God for those who invoke the Mother of God here.

From the primitive and crude oratory—the "wooden altar" of the old documents—to the chapel that replaced it and the various successive additions, up to the old basilica in 1908, the materiel temples that have arisen here are always the work and symbol of the faith of the Brazilian people and its love of the Blessed Virgin.

The pilgrimages in which, in the course of the centuries, persons of all social classes and from the most diverse and distant regions of the country have taken part, are well known. Last year there were over five million, five hundred thousand pilgrims who passed here. What were the ancient pilgrims seeking? What are the pilgrims of today seeking? Precisely what they were seeking on the day, more or less distant, of baptism: faith and the means of nourishing it. They seek the sacraments of the Church, particularly reconciliation with God and eucharistic nourishment. And they set off again strengthened, and grateful to Our Lady the Mother of God and ours.

3. As graces and spiritual benefits multiply in this place. Our Lady of Conception Aparecida is solemnly, crowned in 1904, and exactly 50 years ago in 1930, is proclaimed the main Patroness of Brazil. Later, in 1967, it is the good fortune of my venerated predecessor Paul VI to grant this Shine the Golden Rose, wishing by this gesture to honour the Virgin and this sacred place and to stimulate Marian devotion.

And we come to our day. In response to the need for a larger and more adequate temple to meet the needs of the increasing number of pilgrims, here is the bold project of a new basilica. Years of incessant work for the construction of the imposing edifice. Today, after considerable difficulties have been overcome, the splendid reality that we contemplate. Many names of architects and engineers, of humble workers, of generous benefactors, of priests dedicated to the shrine, will remain attached to it. One name stands out among them all and is the symbol of them all that of my brother Cardinal Carlos Carmelo de Vasconcelos Motta, the great promoter of this new temple, the maternal house and the historic legacy of the Queen, Our Lady Aparecida.

4. I come, therefore, to consecrate this Basilica, a witness to the faith and Marian devotion of the Brazilian people, and I shall do so with deeply felt joy, during the celebration of this Eucharist.

This temple is the dwelling of the "Lord of lords and King of kings" (cf. Rev. 17:14). In it, like Queen Esther, the Immaculate Virgin who "won the heart" of God and in whom the Almighty does "great things" (cf. Esther 5: 5; Lk. 1:19), will not cease to welcome numerous sons and to intercede for them "Let my people be spared" (cf. Esther 7:3).

The material building, which houses the real eucharistic presence of the Lord, in which the family of the Son of God gathers to offer with Christ "spiritual sacrifices" made up of joys and sorrows, hopes and struggles, is also the symbol of another spiritual edifice, in the construction of which we

are called to enter as living stones (cf. 1 Pet 2:5). As St Augustine said, "this is the house of our prayers, but we ourselves are God's house. We are constructed as God's house in this world and we will be solemnly dedicated at the end of time. The edifice, or rather, the construction, is done with toil; the dedication is carried out with joy" (cf. St. Augustine, *Sermo* 336, 1.6, PL 38, ed. 1851, 1471-72).

5. This temple is the image of the Church, which "imitating the mother of her Lord, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, keeps faith intact, hope firm and charity sincere" (*Lumen Gentium*, 64).

The figure of this Church is the woman whom the seer of Patmos contemplated and described in the text of the Apocalypse, which we have just heard in the second reading. In this woman crowned with twelve stars, popular piety throughout the ages has also seen Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Moreover, as St Ambrose recalled and as *Lumen Gentium* declares, Mary is herself a figure of the Church.

Yes, beloved brothers and sons, Mary—the Mother of God—is a model for the Church and a mother for the redeemed. Because of her prompt and unconditional adherence to the divine will which was revealed to her, she became the Mother of the Redeemer (cf. Lk. 1:32), with a deep and very special participation in salvation history. Owing to the merits of her Son, she is immaculate: in her conception, conceived without original sin, preserved from all sin, and full of grace.

Faced with the hunger for God which can be seen in many men today, but also with secularism which, at times imperceptible like dew, at other times violent like a cyclone, sweeps along so many persons, we are called to form a Church.

6. Sin takes God from the central place that is due to him in human history and in the personal history of each man. It was the first temptation "You will be like God" (cf. Gen 3:5). After original sin, man, leaving God out of the picture is subjected to tensions, torn between "love for the Father" and love that "is not of the Father but is of the world" (cf. 1 Jn. 2:15-16) and, worse still, man becomes a stranger to himself, opting for the "death of God" which inevitably brings with it also the death of man (cf. John Paul II, *Easter Message of 1980*).

Recognizing that she is "the handmaid of the Lord" (cf. Lk. 1:38) and pronouncing her "yes", welcoming "in her heart and in her womb" (cf. St. Augustine, *De Virginitate*, 6, PL 40, 399) the mystery of Christ the Redeemer, Mary was not a merely passive instrument in the hands of God, but cooperated in the salvation of men with spontaneous faith and complete obedience. Without removing or diminishing anything and without adding anything to the action of him who is the one mediator between God and men, Jesus Christ. Mary points out to us the ways of salvation, ways that all converge in Christ, her Son, and his work of redemption.

Mary brings us to Christ, as the Second Vatican Council accurately affirms "Mary's function as mother of men, in no way obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power (...), it does not hinder in any way the immediate union of the faithful with Christ but on the contrary fosters it" (*Lumen Gentium*, 60).

7. Mother of the Church, the Blessed Virgin is present in a special way in the life and action of the Church. Precisely for this reason the Church always looks to her who, remaining a virgin, through the action of the Holy Spirit begot the Word made flesh. What is the mission of the Church if not that of making Christ be born in the hearts of the faithful (cf. *ibid.*, 65), through the action of the same Holy Spirit, by means of evangelization. Thus, the "Star of Evangelization", as my predecessor Paul VI called her, points out and illuminates the ways of the proclamation of the Gospel. This proclamation of Christ the Redeemer, of his message of salvation, cannot be reduced to a mere human enterprise for well-being and temporal happiness. It certainly has an impact on collective and individual human history, but it is fundamentally a proclamation of liberation from sin for communion with God in Jesus Christ. But this communion with God does not exclude communion of men among themselves, because those who are converted to Christ, the author of salvation and the principle of unity, are called to unite in the Church, the visible sacrament of this salvific unity (cf. *ibid.*, 9).

Therefore all of us who form the present generation of disciples of Christ, with perfect fidelity to ancient tradition and with full respect and love for members of all Christian communities, wish to unite with Mary, driven by a deep necessity of faith, hope and charity (cf. John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 22). Disciples of Christ at this crucial moment of human history, with complete fidelity to the uninterrupted tradition and the constant sentiment of the Church, moved by a deep imperative of faith, hope and charity, we wish to unite with Mary. And we wish to do so through the expressions of Marian piety of the Church of all time.

8. Love and devotion to Mary, fundamental elements of Latin-American culture (John Paul II, *Homily at Zapopan, Mexico: AAS 71, 1979, 228*; Puebla Document, n. 283), are one of the characteristic features of the piety of the Brazilian people. I am certain that the Pastors of the Church will know how to respect this peculiar character, cultivate it and help it to find the best expression, in order to realize the saying: to arrive "at Jesus through Mary". For this purpose it would not be useless to keep in mind that devotion to the Mother of God has a soul, something essential, incarnate in multiple external forms. What is essential and stable and immutable in it, remains an intrinsic element of Christian worship and, if rightly understood and realized, constitutes in the Church, as my predecessor Paul VI stressed, an excellent witness to her rule of action (*lex orandi*) and an invitation to revive in consciences her rule of faith (*lex credendi*). The external forms are, by their nature, subject to the wear and tear of time and, as the late Paul VI declared, require constant renewal and updating. carried out, however, in full respect for Tradition (Paul VI, *Murialis Cultus*, 24).

9. Devotees of Our Lady and pilgrims to Aparecida present here, and you who follow us on radio and television, preserve jealously this tender and trusting love for the Virgin, which is characteristic of you. Never allow it to become lukewarm! Let it not be an abstract love, but an incarnate love. Be faithful to the exercises of Marian piety traditional in the Church: the Angelus prayer, the month of Mary, and especially the Rosary. Would that the fine custom—once so widespread, today still present in some Brazilian families—of the family recitation of the Rosary, would spring up again.

I know that, some time ago, as a result of a regrettable accident, the little image of Our Lady Aparecida was broken. I was told that among the myriad fragments there were found the two hands of the Virgin united in prayer. The fact is like a symbol: Mary's clasped hands in the midst of the ruins are an invitation to her sons to make room in their lives for prayer, for the Absolute Being of God, without which all the rest loses meaning, value and efficacy. The true son of Mary is a Christian who prays.

Devotion to Mary is a source of deep Christian life, it is a source of commitment to God and to brothers. Remain in the school of Mary, listen to her voice, follow her example. As we heard in the Gospel, she guides us to Jesus: "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5). As once at Cana in Galilee, she points out to her Son the difficulties of men, obtaining from him the graces desired. Let us pray with Mary and through Mary: She is always the "Mother of God and ours".

*Lady Aparecida, a son of yours
who belongs to you unreservedly— totus tuus!—
called by the mysterious Plan of Providence to be Vicar of your Son on earth,
wishes to address you at this moment.*

*He recalls with emotion,
because of the brown colour of this image of yours,
another image of yours
the Black Virgin of Jasna Gora!*

*Mother of God and ours,
protect the Church, the Pope, the bishops, the priests
and all the faithful people;
welcome under your protecting mantle
men and women religious, families, children, young people and their educators!*

*Health of the sick and Consoler of the afflicted,
comfort those who are suffering in body and in soul;
be the light of those who are seeking Christ, the Redeemer of man:
show all men that you are the Mother of our confidence.*

*Queen of Peace and Mirror of Justice,
obtain peace for the world,
ensure that Brazil may have lasting peace,
that men will always live together as brothers,
as sons of God!*

*Our Lady Aparecida,
bless this Shrine of yours and those who work in it
bless this people praying and singing here,
bless all your sons,
bless Brazil. Amen.*

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