



The Holy See

CELEBRATION OF THE AKATHISTOS HYMN IN THE BASILICA OF ST MARY MAJOR

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Friday, 8 December 2000

1. Mary "is an icon of the Church, the symbol and anticipation of humanity transfigured by grace, the model and the unfailing hope for all those who direct their steps towards the heavenly Jerusalem" (Apostolic Letter *Oriente lumen*, n. 6).

Dear brothers and sisters! Here we have gathered together in the basilica that the Roman people, shortly after the Council of Ephesus, dedicated with devout fervour to the Holy Virgin Mary. This evening the Byzantine liturgical tradition celebrates First Vespers of the Conception of St Anne, while the Latin liturgy praises the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God.

I express my heartfelt satisfaction with the participation of this group of brothers and sisters, who are with us this evening representing the Eastern Catholic Churches. I extend a cordial greeting to all the Byzantine-rite Bishops here in this basilica along with their faithful.

2. This evening we have all been filled with deep joy: the joy of praising Mary with the *Akathistos* Hymn, so dear to the Eastern tradition. It is a song centred on Christ, contemplated in the light of his Virgin Mother. It invites us 144 times to repeat to Mary the Archangel Gabriel's greeting: *Hail, Mary!*

We have retraced the stages of her life and offered praise for the marvels worked in her by the Almighty: from the virginal conception, the beginning and principle of the new creation, to her divine motherhood, to her sharing in her Son's mission, especially the moments of his passion, death and resurrection.

Mother of the risen Lord and Mother of the Church, Mary goes before us and leads us to genuine knowledge of God and

to the encounter with the Redeemer. She indicates the way to us and shows us her Son. In celebrating her with joy and gratitude, we honour the holiness of God, whose mercy has worked marvels in his humble handmaid. We greet her with the title *Full of Grace* and implore her intercession for all the children of the Church, which celebrates her glory with this *Akathistos* Hymn.

May she guide us this Christmas to contemplate the mystery of the God made man for our salvation!

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