



The Holy See

**LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II
TO H.E. MSGR RAYMUNDO DAMASCENO ASSIS
FOR THE CENTENARY OF THE CORONATION
OF NOSSA SENHORA APARECIDA (BRAZIL)**

To my Venerable Brother Raymundo Damasceno Assis, Archbishop of Aparecida, to my other Brothers in the Episcopate, and to the priests, men and women religious, and faithful of Brazil

1. On the occasion of the Centenary of the Coronation of *Nossa Senhora Aparecida*, I would like to join myself in spirit with the beloved Brazilian People in order to pay homage to their Queen and Patroness, after designating Cardinal Eugênio de Araújo Sales as my special Envoy to preside in my name at the rites and celebrations of this important event in your National Shrine, an outstanding testimony of the faith and Marian devotion in this Blessed Land.

2. In this place, almost three centuries ago, the Virgin arranged a special meeting with the Brazilian People. The origins of the Shrine are linked to the discovery by fishermen of a small, dark coloured image of Our Lady with a smiling face, which they saw come out of the water as they drew in their nets that were subsequently filled with an extraordinarily abundant catch. These three fishermen viewed the event as a sign of the Virgin's special protection. Since that September, long ago in 1717, devotion to her has grown. From the outset it has prompted people to call her the "Aparecida" [the One who Appeared].

However, far earlier than 1717 and before this extraordinary apparition the devotion to the Mother of Jesus, inherited from the Portuguese, was already deeply rooted in the hearts of Brazilian Christians; but over the years they have given it a colour, motivation and orientation all their own. Love and devotion to Mary is a characteristic trait of Brazilian popular piety.

3. The vast multitude of people who flock to the Shrine of their Queen and Patroness are obeying

a genuine spiritual impulse and carrying out a deeply Brazilian act by filling this city in the Paraíba Valley with prayers and above all with faith, a faith that is simple but without any doubt one that is all that faith should be: the search for God, sometimes distorted or imperfect, but touchingly sincere, deeply-rooted and capable of sacrifice, a search for God through Our Lady.

"And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (Rv 12: 1-2). St John's vision shows us that Mary, glorified in Heaven, a Queen with a crown of stars, continues to be the Mother of all men and women, sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, until the end of the centuries. In the light of divine glory, she contemplates her children, each and every one, in every moment of their lives.

4. In the course of the moving history of the dark image of their Queen and Mother for whom they have such deep love, men and women of all milieus and all cultures have proclaimed her "Sovereign". This is what led my Venerable Predecessor, Pius X, sensitive to the request of the devout sons and daughters of the Virgin "Aparecida", to crown her as Our Lady Queen of Brazil in 1904. Mary's patronage of a Nation is not something that happens without the involvement of those she protects. It implies their freely-given consent, renewed daily; it presupposes that they ask for this protection and show that they are worthy of it by embodying it in a committed life inspired by the assurance of a deep, firm faith.

Our Lady, it is certain, on the one hand is always beside God, where she pleads our cause with such immense power that she has been called "suppliant omnipotence", and on the other, "Mary is in fact one of our race, a true daughter of Eve... and truly our sister, who as a poor and humble woman fully shared our lot" (Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus*, n. 56). She had a country, belonged to a people whom she loved and for whom she suffered; we may imagine her feeling that real, human sentiment - patriotism - of whose deepest meaning she was aware. Having taken these values with her to Heaven she knows what to ask God for better than Esther did with King Ahasuerus: "If it please the king, let my people be given me at my request" (cf. Est 7: 3).

It is certain that the patronage of Mary with her title of "Aparecida" requires a commitment on the part of her subjects to take one another by the hand, in the effort to ensure that the Country becomes what Mary wants it to be, having adopted it as her own: a Land distinguished by hospitality, friendliness, the ability to start a dialogue and to "reconcile" rather than to "oppose".

5. At the religious level which more closely concerns you, venerable Bishops, it is important to strive to accept with an authentic pastoral spirit your people's Marian devotion that has existed since time immemorial: seek to understand its deepest roots, discover its values, grasp its meaning and welcome it, purifying it and guiding it. Whether this devotion will be a path for the people to their encounter in faith with God in Jesus largely depends on the attitude of the Pastors and pastoral workers.

Help the faithful, therefore, to live their Marian devotion as a clear and courageous testimony of love for Christ which expresses the personal and communal Catholic identity, in order to counter the dangers of secularization and consumerism and, at the same time, encourage the practice of Christian virtues in the family. This devotion will likewise help to build up bonds of communion with the Pastors of Christ's Church in order to counter the disintegration of the faith that is all too often facilitated by the proselytism of sects. History teaches that Mary is the true shield of the faith; in every crisis, the Church gathers round her. Only in this way can disciples of the Lord be salt and light in the world for others (cf. Mt 5: 13 and 14).

6. "Happy the people whose Lord is God, and whose Queen is the Mother of God!". This is what Pope Pius XII proclaimed and what this beloved Archdiocese of Aparecida will also be able to exclaim, if it can duly turn its gaze to the One who, through the power of the Holy Spirit, gave birth to the Incarnate Word. The fundamental mission of the Church consists precisely in bringing forth Christ in the hearts of the faithful (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 65) through the action of the very same Holy Spirit by means of evangelization.

Dear brothers and dear sisters, I entrust each and every one of the Brazilian Ecclesial Communities to the protection of *Nossa Senhora Aparecida*, so that they may remain faithful in the purity of faith, strengthened in hope and generous in charity. I entreat her to imbue greater zeal in them, making every Christian a real apostle. As a sign of my deep affection, I impart to you all the requested Apostolic Blessing.

Castel Gandolfo, 17 July 2004, the Memorial of Bl. Ignatius of Azevedo and Companions, Martyrs of Brazil

JOHN PAUL II