

Mother of God and Our Mother

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All the feasts of Our Lady are great events, because they are

opportunities that the Church gives us to show with deeds that we love Mary. But if I had to choose one among all her feasts, I would choose today's, the feast of the divine Motherhood of the Blessed Virgin.

Today's celebration brings us to consider some of the central mysteries of our faith. We meditate on the Incarnation of the Word, which is the work of the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity. Through the Incarnation of Our Lord in her immaculate womb, Mary, the Daughter of God the Father, is also the Spouse of God the Holy Spirit and the Mother of God the Son.

When the Blessed Virgin said Yes, freely, to the plans revealed to her by the Creator, the divine Word assumed a human nature: a rational soul and a body, which was formed in the most pure womb of Mary. The divine nature and the human were

united in a single Person: Jesus Christ, true God and, thenceforth, true Man; the only-begotten and eternal Son of the Father and, from that moment on, as Man, the true son of Mary. This is why Our Lady is the Mother of the Incarnate Word, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity who has united our human nature to himself for ever, without any confusion of the two natures. The greatest praise we can give to the Blessed Virgin is to address her loud and clear by the name that expresses her very highest dignity: Mother of God.

This has always been the true belief of Christians. Against those who denied it, the Council of Ephesus proclaimed that 'if anyone should deny that the Emmanuel is truly God, and that therefore the most Blessed Virgin is the Mother of God, since she gave birth according to the flesh to

the incarnate Word of God, let him be anathema'.

History has handed down to us eyewitness accounts of the joy felt by the Christians when they received such clear, precise definitions, which reaffirmed what everyone believed. In the words of St Cyril, 'The entire community of the city of Ephesus, from the first hours of the day until nightfall, waited anxiously for the resolution... When it became known that the author of the blasphemies had been deposed, with one voice we began to glorify God and to acclaim the Synod, for the enemy of the faith had fallen. On leaving the church we went by torchlight to our houses. It was night time and the whole city was joyful and illuminated.' I must say that, even at a distance of sixteen centuries, their outburst of piety impresses me deeply.

God grant that this same faith may burn in our hearts, and that a hymn of thanksgiving may rise from our lips: for the Blessed Trinity, in choosing Mary as the Mother of Christ, a Man like us, has brought each one of us under the shelter of her maternal cloak. She is the Mother of God and our Mother.

The divine Motherhood of Mary is the source of all the perfections and privileges with which she is endowed. Because of it, she was conceived immaculate and is full of grace; because of it, she is ever virgin, she was taken up body and soul to heaven and has been crowned Queen of all creation, above the angels and saints. Greater than she, none but God. 'The Blessed Virgin from the fact that she is the Mother of God has a certain infinite dignity which comes from the infinite good, which is God.' There is no danger of exaggerating. We can

never hope to fathom this inexpressible mystery; nor will we ever be able to give sufficient thanks to our Mother for bringing us into such intimacy with the Blessed Trinity.

We were sinners and enemies of God. Redemption has not only freed us from sin and reconciled us with Our Lord. It has also made us into children of God and has given us a Mother, the very Mother who gave birth to the Word when he took human nature. Could there ever be a greater, more generous, outpouring of love? God longed to redeem us and, in his infinite wisdom, could have chosen many different ways of carrying out his most holy Will. He chose one which dispels all possible doubts about our salvation and glorification. 'Just as the first Adam was not born of man and woman, but was formed of earth, so also the last Adam, who was to heal the

wound of the first, took a body formed in the womb of the Blessed Virgin, in order to be, in his flesh, equal to the flesh of those who sinned.'

Ego quasi vitis fructificavi...: 'like the vine I sprouted beautiful branches and my blossoms gave forth savoury and rich fruits'. We have read these words in today's Epistle. May our souls and the souls of all Christians be full of that sweet fragrance which is devotion to our Mother, and may it bring us to trust entirely in her who watches over us at all times.

'I am the Mother of fair love, and of fear, and of knowledge and of holy hope.' These are the lessons which Mary reminds us of today. The lesson of fair love, of living a clean life, of having a sensitive and passionate heart, so that we may learn to be faithful in our service to the Church. This is no ordinary love. It is Love

itself. There is no room here for betrayal, or calculation, or forgetfulness. It is a fair, a beautiful love, because its beginning and end is God, who is thrice Holy, who is all Beauty, all Goodness and all Greatness.

But there is also a reference to fear. For myself, the only fear I can imagine is that of turning away from Love. God Our Lord certainly does not want us to be inhibited, timid or lukewarm about our dedication to him. He wants us to be daring, courageous and refined. When the sacred text speaks of fear here I am reminded of a complaint we find elsewhere in Scripture, 'I searched for my heart's love, but found him not.'

This can happen, if one has not yet fully understood what it means to love God. Then our hearts can be swayed by things which do not lead

to Our Lord and so we lose sight of him. At other times it may be Our Lord who hides himself. He knows the reason why. In such cases, he will be encouraging us to seek him more earnestly and, when we find him, we shall be able to cry out with joy, 'I took hold of him and I will never let him go.'

The Gospel in today's Mass has called to our minds a moving scene in Jesus' life, when he stayed behind in Jerusalem teaching in the temple. Mary and Joseph 'had gone a whole day's journey before they made enquiry for him among their kinsfolk and acquaintances. When they could not find him, they made their way back to Jerusalem in search of him.' The Mother of God, who looked for her Son so anxiously when he was lost through no fault of her own, and experienced such great joy in finding him, will help us retrace our steps and put right whatever may be

necessary when, because of our carelessness or our sins, we have been unable to recognise Christ. With her help we will know the happiness of holding him in our arms once more, and telling him we will never lose him again.

Mary is also the Mother of knowledge, for it is with her that we learn the most important lesson of all, that nothing is worthwhile if we are not close to Our Lord. All the wonders of this earth, the fulfilment of our every ambition, all this is worthless unless the living flame of love burns within us, unless there is the light of holy hope giving us a foretaste of never-ending love in our true homeland in heaven.

'In me is to be found every grace of doctrine and of truth, every hope of life and of virtue.' How wise the Church is to put these words on our Mother's lips so that we Christians do

not forget them. She is our safety, the Love that never fails, the refuge ever open to us, the hand ever ready to caress and console.

One of the Fathers of the early Church said that we should try to keep in our minds and in our memories a clear summary of the life of the Mother of God. I expect you have often looked up points in handbooks on medicine, mathematics or other subjects, where they list, for quick reference, the immediate remedies or measures to be taken so as to avoid elementary mistakes in these subjects.

We should often meditate, in the calm and quiet of our prayer, on all we have heard about our Mother. The reward will be that the story of her life will become engraved on our souls; we will find ourselves going to her without hesitation, especially when we have no one else to turn to.

This may sound like self interest on our part. It is, of course; but then don't all mothers know that we children tend to be somewhat self interested, and that we often turn to them only as a last resort? They know this very well, but it doesn't really worry them. That comes with being a mother, and their disinterested love is able to discern, through our apparent selfishness, our filial affection and our trusting confidence.

I am not suggesting, either for myself or for you, that our devotion to Mary should be limited to times of urgent need. I feel, nevertheless, that we should not feel humiliated if this happens to us from time to time. Mothers don't keep a record of their children's tokens of affection; nor do they weigh them up or measure them with petty calculations. A tiny sign of affection is as sweet as honey to them, and they give themselves

generously in return, bestowing much more than they receive. If good earthly mothers react in this way, just imagine what we can expect from our Holy Mother Mary.

I like to go back in my imagination to the years Jesus spent close to his Mother, years which span almost the whole of his life on earth. I like to picture him as a little child, cared for by Mary who kisses him and plays with him. I like to see him growing up before the loving eyes of his Mother and of Joseph, his father on earth. What tenderness and care Mary and the Holy Patriarch must have shown towards Jesus, as they looked after him during his childhood, all the while, silently, learning so much from him. Their souls would become more and more like the soul of that Son, who was both Man and God. This is why his Mother, and after her St Joseph, understand better than anyone the

feelings of the Heart of Christ; and the two of them are thus the best way, I would say the only way, to reach the Saviour.

'May the soul of Mary', writes St Ambrose, 'be in each of you, so that you may praise Our Lord; may the spirit of Mary be in each one of you, so that you may rejoice in God.' This Father of the Church goes on to say something which at first sight seems bold, but which has a clear spiritual meaning for the life of the Christian. 'According to the flesh, there is only one Mother of Christ; according to the faith, Christ is the fruit of all of us.'

If we become identified with Mary and imitate her virtues, we will be able to bring Christ to life, through grace, in the souls of many who will in turn become identified with him through the action of the Holy Spirit. If we imitate Mary, we will share in

some way in her spiritual motherhood. And all this silently, like Our Lady; without being noticed, almost without words, through the true and genuine witness of our lives as Christians, and the generosity of ceaselessly repeating her fiat, which we renew as an intimate link between ourselves and God.

I want to tell you something that was said to me by a good Christian, who has a great love for Our Lady, though he is no expert in theology. I am going to tell it to you just as he said it, because in its simplicity it is the natural reaction of an untutored mind.

'I needed to talk about this to someone,' he said. 'I get terribly upset at some of the things that are going on nowadays. In the preparatory meetings for the present Council and during the Council itself proposals were made to include the

"theme of the Blessed Virgin". Just like that, "the theme"! Is that the proper way for children to speak of their mother? Is that the way our fathers professed their faith? Since when has love for the Blessed Virgin become a "theme" to be discussed as to whether or not it is appropriate?

'There is nothing more at odds with love than stinginess. I am not afraid of speaking out clearly,' he continued, 'in fact, if I didn't, I would feel I was insulting our Holy Mother. It has been discussed whether or not it was right to call Mary the Mother of the Church. It hurts me to have to spell this out, but surely, since she is the Mother of God and the Mother of all Christians, she must be the Mother of the Church, which gathers together all those who have been baptised and reborn in Christ, the Son of Mary.'

'I can't understand', he went on, 'where the pettiness comes from which hesitates at giving that title of praise to Our Lady. How different the faith of the Church is! The "theme" of the Blessed Virgin! Do children discuss the "theme" of love for their mother? They love her, and that's all there is to it. If they are good children, they will love her a lot. Only strangers approaching the matter with clinical coldness, as if it were a case to be studied, could speak about "themes" or "drafts".' That was how that simple and devout soul put it. A well-intentioned and pious outpouring, although not altogether fair.

Let us now return to our consideration of this mystery of the divine Motherhood of Mary, praying quietly and affirming from the bottom of our hearts, 'Virgin Mother of God, He whom the whole world

cannot contain, enclosed himself in your womb to take the flesh of man'.

See what the liturgy proposes for our prayer today: 'Blessed be the womb of the Virgin Mary, which bore the Son of the eternal Father.' An exclamation both old and new, human and divine. We are telling Our Lord, as they do in some places when they want to praise someone, 'Blessed be the mother who brought you into the world!'

'The charity of Mary brought about the birth of the faithful into the Church, who are members of that head of which she is effectively the mother according to the flesh.' Mary teaches us as a mother does, and, being a mother, she does so quietly. We need to have a sensitivity of soul, a touch of refinement, in order to understand what she is showing us, by what she does more than by what she promises.

She teaches us to have faith. 'Blessed art thou for thy believing,' were the words of greeting uttered by her cousin Elizabeth when Our Lady went up into the hill country to visit her. Mary's act of faith had been a wonderful one, 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to thy word.' When her Son was born she contemplated the greatness of God on earth: a choir of angels was present, and not only the shepherds, but also important men of this world came to adore the Child. Afterwards, however, the Holy Family had to flee to Egypt, to escape Herod's murderous intent. Then, silence; thirty long years of simple, ordinary life, just like that of any other home in a small village in Galilee.

In a few brief words, the Holy Gospel points the way for us to understand our Mother's example: 'Mary treasured up all these sayings, and

reflected on them in her heart.' Let us try to imitate her, talking to Our Lord, conversing like two people in love about everything that happens to us, even the most insignificant incidents. Nor should we forget that we have to weigh them, consider their value, and see them with the eyes of faith, in order to discover the Will of God.

If our faith is weak, we should turn to Mary. St John tells us that it was because of the miracle at the marriage feast at Cana, which Christ performed at his Mother's request, that 'his disciples learned to believe in him'. Our Mother is always interceding with her Son so that he may attend to our needs and show himself to us in such a way that we can cry out, 'You are the Son of God.'

Mary teaches us to hope. She proclaimed: 'all generations will call me blessed'. Humanly speaking, how

could she hope for such a thing? Who was she, in the eyes of the men and women of her time? The great heroines of the Old Testament — Judith, Esther, Deborah — won a measure of human glory even here on earth, for they were acclaimed and exalted by the people. Mary's throne, by contrast, like that of her Son, is the Cross. During the rest of her life, until she was taken body and soul into Heaven, what most impresses us about her is her quiet presence. St Luke, who knew her well, describes her as being close to the first disciples, in prayer. This was the way she lived to the end of her days on earth, she who was to be praised by all creatures for all eternity.

What a contrast between Our Lady's hope and our own impatience! So often we call upon God to reward us at once for any little good we have done. No sooner does the first

difficulty appear than we start to complain. Often we are incapable of sustaining our efforts, of keeping our hope alive. Why? Because we lack faith. 'Blessed art thou for thy believing; the message that was brought to thee from the Lord shall have fulfilment.'

She teaches us to have charity. Remember the scene of the presentation of Jesus in the temple. An old man, Simeon, 'said to his mother Mary, Behold, this child is destined to bring about the fall of many and the rise of many in Israel; and to be a sign which men will refuse to acknowledge; and so the thoughts of many hearts shall be made manifest; as for your own soul, it shall have a sword to pierce it.' So great is Mary's love for all mankind that she, too, fulfilled Christ's words when he affirmed: 'Greater love has no man than this, that he should lay down his life for his friends.'

It is with good reason that the Popes have called Mary Co-Redemptrix. 'So fully, in union with her suffering and dying Son, did she suffer and nearly die; so fully, for the sake of the salvation of men, did she abdicate her mother's rights over her Son, and immolate him, insofar as it was in her power, to satisfy the justice of God, that it can rightly be said that she redeemed mankind together with Christ.' This gives us a deeper understanding of that moment in the Passion of Our Lord, which we shall never tire of meditating: *Stabat autem iuxta crucem Iesu mater eius*, 'there, standing by the cross of Jesus, was his Mother'.

I expect you have noticed how some mothers, moved by a legitimate pride, are quick to appear alongside their children when success comes their way, when they receive some public acclaim. But there are other mothers who, even at times like

these, stay in the background, showing their love silently. This was Mary's way, and Jesus knew it.

But when it comes to the scandal of the Sacrifice of the Cross, Mary is there, hearing with sadness how 'the passers-by blasphemed against him, tossing their heads, Come now, they said, you would destroy the temple and build it up in three days, rescue yourself; come down from that cross, if you are the Son of God.' Our Lady is there listening to the words of her Son, united to him in his suffering, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' What could she do? She united herself fully with the redemptive love of her Son, and offered to the Father her immense sorrow, which pierced her pure Heart like a sharp edged sword.

Jesus is comforted anew by the quiet, loving presence of his Mother. Mary does not shout; she does not run

about frantically. Stabat: she is there, standing next to her Son. It is then that Jesus looks at her, and then turning his gaze to John he exclaims, 'Woman, this is thy son. Then he said to the disciple, This is thy Mother.' In the person of John, Christ is entrusting all men to his Mother, and especially his disciples: those who were to believe in him.

Felix culpa, the Church sings. Happy fault, that has brought us so great and wonderful a Redeemer. Happy fault, we could add, which has merited that we should receive Mary as our Mother. Now we are safe. Nothing should worry us now, because Our Lady, the crowned Queen of heaven and earth, is omnipotent in her supplication before our Father God. Jesus cannot deny anything to Mary, nor to us, who are children of his own Mother.

Children, especially when they are small, give very little thought to what they should do for their parents and are much more concerned about what they hope to get from them. As children, we tend to be very self-interested, although our mothers, as we have already mentioned, do not seem to mind really, because they have so much love in their hearts and they love with the best kind of affection: that which gives without expecting anything in return.

The same is true of Mary. But today, on the feast of her divine Motherhood, we should try to be more attentive than usual. If we find there have been times when we failed to be gentle and kind towards this good Mother of ours, we should feel sorry. I ask you now, as I ask myself, how are we honouring her?

Let us return once again to our everyday experience and see how we

behave with our earthly mothers. What does a mother want most of all from her children, from those who are flesh of her flesh and blood of her blood? Her greatest desire is to have them close to her. When the children grow up and it is no longer possible to have them beside her, she waits impatiently for news from them, and everything that happens to them, from the slightest illness to the most important events, concerns her deeply.

Look: in the eyes of our Mother Mary we never cease to be little, because she opens to us the way to the Kingdom of Heaven, which will only be given to those who become little children. We should never separate ourselves from Our Lady. How should we honour her? By keeping close to her, talking to her, showing her that we love her, pondering in our hearts the scenes of her life on

earth and telling her about our struggles, successes and failures.

When we do this we discover the meaning of the Marian prayers, which the Church has always used, as if we were saying them for the very first time. What are the Hail Mary and the Angelus if not loving praises of her divine Motherhood? And when we say the Holy Rosary, which is a wonderful devotion which I will never tire of recommending to Christians everywhere, our minds and hearts go over the mysteries of Mary's admirable life which are, at the same time, the fundamental mysteries of our faith.

The liturgical year is adorned with feasts in honour of Mary. The basis of this cult is the divine Motherhood of Our Lady, which is the fount of all the gifts of nature and grace lavished on her by the Blessed Trinity. Anyone who fears that the cult of veneration

given to the Blessed Virgin could in some way lessen the cult of adoration given to God shows scant knowledge of his Christian faith and very little filial love. Our Mother, the model of humility, sang, 'from this day forward all generations will count me blessed; because he who is mighty, he whose name is holy, has wrought for me his wonders. He has mercy upon those who fear him, from generation to generation.'

When the feasts of Our Lady come round let us not be sparing in our tokens of affection. Let us raise our hearts to her more often, asking her for what we need, thanking her for her constant, motherly care and entrusting to her the people we love. Though, naturally, if we really want to act as good children, every day is a good day for loving Mary, just as every day is a good day for those who really love one another.

Perhaps some of you might be thinking that the ordinary comings and goings of your working day are not going to help you much to stay close to someone as pure as Our Lady. But I would just ask you to reflect a little. What are we looking for all the time in things we do, even without thinking about it especially? If we are motivated by the love of God and we work with a right intention, then we are seeking whatever is good and clean, whatever brings peace to our conscience and happiness to our soul. Yes, you might say, but don't we still have our faults? Indeed, but it is precisely by acknowledging our faults that we are able to see, more clearly than ever, just what our goal has to be. What we are looking for is happiness; not a momentary happiness, but one that is deep and lasting and both human and supernatural.

There is one creature who achieved such happiness here on earth because she is God's masterpiece: our most holy Mother Mary. She lives now and is protecting us. She is there, body and soul, with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. She is the same person who was born in Palestine, who gave herself to God while still a child, who received the message from St Gabriel the Archangel, who gave birth to our Saviour and who stood beside him at the foot of the Cross.

In her, all ideals become a reality; but this should not make us think that her sublime greatness makes her inaccessible to us. She is the one who is full of grace and the sum of all perfections; and she is also our Mother. Her power before God is such that she can obtain anything we ask for, and, like any mother, she wants to answer our prayers. Like any mother also, she knows and

understands our weaknesses. She encourages us and makes excuses for us. She makes the way easy for us and, even when we think there is no possible solution for our worry, she always has one ready to offer us.

If we truly got to know Mary our Mother, how quickly the supernatural virtues would grow in us! Let us not be shy about repeating short prayers and aspirations to her throughout the day. There is no need to say them out loud, we can say them in our heart. Christian devotion has gathered together many of these loving words of praise in the Litany which accompanies the Holy Rosary. But each one of us is free to think up new ones, and address new praises to her, telling her with our heart — with a holy bashfulness that she understands and approves — what we would not dare to say out loud.

Finally, I would recommend that, if you haven't already done so, you find out for yourself by personal experience the meaning of Mary's maternal love. It is not enough just to know she is our Mother and to think and to talk about her as such. She is your Mother and you are her son. She loves you as if you were her only child in this world. Treat her accordingly: tell her about everything that happens to you, honour her and love her. No one will do it for you or as well as you, if you do not do it yourself.

I give you my word that, if you set out along this way, you will quickly discover all the love of Christ: and you will find yourself drawn into the ineffable life of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. You will draw strength from it to put the Will of God fully into practice, and you will be filled with desires of serving all men. You will be the

Christian you have sometimes dreamed of being: full of works of charity and justice, happy and strong, understanding towards others and demanding on yourself.

This, and no other, is the kind of faith we want. Let us have recourse to our Mother Mary; she will accompany us and help us make firm and constant progress.

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