

## MOTHER OF GOD, OUR MOTHER

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All the feast days of our Lady are wonderful, for they are opportunities that the Church offers us to demonstrate with deeds our love for holy Mary. But if I had to choose one of these feasts, I would prefer today's: that of the divine motherhood of the blessed Virgin.

This 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. Mary, Daughter of God the Father, through the incarnation of the Lord in her immaculate womb, is Spouse of God the Holy Spirit and Mother of God the Son.

When the blessed Virgin answered yes, freely, to those designs which the creator revealed to her, the divine Word assumed human nature: the rational soul and the body, 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, from then on, as man, the true son of Mary. For this reason our Lady is Mother of the incarnate Word, of the second Person of the blessed Trinity, who has taken up human nature for ever, without intermingling the two natures. We can address the blessed Virgin, aloud, as the best possible praise, with words that express her highest dignity: Mother of God.

### What Christians always believed

This has always been the sure doctrine. Against those who denied it, the Council of Ephesus proclaimed that 'if anyone should not confess 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 Word of God incarnate, let him be anathema'<sup>1</sup>.

History has handed down to us the joyful testimony the early Christians upon receiving these clear,

precise definitions, which reaffirmed what everyone believed: 'The entire community of the city of Ephesus, from the first hours of the morning until nightfall, was waiting anxiously for the resolution . . . When it became known that the author of the blasphemies had been deposed, with one voice we all began to glorify God and to acclaim the Synod, for the enemy of the faith had fallen. On leaving the church, we went, accompanied by torches, to our houses. It was nighttime: the whole city was joyful and illuminated'<sup>2</sup>. So writes St Cyril, and I cannot deny that even sixteen centuries later, their outburst of piety deeply impresses me.

May it please God our Lord that this same faith burn in our hearts, and that a hymn of thanksgiving rise from our lips. For the blessed Trinity, in choosing Mary as the Mother of Christ, a man like us, has put each of us under her maternal cloak. She is the Mother of God and our mother.

The divine motherhood of Mary is the root of all the perfections and privileges which adorn her. Because of her role she was conceived immaculate and is full of grace. She is ever virgin, she rose in body and soul to heaven, she has been crowned as queen

of the whole of creation, above the angels and the saints. Greater than she, no one but God. 'The blessed Virgin, by being Mother of God, possesses a dignity which is in some way infinite, from the infinite good which is God'<sup>3</sup>. There is no danger of exaggerating. We can never penetrate deeply enough into this ineffable mystery. We will never be able to give sufficient thanks to our mother for the intimacy with the blessed Trinity which she shares with us.

We were sinners and enemies of God. Redemption not only frees us from sin and reconciles us with our Lord. It converts us into sons, it gives us a mother, the same one who gave birth to the Word according to his humanity. Could there possibly be a greater outpouring, a greater excess of love? God desired to redeem us and he had available many ways of carrying out his most holy will, according to his infinite wisdom. He chose one, which dispels all possible doubts about our salvation and glorification. '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 one, 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'<sup>4</sup>.

#### Mother of the fair love

'Like the vine I sprouted beautiful branches and my blossoms gave forth savory and rich fruits' (Eccli 24:23).

We have read these words in the epistle. May that sweet fragrance which is devotion to our mother abound in our souls and in the souls of all Christians, and may it lead us to trust fully in her who always looks after us.

'I am the mother of the fair love, of fear, of knowledge, and of blessed hope' (Eccli 24:24). These are lessons which holy Mary calls to our mind today. A lesson of fair love, of a clean life, of a heart full of feeling and compassion, so that we may learn to be faithful in the service of the Church. This is not an ordinary love; it is the Love. Here there is neither betrayal, nor calculation, nor forgetfulness. It is a fair love, for it has as its beginning and end God who is thrice-blessed, who is all beauty and all goodness and all greatness.

But we speak also of fear. I cannot conceive of any other fear than that of separating oneself from this Love. For God our Lord does not want us to be inhibited, timorous or lukewarm in our dedication. He wants us to be daring, courageous and refined in our love. The fear of which the sacred text speaks brings to mind that other complaint of Scripture: 'I sought him whom my heart loves; I sought him but I did not find him' (Song 3:1).

This can happen if man does not fully understand what it means to love God. Then the heart allows itself to be dragged down by things which do not lead to our Lord. And, as a result, we lose sight of him. On other occasions perhaps it is our Lord who hides himself; only he knows why. He encourages us in those

moments to seek him with more ardor, and, when we find him we cry out with joy: 'I took hold of him and I will never let him go' (Song 3:4).

The gospel of the holy Mass has called to our minds the moving scene when Jesus remains in Jerusalem teaching in the temple. 'Mary and Joseph had gone a whole day's journey making 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' (Lk 2:44-45). The Mother of God, who anxiously sought her Son—lost without any fault on her part—experienced boundless joy on finding him. And it is she who will help us to retrace our steps, to rectify whatever may be necessary when, due to our carelessness or sins, we fail to discern Christ. With her help we will enjoy the happiness of embracing him once again, and we will tell him that we will not lose him any more.

Mary is mother of knowledge, since it is with her that we learn the most important lesson: that nothing is worthwhile if we are not close to our Lord; that all the wonders of this earth, all our fulfilled ambitions are worthless; if in our heart there does not burn the flame of living love, the light of blessed hope which is an anticipation of the never-ending love of our definitive fatherland.

'In me is to be found every grace of doctrine and of truth, every hope of life and of virtue' (Eccli 24:25). How wise the Church is to put these words on our mother's lips, so we Christians will not forget them! She is assurance, ever-faithful love, the refuge which is always open, the hand which always caresses and consoles.

A Father of the early Church writes that we should strive to preserve in our minds and in our memories an ordered account of the life of the Mother of God<sup>5</sup>. On many occasions you have probably leafed through handbooks of medicine, mathematics, or other subjects. They list, for quick reference, the immediate remedies, the solutions, the steps to take in order not to go astray in such matters.

Let us meditate often, in a serene and tranquil prayer, everything we have heard about our mother. The fruit of our prayer will be that the story of her life will be engraved in our souls and we will have recourse to her without hesitation, especially when we have no one else to turn to. Is this not selfish interest on our part? Of course it is. But do not all mothers know that we children are inclined to be selfish, and that we often turn to them only as a last resort? Of course they do, but they do not worry: that is why they are mothers. And this disinterested love sees — in our apparent selfishness — our filial affection and our trusting confidence.

I do not suggest — either for myself or for you — that our devotion to holy Mary be limited to these urgent appeals. I feel, nevertheless, that we should not feel humiliated if this happens to us from time to time. Mothers do not keep count of the occasions on which their children show their affection for them. They do not weigh or measure with petty criteria.

They savour a little show of affection like honey, and they pour themselves out, bestowing much more than they receive. If good mothers on earth react in this way, imagine what we can expect from our mother, holy Mary.

### Mother of the Church

With my imagination I like to 'revisit' the years in which Jesus lived with his Mother, years which span almost the whole of the life of our Lord on earth. To see him small, when Mary minds him and kisses him and plays with him. To see him grow up, before the loving eyes of his Mother and of Joseph, his father on earth. With what tenderness and refinement would Mary and the holy patriarch busy themselves with Jesus during his infancy and, in silence, they would continually learn a great deal from him. Their souls would come to resemble that of their Son, God and man. For this reason Mary – and after her, Joseph – understands like no else the sentiments of Christ's heart. And the constant company of Mary and Joseph is the best way – I would say the only way – to reach the Savior.

'May the soul of Mary,' writes St Ambrose, 'be in each of you in order to praise the Lord: may the spirit of Mary be in each one in order to rejoice in God.' And this Father of the Church adds some considerations which at first sight seem bold, but which have a clear spiritual meaning for a Christian's life. 'According to the flesh, there is only one Mother of Christ; according to faith, Christ is the fruit of all of us'<sup>6</sup>.

If we identify ourselves with Mary, if we imitate her virtues, we will help to bring about the birth of Christ, through grace, in the souls of many who will be identified with him through the action of the Holy Spirit. If we imitate Mary, in some way we will participate in her spiritual maternity. In silence, like our Lady; without being noticed, almost without words, with the integral and coherent testimony of our christian conduct, with the generosity of repeating ceaselessly her *fiat* ('be it done'), which is renewed as something intimate between ourselves and God.

Moved by a great love for our Lady but perhaps with a lack of theological understanding, a good Christian told me of a particular incident which I am going to pass on to you, because – in all its candor – it is natural to a person of simple soul.

'Take it,' he told me, 'as an outpouring of my heart. Understand my sadness in the face of certain things which are going on nowadays. During the preparation and development of the present Council, it was proposed to include 'the theme of the blessed Virgin'. Just that: 'the theme'. Do children speak like that? Is this the faith that the faithful have always professed? Since when is love for the blessed Virgin 'a theme,' about which it is permitted to carry on a dispute over whether or not it is appropriate?

'If there is anything which is at odds with love, it is stinginess. I am not afraid of speaking out very

clearly; if I didn't do it,' he continued, 'it would seem to me an offense against our holy mother. They have discussed whether or not it was appropriate to call Mary the Mother of the Church. It upsets me to go into more detail. But surely there can be no question that the Mother of God, and for that reason the mother of all Christians, is Mother of the Church, which is the gathering of all those who have been baptised and who have been reborn in Christ, the Son of Mary.

'I cannot understand,' he continued, 'the origin of the small-mindedness which hesitates to grant that title in praise of our Lady. How different is the faith of the Church! The "theme" of the blessed Virgin! Do children pose the 'theme' of love for their mother? They love her, and that is the end of it. They will love her a great deal, if they are good children. It is strangers, those who study a case with clinical coldness, who speak about the 'theme' or the 'draft'. Here ends the outpouring of heart, upright and pious, but unenlightened, of that simple and devout soul.

Let us continue to consider the mystery of the divine maternity of Mary, in a quiet prayer, affirming from the bottom of our heart: 'Blessed Virgin, Mother of God: he whom heaven cannot contain, has enclosed himself in your womb to take the flesh of man'<sup>7</sup>.

Notice what the liturgy has to say today: 'Blessed be the womb of the Virgin Mary, which bore the Son of the eternal Father'<sup>8</sup>. An exclamation both old and new, human and divine. This is to tell our Lord, as they do in some places when they want to praise someone: blessed be the mother who brought you into the world!

### Teacher of faith, hope and charity

'Mary cooperated with her charity so that the faithful – members of that Head of which she is effectively the Mother according to the flesh – might be born in the Church'<sup>9</sup>. As a mother, she teaches; and because she is a mother, her lessons are not pretentious. In our soul we must have refinement, a touch of delicacy, in order to understand what she shows us, with deeds more than with promises.

Teacher of faith. 'Blessed are you, because you have believed!' (Lk 1:45). Thus does her cousin Elizabeth greet her when our Lady goes into the hills to visit her. The act of faith of holy Mary had been wonderful: 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word' (Lk 1:38). In the birth of her Son she contemplates the greatness of God on earth: there is a choir of angels, and both shepherds and the powerful of the land come to adore the Child. But afterwards the holy family has to flee to Egypt, to escape the criminal intentions of Herod. Later, it is silence: thirty long years of simple everyday life, like that of any other home in a little village of Galilee.

The holy gospel in a few words makes it easy for us to understand the example of our mother: 'Mary



kept in mind all these things, pondering them in her heart' (Lk 2:19). Let us try to imitate her, talking over with our Lord, in a loving dialogue, everything that happens to us, even the most insignificant incidents. Let us not forget that we must weigh them, to consider their value, and see them with eyes of faith, in order to discover God's will.

If our faith is weak, let us have recourse to Mary. St John tells us that because of the miracle of the wedding feast of Cana, performed by Christ at the petition of his Mother, 'his disciples believed in him' (Jn 2:19). Our Mother always intercedes with her Son so that he attends to us and shows himself to us in such a way that we can proclaim: You are the Son of God.

Teacher of hope. Mary proclaims that 'all generations will call me blessed' (Lk 1:48). Humanly speaking, on what was this hope based? Who was she for the men and women of her time? The great heroines of the Old Testament – Judith, Esther, Deborah – attained even on earth a human glory, being acclaimed and exalted by the people. The throne of Mary, like that of her Son, is the cross. And during the rest of her life, until she was carried in body and soul up to heaven, what most impresses us is her quiet presence. St Luke, who knows her well, notes that she is close to the first disciples, in prayer. And in this way she finishes her days on earth, she who was to be praised by all creatures for all eternity.

How the hope of our Lady contrasts with our impatience! So often we demand that God reward us immediately for the little good we have done. No sooner does the first difficulty appear than we complain. Many times we are incapable of sustaining the effort, of maintaining hope. Because we lack faith: 'Blessed are you, because you have believed; because the things promised you by the Lord shall be accomplished' (Lk 1:45).

Teacher of charity. Remember that scene of the presentation of Jesus in the temple? That old man, Simeon, assured Mary, his Mother: 'Behold, this child is destined for the fall and for the rise of many in Israel, and for a sign that shall be contradicted. And you own soul a sword shall pierce, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed' (Lk 2:34-35). The immense love of Mary for humanity brings about the fulfillment in her as well of the affirmation of Christ: 'No greater love does a man have than that he lay down his life for his friends' (Jn 15:13).

It is with good reason that the Roman pontiffs have called Mary co-redemptrix: 'She so suffered and almost died, together with her Son, for the salvation of men, and immolated him, in so far as it was in her power, in order to satisfy the justice of God, that it can rightly be said that she redeemed mankind together with Christ'<sup>10</sup>. Thus we understand better that moment of the passion of our Lord that we will never tire of meditating: *Stabat autem iuxta crucem Iesu mater eius*: 'there was standing by the cross of Jesus his mother' (Jn 19:25).

You have no doubt observed how some mothers,

moved by a legitimate pride, make haste to put themselves at the side of their children when they triumph, when they receive some public acclaim. Others, on the contrary, even in those moments, remain in the background, loving in silence. Mary was like that, and Jesus knew it.

But at the scandal of the sacrifice of the cross, holy Mary was present, hearing with sadness 'the passersby, and they were jeering at him, shaking their heads and saying: "You who destroy the temple, and in three days build it up again, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!"' (Mt 27:39-40). Our Lady listened to the words of her Son, sharing the suffering: 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' (Mt 27:46). What could she do? She unites herself with the redemptive Love of her Son, and offers to the Father the immense sorrow which transfixed her pure heart like a sharp sword.

Once again Jesus feels comforted, with that discreet and loving presence of his Mother. Mary does not shout, she does not run back and forth. *Stabat*: she is standing, next to her Son. It is then that Jesus looks at her, directing his gaze afterward to John. And he exclaims: 'Mother, behold your son.' Afterwards he says to the disciple: 'Behold your mother' (Jn 19:26-27). In John, Christ entrusts to his Mother all men, and especially his disciples – those who were to believe in him.

*Felix culpa* the Church sings. Happy fault, for it has brought about our having so great a Redeemer. Happy fault, we can add as well, which has merited that we should receive holy Mary as a mother. Now we are assured; now nothing should worry us, because our Lady, crowned queen of heaven and earth, is almighty in her supplications to God in our behalf. Jesus cannot deny anything to Mary, nor to us, who are children of his very same Mother.

### Our Mother

Children, especially when they are still young, tend to ask themselves what their parents are going to do for them, forgetting about their own obligations of filial piety. We children are ordinarily very interested in ourselves, although this behaviour – as we pointed out earlier – does not seem to matter much to mothers, since they have sufficient love in their hearts and they love with the best affection: that which gives without expecting anything in return.

The same thing happens with holy Mary. But today, on the feast of her motherhood, we should strive to examine ourselves more deeply. If we find occasions on which we have shown a lack of love for our mother, we should be sorry. I ask you – and I ask myself – how can we honour her?

Let us return once again to our everyday experience, to our relationship with our earthly mothers. Above all, what do they desire from their children, who are flesh of their flesh and blood of their blood? Their greatest joy is to have them close. When children grow up and it is no longer possible for them to be

by their side, mothers wait impatiently for news of them, and they are moved by everything which happens to them, from a slight illness to the most important events.

Look: for our mother holy Mary, we never cease to be little, because she opens to us the way to the kingdom of heaven, which knowledge is given to those who become little children (cf Mt 19:14). We should never leave our Lady. How will we honour her? By not forgetting her, by speaking with her, showing her our affection, pondering in our hearts the scenes of her life on earth, telling her of our struggles, our successes and our failures.

In this way we discover, as if we were reciting them for the first time, the meaning of the prayers which the Church has always directed to Mary. What are the 'Hail Mary' and the 'Angelus' but loving praises to her divine maternity? And in the holy Rosary – the marvellous devotion which I will never tire of recommending to all Christians – there pass through our minds and our hearts the mysteries of Mary's life, which are the very fundamental truths of our faith.

The liturgical year is adorned with feasts in honour of holy Mary. The root of this worship is the divine maternity of our Lady, which is the origin of the fullness of the gifts of nature and grace which the most blessed Trinity has showered on her. Anyone who feared that devotion to the blessed Virgin could diminish the adoration owed to God would reveal a very scant christian upbringing and very little love of a son. Our mother, who is the model of humility, said: 'Henceforth all generations shall call me blessed; because he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name; and his mercy is from generation to generation on those who fear him' (Lk 1:48-50).

On the feasts of our Lady let us not be sparing in our show of affection. Let us raise our hearts to her more often, asking her for what we need, thanking her for her maternal and constant care, entrusting to her the persons we love. But if we want to behave as children, every day will be a good day for showing love to Mary, just as every day is fitting for those who truly love one another.

Perhaps at this point some of you could think that your ordinary life, the habitual comings and goings of your life, do not much lend themselves to fixing your heart on a creature as pure as our Lady. I would invite you, if that is the case, to reflect a little. What do we seek all the time, even without special attention, in everything we do? When we are moved by the love of God, and we work with rectitude of intention, we seek what is good, what is clean, what brings peace to our conscience and happiness to our soul. But do we not still have faults? Yes, but precisely to acknowledge our faults is to discover more clearly that our goal is this: a happiness that is not momentary but rather deep, serene, human and supernatural.

There is one creature who achieved on this earth that happiness, because she is the greatest work of

God: our most blessed mother Mary. She lives and she protects us; she is there together with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, in body and soul. She is the same one who was born in Palestine, who gave birth to our Saviour, who was next to him at the foot of the cross.

In her all ideals become a reality; but we should not conclude that her sublimity and greatness make her inaccessible and distant. She is full of grace, the sum of all perfections: *and* she is our mother. With her power before God, she will obtain for us whatever we ask of her. Like a mother, she wants to grant it to us. And also like a mother, she knows and understands our weaknesses. She encourages, excuses, makes our way easier, has the remedy always prepared, even when it may seem that there is no way out.

How the supernatural virtues would grow in us if we really got to know Mary, who is our mother! Let us not be afraid to repeat to her during the day – with our heart, without need for words – little prayers, aspirations. Christian devotion has gathered together many of these loving praises in the litany which accompanies the holy Rosary. But each person is free to add to them, addressing to her new praises, telling her what – out of holy shyness, which she understands and approves of – we would not dare to say aloud.

In conclusion, I advise you to experience, if you have not already done so, the maternal love of Mary. It is not enough to know that she is mother, to consider her as such, to speak thus about her. She is your mother and you are her child. She loves you as if you were her only child in this world. Deal with her accordingly. Tell her everything that happens to you – honour her, love her. No one will do it for you, or as well as you, if you do not do it.

If you take up this way, I assure you that you will quickly discover all the love of Christ. And you will find yourself immersed in the ineffable life of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. You will take on strength in order to live fully the will of God. You will be filled with desires to serve all men. You will be the Christian at times you dream of being: full of works of charity and justice, happy and strong, understanding with others and demanding with yourself.

This, and no other, is the temper of our faith. Let us have recourse to holy Mary, for she will accompany us with a step both firm and constant.