

In The School of Mary

(Papal documents condensed by Deacon William Wagner)

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Pope John Paul II

Redemptoris Mater, The Mother of the Redeemer, 1999

Introduction:

The Holy Father's introductory remarks point to Mary as having an *active* as well as *exemplary* presence within the Church. The "fullness of time" presages the pivotal event in all of creation, the moment when the divine penetrates our temporality and the mystery which is Christ becomes "salvation time."

In Mary of Nazareth the Church inauspiciously begins its journey while at the same in the Incarnation because of the Virgin's *fiat* she encounters Christ and Mary indissolubly joined. Pope John Paul points out that on this journey the Church proceeds along a path already taken by the Blessed Virgin *advancing*, as the Second Vatican Council had already proclaimed, *on her pilgrimage of faith in union with her Son unto the Cross*. This very council had venerated this woman, Mother of Christ, as the Church's own beloved Mother and model in faith, hope and charity. Subsequent to Vatican II Pope Paul VI would be no less effusive in his praise and veneration of Mary.

The approach of the year 2000 occasioned Pope John Paul II to consider the subject of Mary, entertaining the thought of a special year in celebration of her birth. Our expectant approach to the end of the second Millennium after Christ in some respects occasions for him a comparison with Mary's own expectant appearance on the horizon of salvation history before Christ. As discreet as her first appearance in the midst of the world might have been, it was not nearly so in the plan of Almighty God. In the words of the Pope we, Christians, knowing the providential plan of the Most Holy Trinity, therefore felt a need as the year 2000 approached, "to emphasize the unique presence of the Mother of Christ in history."

If, as Vatican II said, that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light, then this applies even more aptly to that "exceptional daughter of the human race," Mary. In that light the Council of Ephesus (AD 431) confirmed the faith of the Church declaring Mary to be *Theotokos*, God-bearer, Mother of God. Pope John Paul II reiterates, "... the divine motherhood of Mary was for the Council of Ephesus and is for the Church like a seal upon the dogma of the Incarnation." Yet human nature is not cancelled out in the unity of the person of the Word.

The Holy Father points to how the Second Vatican Council saw Mary, as the Mother of Christ, united in a particular way with the Church. "The reality of the Incarnation," he says, "finds a sort of extension in the mystery of the Church, the Body of Christ. One cannot think of the reality of the Incarnation without referring to Mary, the Mother of the Incarnate Word." This twofold bond of Mother of Christ and of the

Church finds yet a further tie to the people of God on their "*pilgrimage of faith*." To this people Mary is also virginal mother as she brings forth children conceived of the Holy Spirit and destined for eternal life.

In conclusion the Pope reminds us that the Mother of God is already the *eschatological fulfillment* of the Church: in this most holy Virgin the Church has already reached in eternity that perfection whereby she exists without spot or wrinkle. It is in this Mother, the "Star of the Sea," who has already crossed that eternal threshold that we see the model of all virtues. More importantly still, Mary continues to cooperate with a maternal love in the birth and development of all of us, the brothers and sisters of her first-born Son.

Part I-MARY IN THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST

Chapter 1- Full of Grace:

God's plan of creation/salvation is an eternal plan for all. Chosen from eternity we were also destined to be sons and daughters in the Son. According to St. Paul this eternal plan is linked to Christ, reserving a special place for the "*woman*" who is already prophetically foreshadowed in Genesis Cf. *Gen 3:15*. She is also the "*virgin who is to conceive and bear a son whose name will be called Emmanuel*". Cf. *Isa 7:14*.

At this point the Holy Father begins to highlight Mary's role in the Mystery of Christ by specifically mentioning the Annunciation as the definitive point. It happens in "the concrete circumstances of the history of Israel." The angel greets the virgin with the words, "Hail full of grace (*kecharitoméne*). She is indeed blessed in a special way and to an exceptional degree for she is equally greeted by Elizabeth as "blessed among women."

The heavenly messenger has addressed Mary not with Miryam, her given name, but with "*full of grace*" as if it were her proper name. Why? What can this mean?

In explanation, the Holy Father goes on to tell us that "grace" in the New Testament has a special meaning and is grounded in the Holy Trinity. In God who is love. The fruit of this God-love is "*the election*" of which the Letter of Ephesians speaks. At the same time it expresses the eternal desire of God to save us through a participation in the divine life in Christ Cf. *2 Pt 1:4*. This *gift of election* is like a *seed of holiness* given to those who are chosen. We are blessed in Christ who is eternally the beloved Son of the Father.

For Mary then we understand this to be a special blessing. Eternally, she has been chosen by the Father to be the Mother of the Son. In an exceptional way she is united to Christ and eternally loved in this "*beloved Son*." Yet at the same time as Vatican II reminds us, "Mary stands out among the poor and humble of the Lord, who confidently await and receive salvation from him."

"Full of Grace" refers first of all to the *election* of Mary as Mother of God. This choice (*election*) is fundamental in God's design of salvation for us all and in our special vocation and dignity as sons and

daughters in the Son. The Holy Father cannot seem to emphasize sufficiently for us the singularity of Mary's *election* and her unique position in the mystery of Christ.

The Pope says that the Annunciation is the revelation of the mystery of the Incarnation, a high point of God's self-gift to us, at the beginning of its fulfillment on earth. Hence, Mary is "full of grace" because of many things: the hypostatic union (the union of the human and the divine) takes place within her; she is also Mother of the Son of God, favorite daughter of the Father, temple of the Holy Spirit. As a result she far surpasses all the rest of us in heaven and on earth.

St. Paul in Ephesians refers to the "glory of grace" (cf. Eph 1:6) which we have all received. This "glory" is manifested in Mary in a special way because she has been redeemed in a "more sublime manner." John Paul recalls how, because of this richness of grace, Mary was preserved free from original sin. In the order of grace Mary receives life from him to whom she, in the order of nature, will give earthly life as a mother. The Pope reminds us that the liturgy itself does not hesitate to call her "mother of her Creator."

The encyclical concludes this section by saying, "...the mystery of the Incarnation constitutes the superabundant fulfillment of the promise made by God to man after original sin." The *enmity* referred to in Genesis (cf. Gen 3:15) is played out in the Apocalypse (cf. Rev 12.1) where Mary appears as the *woman* clothed with sun.

Mary, specially endowed with that "glory of grace," is at the very center of this *enmity*. She is there as the inviolable sign of God's *election* of us, an election more powerful than all the *enmity* afflicting us throughout history. In this history Mary remains a sign of sure hope.

Chapter 2- Blessed is She Who Believed

Because the conception of John the Baptist by her cousin, Elizabeth, in her old age had been mentioned by an angel on the occasion of the Annunciation, Mary visits her at *Ain Karim*, a village near Jerusalem. Elizabeth bears witness to the miraculous within Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" Even more significant are the words of Elizabeth as she bears witness to Mary as "the Mother of my Lord," the Messiah, standing before her. The son whom Elizabeth is carrying in her womb also bears witness as he "leaped for joy." (Cf 1: 36-45)

Most important of all, the Holy Father tells us, is that Mary's blessedness is essentially linked to her belief that what the angel told her would be fulfilled within her. Her faith is critical and her place in the mystery of Christ is crucial. The *fullness of grace* refers to the gift of God himself, Jesus.

At the Annunciation Mary's availability to God is complete and total. Pope John Paul says her faith response included "perfect cooperation with *the grace of God that precedes and assists* and perfect openness to *the action of the Holy Spirit who constantly brings faith to completion*." Mary's acceptance of God's invitation meant that the Incarnation (the Word made flesh) could be accomplished in her. Lest we forget what has just happened, the Pope repeats the words of Vatican II: "The Father of mercies willed that the consent of the predestined Mother precede the Incarnation."

Mary's *fiat* (let it be done to me...) was necessary. Her *fiat* was uttered in faith. She entrusted herself "without reserve" and devoted herself totally to being "the handmaid of the Lord." The Fathers of the Church taught the important truth long ago that Mary had "conceived this Son in her mind before she conceived him in her womb: precisely in faith!" The accomplished fact of the Incarnation is the mystery recognized by Elizabeth: "The mother of my Lord comes to me!"

In addition to what we have already said, Mary's faith can be compared to that of Abraham's. The Holy Father says that whereas Abraham's faith constitutes the beginning of the Old Covenant, Mary's faith at the Annunciation inaugurates the New Covenant. Each in a very similar way "*in hope believed against hope.*" Although applicable to Abraham, Pope John Paul's words on faith are descriptive particularly of Mary, "To believe means to abandon oneself to the truth of the word of the living God, knowing and humbly recognizing how unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways." (cf. Rom 11:33)

To all which the angel declared concerning "the child to be born," Mary gives her assent at the Annunciation. All of Israel had awaited this moment. Mary now gives herself to that meaning which God has affixed to the various statements she hears concerning her future son: *Jesus (savior); given the throne of David, his father; to rule over the house of Jacob; Son of the Most High; of his kingdom there will be no end.* It is to this, the Pope says, that Mary abandons herself in "obedience of faith."

At the beginning of this "journey" of faith there appears Simeon in the temple at Jerusalem. The Holy Father points out how Simeon's words confirm the truth of the Annunciation. Taking Jesus in his arms he affirms his title of *Savior*. Simeon now addresses the Lord God, "For my eyes have seen your *salvation.*"

Simeon goes on to tell Mary that her son's mission would be accomplished in misunderstanding and sorrow; that he would be "*a sign that would be spoken against.*" Simeon further declares to Mary that her own motherhood lived out at the side of Christ, in that "*obedience of faith,*" would be one of mystery and sorrow. As he foretells, "A sword will pierce through your own soul also." (cf. Lk 2:34-35)

The Holy Father brings to bear a consideration of Mary's faith during a period that we might describe in the spiritual life as a time of intense dryness. It is the period of the "hidden life." This mother has given the name, "Jesus," to her son as so many other Jewish mothers before her. Yet she knows "the truth" about her son that the angel for a reason gave her this name. Mary knows that she has conceived this "Jesus" without a human husband, having been overshadowed by the Holy Spirit just as the cloud in the time of Moses and the Patriarchs concealed the presence of God. She knows her son to be "the Holy One" of God.

In constant contact with this ineffable mystery of God, she nonetheless does not know him as the Father knows him, "as one who begets him in the eternal *today,*" according to the words of the Pope. "She, his Mother," says John Paul, "is in contact with the truth about her Son only in faith and through faith." She, who was blessed because of her faith and bears within herself the radical "newness" of faith, the very beginning of the New Covenant, must continue in silence to believe day after day.

With the mystery of the divine sonship revealed to her in a most complete way, she nevertheless must proceed along her pilgrimage of faith living the whole of it through faith. She advances through his public life in like manner until she finds herself beneath the cross completely abandoned to God without reserve, perfectly united with Christ in his self-emptying. Here on Golgotha Jesus reveals himself as truly the “sign of contradiction” and Simeon’s predicted sword now pierces her soul as well.

Mary stands at the center of the mystery of Redemption, the “new Eve” at the side of the “new Adam.” In the words of St. Irenaeus, “The knot of Eve’s disobedience was untied by Mary’s obedience.” Mary, in the minds of the Fathers of the Church, thereby became the “mother of the living.” The Holy Father closes this chapter with his final assessment that through the mystery of the Son, the mystery of the Mother also becomes clear.

Chapter 3, Behold Your Mother

The Holy Father begins this chapter with an examination of the statement of the woman in the crowd, “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked” (Lk 11:27). Unexpectedly Mary’s hiddenness is interrupted.

Nevertheless, thanks to this statement we are confirmed in our knowledge that Jesus, the Son of the Most high, is a true *son of man*. As John Paul says, “He is ‘flesh’ like every other man; he is ‘the Word (who) became flesh’ (cf. Jn 1:14). He is of the flesh and blood of Mary!”

A statement comparable to this woman’s is found in all the other Synoptics as well. When Jesus hears that his mother and brothers are looking for him he responds, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” (cf. Lk 8:20-21) In both instances the Pope notes how Jesus’ response is similar. He is not seeking to dismiss the significant role of his mother in his life. Indeed, Jesus is attempting to shift the emphasis away from the temporal to the “other worldly.”

That which is important is the kingdom that he is proclaiming, the being “about his Father’s business” (Lk 2:49) on which Mary and Joseph had pondered on their return to Nazareth so many years before. Pope John Paul points out how “brotherhood” and “motherhood” within the context of the “fatherhood” of God takes on a new meaning. Jesus is teaching this new meaning when responds to the audiences around him. However, it refers to Mary in a special way.

This “handmaid of the Lord” is truly the first disciple for not only did she, in fact, conceive Jesus in her womb, but especially because already at the Annunciation “she accepted the word of God ...believe it ...was obedient to God, and kept the word pondering it in her heart.” As the Holy Father tells us, she discovered and accepted this new dimension of “motherhood” that constituted her “part” bedside her Son before anyone else. Thus she became his “first disciple.”

Oh the other woman, the woman in the crowd, John Paul says that unknowingly she also became a first, the first in a long line who would fulfill the Blessed Mother’s statement in the Magnificat that, “all generations will call me blessed” (Lk 1:48).

As the Holy Father continues his considerations he notes how Jesus' "hour," provoked by the "woman" who is his mother, arrives suddenly and unexpectedly during the wedding at Cana. The "hour" turns on his mother's concerned for the needs of others. In the seemingly bluntness of his response to her entreaty, he reminds Mary that their lives henceforth would never be the same.

There exists a mysterious relationship between this mother and her son. Again the Pope makes us aware of that new dimension in faith. He says that the Cana event actually manifests a new kind of motherhood according to the spirit and not just according to the flesh; namely, "Mary's solicitude for human beings." It is an extension of her maternal role, which reaches far beyond this symbolic instance of concern.

Mary's motherly role is exercised "within Christ's messianic mission and power." Her role of *mediatrix* is not exercised, the Holy Father tells us, "as an outsider but in her position as mother." Mary understands that she can point out to her Son the needs of mankind. By maternal right she places herself in the middle. The Mother *intercedes* on behalf of us all, thereby manifesting at the same time the salvific power of her Son.

A further critical notion derives from Mary's statement to the servants: "Do whatever he tells you." The Mother of Christ speaks on behalf of the Son's will in our regard. John Paul recalls for us the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. Its teaching elaborates as well on how Mary's maternal role does not diminish the unique efficacy of Christ's mediation but, on the contrary, shows it forth. Cana, in a singular way, becomes a "first announcement of Mary's mediation."

The Pope uses some turns of phrases, not necessarily all uniquely his, which draw for us a picture of Mary as Mother. She is *mother in the order of grace: by the will of divine providence; having been derived from her divine motherhood; because of it an associate of unique nobility; to last without interruption until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect.* All this occurs because she was *God's humble and obedient handmaid.*

In John's Gospel, as Cana represented Mary's initiation into her maternal role of mediation, the crowning moment must be the sacrifice of the Cross on Calvary, the culmination of Christ's paschal mystery. Mary and John are found together standing beneath this horrific instrument of death. Jesus establishes a new relationship between Mother and Son. Mary, who stands at the center of Christ's all embracing mystery, is given as mother to all mankind. The Beloved Disciple stands with her but he does not stand alone. John stands for us. The Holy Father takes note of the fact that the Second Vatican Council "did not hesitate to call Mary *'the Mother of Christ and the mother of mankind.'*" Clearly she is the mother of the members of Christ. This new motherhood, generated by faith, came as a result of her sharing in the redemptive love of her Son.

At Calvary, more so than anywhere else, we are at the epicenter of the fulfillment of the prediction spoken in Genesis that "the seed of the woman ... will crush the head of the serpent." Pope John Paul points out how significant it is that Jesus at Cana would call his mother, "woman." But now looking down from the cross this very significant word falls again from his lips, "Woman, behold your son." Our Holy

Father's own words, "How can one doubt that especially, now on Golgotha, this expression goes to the very heart of the mystery of Mary, and indicates the unique place, which she occupies in the whole economy of salvation."

The motherhood of Mary finds a new continuation in and through the Church symbolized by John. From Genesis through the Apocalypse, the "woman," full of grace, because of her divine Motherhood according to the "eternal plan of Providence" is poured out upon the Church.

Finally, the Pope sees a unique correspondence between the moment of the Incarnation of the Word and the birth of the Church at Pentecost. A person links the two occasions, Mary: *Mary at Nazareth* and *Mary in the Upper Room in Jerusalem*. Again Pope John Paul II: "In both cases her discreet yet essential presence indicates the path of 'birth from the Holy Spirit.'" Mary's maternal presence is there; *in the life of Christ* and *in the life of the Church*. "Woman, behold your son!" "Son, behold your Mother!"

Part II-THE MOTHER OF GOD AT THE CENTER OF THE PILGRIM CHURCH

Chapter 1, The Church, the People of God present in all the Nations of the Earth

The Second Vatican counsel establishes an analogy between the Church, and Israel journeying through the desert. For the Church there is an external character in which she moves through time and space. There is, as well, an interior characteristic in which it is a question of a journey through faith, a pilgrimage in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Father tells us that it is in this ecclesial journey through space and time that Mary is present. In fact as we have already seen, he tells us that this "*woman*" figures profoundly in the history of our salvation.

From the moment of the *descent of the Holy Spirit*, "there also begins that journey of faith, the Church's pilgrimage through the history of individuals and peoples. For Mary, in a sense, this pilgrimage is longer. The Holy Spirit had already come down upon her at the Annunciation. Mary has gone before the rest of those gathered in that upper room. She leads the way for them. The Pope says, "In the Upper Room, Mary's journey meets the Church's journey of faith."

Before the Son's return to the Father, he had commissioned the eleven to spread the good news to all the world (Mt 28:19). Mary did not directly receive this apostolic mission. She was not among those who had received it. She was, however, with them in the Upper Room as they prepared themselves for the mission of the Spirit of Truth.

This early Church knew Jesus, the Savior, and knew the Mother of the Savior and her relationship to him. She was in the words of the Holy Father, "a unique witness to the mystery of Jesus." He further tells us that from the very first moment, the Church "looked at" Mary through Jesus, just as the Church "looked at" Jesus through Mary. Although for the most part in silence, Mary had followed Jesus step by step even to the Cross.

It was in that Upper Room in Jerusalem that those many promises made by the Angel Gabriel at the Annunciation finally began to find confirmation; those words that "he will be great... and he will reign over

the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end.” What had looked so dark at Calvary, after the Resurrection now had begun to be transformed into reality.

At times one finds it difficult to summarize the Holy Father. His writings are so filled with meaning that one dislikes short changing the actual text. Let me quote directly from John Paul:

“Mary belongs indissolubly to the mystery of Christ, and she belongs also to the mystery of the Church from the beginning, from the day of the Church’s birth. ...Mary’s faith marks the beginning of the new and eternal Covenant of God with man in Jesus Christ. This heroic faith of hers “precedes” the apostolic witness of the Church, and ever remains in the Church’s heart, hidden like a special heritage of God’s revelation. All those who from generation to generation accept the apostolic witness of the Church share in that mysterious inheritance, and in a sense share in Mary’s faith.

Elizabeth’s words ‘Blessed is she who believed’ continue to accompany the Virgin ... from age to age, wherever knowledge of Christ’s salvific mystery spreads. ...Thus is fulfilled the prophecy of the *Magnificat*: ‘All generations will call me blessed.’”

It is a noteworthy characteristic of Catholic people of faith that when from generation to generation they accept the mystery of Christ, the Incarnate Word and Redeemer, they also turn to veneration and recourse to Mary as Mother of that Redeemer. More, they also seek in her faith support for their own. To love this “*woman*” of the ages is in truth a special grace and privilege.

The Second Vatican Council says that Mary figured profoundly in the history of salvation... “Hence when she is being preached and venerated,” it says, “she summons the faithful to her Son and his sacrifice and to love for the Father.” Mary’s faith in some way becomes our own. It is faith passed on through mind and heart, regained continually through prayer.

In the shadow of the third Millennium, Vatican II again calls our attention to the fact that we, though scattered throughout the world, are a single people in communion with each other in the Holy Spirit. Modern apostles, intermingled in the nations of the world, still find themselves devoted to prayer together with Mary, the mother of Jesus. In doing so, we, from generation to generation, are the sign of the kingdom that is not of this world. Pentecost is still happening.

The Pope recalls for us the fact that the presence of Mary finds many different ways to express itself today even as it has over the centuries. Nations and peoples have found her in their various churches and shrines; from Guadalupe, Lourdes, and Fatima; all those places of pilgrimage where the People of God seek to strengthen their own Faith within the embrace of the faith of the Mother of God. Pope John Paul leads us to understand that it is within Mary’s faith that we find “an interior space” in which we too are blessed by the Father *with every spiritual blessing*.

Chapter 2, The Church's Journey and the Unity of All Christians

The Holy Father continues his treatment of our topic by introducing an aspect of Christian unity with which many find a difficulty, namely the Mother of God. It is the inspired wish of all Christian disciples to strive toward the unity for which Christ prayed the night before his passion. John Paul II makes a point which many recognize; namely, that the unity manifested by Christ's disciples is a great sign toward enkindling faith while their division constitutes a scandal. In the midst of this dichotomy the Mother of God shines forth as a sure hope of unity rather than a hindrance especially "among the Easterners".

The Pope, while acknowledging important discrepancies of doctrine, recognizes the importance of the unity of faith for Christians. One of those "discrepancies" has to do sometimes with the role of Mary in the work of salvation. He notes that studying Mary and the Church, each being clarified in the light of the other, energizes Christians to make progress together on this "pilgrimage of faith." Again Mary is a model for them leading toward unity. It is an encouraging sign that these many Churches find agreement on points of faith including the Virgin Mary as the Mother of the Lord. It is the Pope's wish that we all look to her as our common Mother and the one who precedes us all at the head of the long line of witnesses to the one Lord, Son of God, virginally conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, the John Paul lifts up as point of reflection the way in which the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and the ancient Churches of the East share in their love and praise of the *Theotokos*, Mary, Virgin Mother of God. Although the history of these Churches is complex, and at times difficult, they see the Virgin as a permanent presence in the whole of the reality of the mystery of salvation. Names such as, St. Cyril of Alexandria, St. Ephrem the Syrian (and a deacon), St. Gregory of Narek, all sing the *Theotokos'* praises. Is it any wonder then that the ancient Oriental Churches adorn their worship with feasts and hymns extolling the Virgin, the Mother of the Word made flesh?

As the Holy Father continues to pursue this topic of Mary and unity among the various Churches, he notes the place of great honor which she garners in the East. In the Byzantine liturgy at its very heart, in the Eucharistic Prayer of St. John Chrysostom, immediately following the epiclesis we find words such as the following: "...We magnify you who are more honorable than the Cherubim and incomparably more glorious than the Seraphim. You who, without losing your virginity, gave birth to the Word of God. You who are truly the Mother of God." It is such like prayers which have molded the faith and piety of the people over the centuries.

The Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (787 AD) put an end to the iconoclastic confusion of the times and proclaimed that it was very fitting that images of the Mother of God, the angels and the saints could be exposed in Churches for veneration by the faithful. Pope John Paul recalls for us how images of the Virgin have a place of honor in our churches and houses. He writes of the way Mary is so often depicted with her Son in her arms and that it is this relationship with her Son that especially glorifies the Mother.

The Holy Father reminds us that the peoples of the Ukraine, Byelorussia and Russia have a rich heritage of images of the Mother stemming from a sense of her presence and protection over the

centuries. The Pope happily recounts the various images which honor Mary throughout the these times and places. Because of this common tradition, he sees the distinct possibility that, as he is wont to say, "...the Church can begin once more to breathe fully with her 'two lungs,' the East and the West." Such a thing is more than just a profitable enterprise for this Pope but of necessity to further the entire cause of ecumenism.

Chapter 3, The "*Magnificat*" of the Pilgrim Church

The Pope begins another chapter. "Like a pilgrim in a foreign land," he says, "the Church presses forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God, announcing the Cross and Death of the Lord until he comes." She strains toward that unity for which Jesus prayed while the Virgin Mother accompanies his people through the centuries as is evidenced by her *Magnificat* re-echoing in the heart of the Church.

At the threshold of her own home, Elizabeth blesses Mary twice over; once because of the "fruit of her womb," and again because of her faith. Both point directly to the Annunciation, another threshold; that of our salvation. Mary's ecstasy of heart shines forth in the *Magnificat*. In those Spirit filled words, she lets us know that she is aware that concentrated within her, as the Mother of Christ, is the whole of the economy of salvation. The Pope says that in her exultation Mary confesses that she finds herself in the very heart of this fullness of Christ. Incredibly, the hope of all the ages find their fulfillment in this humble maiden of Nazareth from which nothing good is thought possible.

It is from Mary that the Church derives its awareness of the inseparability of the "poor of Yahweh" and the God of the Covenant: "the God who is Almighty and does great things for man: holy is his name." The Pope recalls how Mary is the first witness to the marvelous truth: "He so loved the world that he gave his only Son." (Jn 3:16) Yet, equally important is the way in which in Mary's *Magnificat* the Church's preference for the poor is so wonderfully bound to it. The Holy Father presses the issue, "The truth about God who saves, ...cannot be separated from the manifestation of his love of preference for the poor and humble." He points out that this fact is celebrated first in the *Magnificat* and then finds fulfillment in the words and works of Jesus himself. It is to Mary at the side of Jesus, the first and most perfect image of freedom and the liberation of humanity, that the Church looks for the complete understanding of its own mission.

Part III – MATERNAL MEDIATION

Chapter 1, Mary, the Handmaid of the Lord

At this point in the encyclical we have arrived at an extremely important topic, one that has practical implications for all who pray. It is as though the first two parts of this papal letter have laid the groundwork for what we are to encounter in this final portion. St. Maximilian Kolbe used to pray the question: "Who are you, O Immaculata?" It was evident to him that Mary, the Immaculate One and Our

Mother, needed to be studied far more deeply. We have a Pope who has seen fit to guide us in this regard.

We live in relationship with a Triune God, (to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit), in Communion with the Saints, and within that framework, in a pre-eminent way with Our Blessed Mother, and finally with one another. The Catholic Church has a Marian character without which it would not be Catholic. As a result, it is critical that we understand our relationship to Mary and hers to us; that this relationship neither impedes nor diverts us from our relationship with God.

It is with this in mind that the Holy Father begins by emphasizing what *Lumen Gentium*, the Document on the Church, of the Second Vatican Council laid down as foundational, “The Church knows and teaches with Saint Paul that there is only one mediator.” That mediator is “the man Christ Jesus.” Simply put, Mary’s mediation is mediation in Christ.

The Holy Father quotes directly from *Lumen Gentium* in acknowledgement of that understanding. So that there be no misunderstanding we quote directly as well:

“...All the saving influences of the Blessed Virgin on mankind originate... from the divine pleasure. They flow forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rest on his mediation, depend entirely on it, and draw all their power from it. In no way do they impede the immediate union of the faithful with Christ. Rather, they foster this union.”

The Pope concludes by saying that this influence is sustained by the very same Holy Spirit who began in Mary the divine motherhood.

Mary’s mediation is intimately linked with her motherhood. Although Mary’s mediation is pre-eminent, others in a less perfect way share as well in the unique mediation of Christ. Christ’s mediation gives rise to this shared mediation in many ways whether it is that of Mary or of others.

Where Mary is concerned, she is first of all, the choice of the Father to be the earthly mother of his Son and a companion therefore in the work of redemption. As a consequence she is at the same time “a mother to us in the order of grace.” The Holy Father makes it clear that Mary is indeed a true presence in the saving mystery of Christ and the Church.

The Incarnation of the Word at the time of the Annunciation is the important event in our salvation. It is at this particular moment that Mary consents to be the mother of the Savior. “This consent of Motherhood,” the Pope tells us, is above all a result of her total self-giving to God in virginity.” She accepted and understood her own motherhood as a total gift of self. At this level of self-donation, maternity and virginity encompass the same gift of self.

Pope John Paul II makes an important statement which frames our own notions of the mediation of Mary as he reminds us that “before anyone else it was God himself, the Eternal Father, who entrusted himself to the Virgin of Nazareth, giving her his own Son in the mystery of the Incarnation.” The union of

the two natures, human and divine, is achieved within the context of her Motherhood. This openness to being the Mother of the Son of God bears within itself from the start a complete openness to the person of Christ, to his work, to his whole mission. In the course of her collaboration with the work of her Son, Mary's Motherhood underwent a transformation more and more directed toward those who were the object of Christ's mission.

The Holy Father tells us that in Mary's case we have a uniquely exceptional mediation based upon her "fullness of grace." It disposed her to a complete willingness on her part as the "handmaid of the Lord." Christ was thus able to prepare her to become the Mother of all peoples in the "order of grace." Although there are other relevant passages in the New Testament, particularly important in this regard are the words spoken by Jesus from the cross to Mary and John.

Pope John Paul says that after the Ascension, Mary, "the handmaid of the Lord," was left in the midst of the fledgling Church as its mother. He recalls for us the words beneath the cross, "Behold your mother." And so it was that a special bond developed between this Mother and the Church evolving into that special role that we know as maternal mediation (intercession). The Second Vatican Council teaches us that this "motherhood of Mary in the order of grace ... will last without interruption until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect." Her mediation embraces not only all times but the whole of humanity.

As we remember, this mediation was first seen at the wedding feast at Cana. It is now to extend throughout history and the world. In this way Mary's motherhood continues uninterrupted within the Church unto all times.

Mary's Assumption ties the Church on earth in a mysterious way to the Communion of Saints in heaven because through a miracle of grace she is already taken up body and soul into heaven. Pius XII proclaimed this teaching, in harmony with the tradition of the Church over the centuries, a dogma in 1950. It places Mary in a close and unbreakable bond with her Son, Jesus. Having been united to her Son in his first coming, the Church believes that Mary will be united to him in his second as well. Vatican Council II identified this altogether special role as mediatrix of graces.

At the Annunciation Mary called herself the "handmaid of the Lord." She remained such throughout her life. The Virgin Mary was a true "disciple of Christ" who united herself in a unique way to the mission of her Son, "who came to serve and not to be served." As a result the Second Vatican Council says that this mother shares in the eternal kingdom of her Son. It confirms Mary's heavenly mission, "... Assumed into heaven, she does not cease here saving service, which expresses her maternal mediation until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect." In this role the Blessed Mother clothes herself with the whole of the Communion of Saints and directs it toward that fulfillment about which St. Paul spoke when he said that in the end "God would be all in all."

Chapter 2, Mary in the Life of the Church and of Every Christian

The Second Vatican Council shed new light on the role of the Mother of Christ in the life of the Church. "The Mother of God," it says, "is a figure of the Church in the matter of faith, charity and perfect

union with Christ.” Overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, she was virgin, handmaid and mother, believing and obeying in absolute fidelity.

The Holy Father recalls how from ancient times Mary has been venerated as God-bearer. The faithful prayerfully have called upon her in times of need. He says that this practice is altogether special because it bears within itself and expresses the profound link that exists between the Mother of Christ and the Church. And so it is that Mary, Virgin and Mother, remains a permanent model for the Church who is likewise called virgin and mother. The Pope notes that these titles have significant biblical and theological justification.

The Church becomes a mother when through preaching and baptism she brings forth children, conceived of the Holy Spirit, to new and immortal life. St. Paul himself made reference to this understanding when he said in Galatians, “My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!” This awareness, modeled upon the Mother who brought forth the first-born among many brothers, still informs the Church’s self-understanding today. The Pope tells us that as Mary effectively fulfilled her role in *the mystery of the Incarnation*, so the Church fulfills her role in *the mystery of adoption to sonship* through grace.”

Again following the example of Mary, the Church remains the virgin faithful to her spouse, Christ, as he is seen in the letters of Paul and from the title, *bride of the Lamb*, found in Revelation (Rev. 21:9). “This virginity,” says John Paul, “after the example of the Virgin of Nazareth, is the source of a special spiritual fruitfulness: it is the source of motherhood in the Holy Spirit.” Because of Mary’s relationship to the Church, the Church is close to Mary and seeks to become like her. Mary is present in the mystery of the Church as a model. However, the Holy Father is quick to note that she is not only present as an exemplar but that she also has an effective role to play in the Church’s bringing to birth of its sons and daughters.

The Pope places great emphasis, as has the Church in its long tradition, on those meaningful words uttered by Christ from the Cross, “Woman behold your son. ... Son behold your mother.” He goes on to say that these words draw Mary into a new spiritual Motherhood, “*motherhood in the order of grace.*” This motherhood involves the gift of the Spirit, which she too received along with the disciples at Pentecost.

The faithful feel a profound connection between Mary’s motherhood at the Eucharistic banquet where the true body born of Mary becomes really present. It has been a note-worthy characteristic of authentic Marian devotion that she without fail “*guides the faithful to the Eucharist.*”

Pope John Paul now speaks of how motherhood always creates a special relationship between mother and child. Motherhood in the order of grace preserves this bond. On Calvary there occurred a mutual entrustment of the mother to “*her Son,*” and of the “*Son to his mother.*” This became the model for the Christian disciple in reference to Mary “*to take her into his own home.*” As the Holy Father has already noted she, in effect, comes to care for the brethren of her Son, in whose birth and development she cooperates.

The Holy Father's words of explanation on self-entrustment give body in a definitive way to all the personal acts of consecration to Mary over the centuries. He says:

"This filial relationship, this self-entrusting of a child to its mother, not only has its beginning in Christ but can also be said to be definitively directed towards him. Mary can be said to continue to say to each individual the words which she spoke at Cana in Galilee: *do whatever he tells you*. ...Precisely with her faith as Spouse and Mother she wishes to act upon all those who entrust themselves to her as her children. ...Mary leads them to the unsearchable riches of Christ."

The Holy Father concludes this section with a statement on how the figure of Mary of Nazareth sheds light on womanhood in general. Because of Mary's central role in the Incarnation, women can look to Mary to find the secret of true femininity. Mary raises to a new height the dignity of what it means to be a woman especially in "the self-offering totality of love."

The Holy Father begins to draw together a summation of his encyclical by noting, first of all, how Pope Paul VI solemnly proclaimed Mary as the Mother of the Church at the Second Vatican Council and then again in an even more forceful way in his "Credo of the People of God."

*Pope John Paul II once more recalls how Pope Paul VI employed the thought of *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of the Second Vatican Council when it spoke of Mary in these words, "Knowledge of the true Catholic doctrine regarding the Blessed Virgin Mary will always be a key to the exact understanding of the mystery of Christ and of the Church." In a final reference to his predecessor, the Holy Father speaks of how Paul VI in a papal discourse pressed the Church to draw from the Virgin Mother of God the most authentic form of perfect imitation of Christ.*

In the mind of Vatican II in Mary assumed into Heaven, the Church has already reached "that perfection whereby she exists without spot or wrinkle (to use a Pauline turn of phrase)."

Chapter 3 The Meaning of the Marian Year (Pentecost 1987 – Assumption of BVM 1988)

In the final section of his encyclical the Holy Father offers his work not only as a clarification of doctrine on Mary but as an enhancement of Marian Devotion as well. He reminds us of the work of the great apostle of Mary, St. Louis Marie Grignon de Monfort, who advocated consecration to Mary as a most effective and short road to Jesus. He rejoices in the fact that again in these days there are abundant signs of renewed Marian devotion. As Christ's Mother was there at the beginning of the "time of the Church," and as Mary always "precedes" the Church in its human journey through history, she is present once again to prepare the Church for its path into and through the Third Christian Millennium.

In the Conclusion, the Pope highlights a particular Marian antiphon, which comes at the close of Night Prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours. It sings of human nature's wonderment of faith at the mystery of Mary's divine Motherhood. Yet it was Mary as the loving Mother of the Redeemer, who first stood in the

midst of this wonderment of faith at the mystery of the Incarnation. At length we recall how it is also Mary, this wondrous Mother of God, who always helps those who have fallen to rise once again on the path of their eternal vocation.