



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Hall of Paul VI

Wednesday, 10 January 1979

1. The Christmas period has drawn to an end. The feast of the Epiphany has passed too. But the meditations of our Wednesday meetings will still refer to the fundamental content of the truths which the Christmas period puts before our eyes every year. They appear in a particular depth. It takes time to look at them with the open eyes of the spirit, which has the right and the need to meditate on the truth, to contemplate its whole simplicity and depth.

During the octave of Christmas, the Church turns the eyes of our spirit towards the mystery of Motherhood. The last day of the octave, which is also the first day of the new year, is the feast of the Motherhood of the Mother of God. In this way stress is laid on "the place of the Mother, the maternal "dimension" in the whole mystery of the birth of God.

2. This Mother bears the name of Mary. The Church venerates her in a special way. The cult it renders to her (*cult of hyperdulia*) surpasses the cult of all other saints. It venerates her precisely in this way because she was the Mother; because she was elected to be the Mother of the Son of God; because she gave that Son, who is the Eternal Word, his "body" in time, she gave him "humanity" at a moment of history. The Church inserts this particular veneration of the Mother of God in the whole cycle of the liturgical year, during which the moment of the human conception of the Son of God is stressed, discreetly but also very solemnly, by means of the feast of the Annunciation, celebrated on 25 March nine months before Christmas. It can be said that during this whole period, from 25 March to 25 December, the Church walks with Mary who, like every mother, waits for the moment of the birth: Christmas Day. And at the same time during this period Mary "walks" with the Church. Her maternal waiting is inscribed discreetly in the life of the Church every year. All that happened between Nazareth, Ain Karin, and Bethlehem, is the subject of the

liturgy of the life of the Church, of prayer—especially the prayer of the rosary and of contemplation. A particular feast dedicated to the "Virgo Paritura", the feast of "the Virgin's maternal waiting" which used to be celebrated on 18 December, has now disappeared from the liturgical year.

3. Inserting in this way the Mystery of "the Virgin's maternal waiting" in the rhythm of its liturgy, the Church—against the background of the Mystery of those months which unite the moment of birth with the moment of conception—meditates on the whole spiritual dimension of the motherhood of the Mother of God.

This "spiritual" (*quoad spiritum*) motherhood began at the same time as the physical (*quoad corpus*) motherhood. At the moment of the annunciation, Mary had the following conversation with the announcing angel: "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" (Lk 1:34); answer: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God" (Lk 1:35). Her spiritual motherhood (*quoad spiritum*) started at the same time as her physical motherhood (*quoad corpus*). Thus this motherhood filled the nine months of waiting for the moment of the birth, like the thirty years spent between Bethlehem, Egypt, and Nazareth, as well as the later years during which Jesus, after leaving his home in Nazareth, taught the Gospel of the Kingdom, the years that ended with the events of Calvary and the Cross. There the "spiritual" motherhood reached its key-moment, in a certain sense. "When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" (Jn 19:26).

Thus he bound her, his own Mother, in a new way, to man: to man, to whom he transmitted the Gospel. He bound her to every man. He bound her to the Church on the day of its historic birth, the day of Pentecost. From that day the whole Church has her as Mother. And all men have her as Mother. They understand the words spoken from the Cross as addressed to each of them. The Mother of all men. Spiritual motherhood knows no limits. It extends in time and in space. It reaches so many human hearts. It reaches whole nations. Motherhood is a favourite subject, and perhaps the most frequent one, of the creativity of the human spirit. It is an element which constitutes the inner life of so many men. It is the keystone of human culture. Motherhood: a great, splendid, fundamental human reality, from the beginning called with its own name by the Creator. Accepted again in the Mystery of the Birth of God in time. Contained in it, in this Mystery. Inseparably united with it.

4. In the first days of my ministry in the Roman See of St Peter, I had the pleasure of meeting a man who has become particularly close to me from that first meeting. Allow me not to pronounce here the name of this person whose authority in the life of the Italian nation is so great, and to whose words I, too, listened on the last day of the year with attention united with gratitude. They were simple, deep and full of concern for the good of man, of the country, of the whole of mankind, and of youth in particular. My distinguished interlocutor will forgive me if, though not saying his name, I take the liberty of referring in some way to the words that I heard from him during that first meeting. These words concerned mothers: his mother. After so many years of life, experience,

political and social struggles, he remembered his mother as the one to whom he owed, together with life, everything that constitutes the beginning and structure of the history of his spirit. I listened to these words with sincere emotion. I stored them in my memory and I will never forget them. They were for me, a kind of announcement and at the same time a kind of appeal.

I am not speaking here of my mother, because I lost her too early; but I know that I owe her the same things as my distinguished interlocutor expressed so simply. For this reason I take the liberty of referring to what I heard from him.

5. And I am speaking of this today so as to carry out what I announced a week ago. Then I said that we must be close to every expectant mother; that we must surround with particular assistance motherhood and the great event connected with it, conception and the birth of man, which is always at the basis of human education. Education rests on trust in the woman who gave life. This confidence can never be exposed to danger. At Christmas time the Church puts before the eyes of our spirit the Motherhood of Mary, and it does so on the first day of the new year. It does so, also, to highlight the dignity of every mother, to define and recall the significance of motherhood, not only in the life of every man, but also in the whole of human culture. Motherhood is woman's vocation. It is an eternal vocation, and it is also a contemporary vocation. "The Mother who understands everything and embraces each of us with her heart": these are words of a song, sung by young people in Poland, which come into my mind at this moment. The song goes on to announce that today the world is particularly "hungry and thirsty" for that motherhood, which is woman's vocation "physically" and "spiritually", as it is Mary's.

Everything must be done in order that the dignity of this splendid vocation may not be broken in the inner life of the new generations; in order that the authority of the woman-mother may not be diminished in the family, social and public life, and in the whole of our civilization; in all our contemporary legislations, in the organization of work, in publications, in the culture of everyday life, in education and in study: in every field of life.

This is a fundamental criterion. We must do everything in order that woman may merit love and veneration. We must do everything in order that children, the family and society may see in her that dignity that Christ saw.

Mater genetrix, spes nostra!

At the close of the General Audience in the Paul VI Hall on 10 January, Pope John Paul paid tribute to the Hall's outstanding architect, Pier Luigi Nervi, who died the previous day:

Yesterday the architect Pier Luigi Nervi died in Rome at the age of 87. It was he who planned and brought to realization this Audience Hall whose architectural lines reveal an elegance and daring, a harmony and functionality. As you know, his constructions in reinforced concrete—in which the most

advanced technique is transformed into expressions of true art—have made him known throughout the whole world.

In remembering with gratitude this outstanding artist, who has contributed in a masterly fashion to the planning of dwelling places ever more worthy of man, we offer a special prayer of suffrage that God may welcome his soul into the eternal habitation of heaven.

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