



The Holy See

POPE JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Christ calls women to share his mission

1. The words of the aged Simeon, announcing to Mary her sharing in the Messiah's saving mission, shed light on woman's role in the mystery of Redemption.

Indeed, Mary is not only an individual person, but she is also the "daughter of Zion", the new woman standing at the Redeemer's side in order to share his Passion and to give birth in the Spirit to the children of God. This reality is expressed by the popular depiction of the "seven swords" that pierce Mary's heart: this image highlights the deep link between the mother, who is identified with the daughter of Zion and with the Church, and the sorrowful destiny of the Incarnate Word.

Giving back her Son, whom she had just received from God, to consecrate him for his saving mission, Mary also gives herself to this mission. It is an act of interior sharing that is not only the fruit of natural maternal affection, but above all expresses the consent of the new woman to Christ's redemptive work.

2. In his words Simeon indicates the purpose of Jesus' sacrifice and Mary's suffering: these will come about so "that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed" (Lk 2:35).

Jesus, "a sign that will be opposed" (Lk 2:34), who involves his mother in his suffering, will lead men and women to take a stand in his regard, inviting them to make a fundamental decision. In fact, he "is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel" (Lk 2:34).

Thus Mary is united to her divine Son in this "contradiction", in view of the work of salvation. Certainly there is a risk of ruin for those who reject Christ, but the resurrection of many is a marvellous effect of the Redemption. This proclamation alone kindles great hope in the hearts of

those to whom the fruit of the sacrifice already bears witness.

Directing the Blessed Virgin's attention to these prospects of salvation before the ritual offering, Simeon seems to suggest to Mary that she perform this act as a contribution to humanity's ransom. In fact, he does not speak to Joseph or about Joseph: his words are addressed to Mary, whom he associates with the destiny of her Son.

3. The chronological priority of Mary's action does not obscure Jesus' primacy. In describing Mary's role in the economy of salvation, the Second Vatican Council recalled that she "devoted herself totally ... to the person and work of her Son, *under and with him*, serving the mystery of Redemption" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 56).

At the presentation of Jesus in the temple, Mary serves the mystery of Redemption under Christ and with Christ: indeed he has the principal role in salvation and must be ransomed by a ritual offering. Mary is joined to the sacrifice of her Son by the sword that will pierce her soul.

4. The primacy of Christ does not rule out but supports and demands the proper, irreplaceable role of woman. By involving his mother in his own sacrifice, Christ wants to reveal its deep human roots and to show us an anticipation of the priestly offering of the cross.

The divine intention to call for the specific involvement of woman in the work of Redemption can be seen by the fact that Simeon's prophecy is addressed to Mary alone, although Joseph also took part in the offering rite.

The conclusion of the episode of Jesus' presentation in the temple seems to confirm the meaning and value of the feminine presence in the economy of salvation. The meeting with a woman, Anna, brings to a close these special moments when the Old Testament as it were is handed over to the New.

Like Simeon, this woman has no special status among the chosen people, but her life seems to have a lofty value in God's eyes. St Luke calls her a "prophetess", probably because many consulted her for her gift of discernment and the holy life she led under the inspiration of the Spirit of the Lord.

Anna is advanced in age, being 84 years old, and has long been a widow. Totally consecrated to God, "she never left the temple, serving God day and night with fasting and prayer" (cf. Lk 2:37). She represents those who, having intensely lived in expectation of the Messiah, are able to accept the fulfilment of the promise with joyous exultation. The Evangelist mentions that "coming up at that very hour she gave thanks to God" (2:38).

Staying constantly in the temple, she could, perhaps more easily than Simeon, meet Jesus at the

end of a life dedicated to the Lord and enriched by listening to the Word and by prayer.

At the dawn of Redemption, we can glimpse in the prophetess Anna all women who, with holiness of life and in prayerful expectation, are ready to accept Christ's presence and to praise God every day for the marvels wrought by his everlasting mercy.

5. Chosen to meet the Child, Simeon and Anna have a deep experience of sharing the joy of Jesus' presence with Mary and Joseph and spreading it where they live. Anna in particular shows wonderful zeal in speaking about Jesus, thus witnessing to her simple and generous faith. This faith prepares others to accept the Messiah in their lives.

Luke's expression, "she ... spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (2:38), seems to credit her as a symbol of the women who, dedicated to spreading the Gospel, will arouse and nourish the hope of salvation.

To the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims, the Holy Father said:

I am pleased to greet all the English-speaking visitors, especially the pilgrims from Korea and the United States. I also thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. Upon you and your families I cordially invoke the joy and peace of Jesus Christ our Saviour.

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