



The Holy See

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The most beautiful sight that a people can offer is without any doubt is that of its own faith. At this moment I feel tangibly a moving manifestation of the faith that enlivens you and I would like immediately to express to you my admiration of this. I gladly accepted the invitation to come to your most beautiful Island on the occasion of the centenary of the proclamation of Our Lady of Bonaria as your principal Patroness. Today, together with the panorama of the wonderful nature that surrounds us, you offer me a view of your fervent devotion to the Most Holy Virgin. Thank you for this beautiful witness!

I greet you all with deep affection, starting with Archbishop Giuseppe Mani of Cagliari, President of the Sardinian Bishops' Conference, whom I thank for his courteous words at the beginning of this Holy Mass also on behalf of the other Bishops, to whom I extend my cordial thoughts, and on behalf of the whole ecclesial community which lives in Sardinia. Thank you, above all, for the dedication with which you prepared my Pastoral Visit. And I see that everything was indeed prepared perfectly. I greet the Civil Authorities and in particular the Mayor, who will address to me both his greeting and that of the City. I greet the other Authorities present and express my gratitude to them for the generous collaboration they offered to the organization of my Visit here in Sardinia. Thus I would like to greet the priests, and especially the Community of Mercedarian Fathers, the deacons, the men and women religious, those responsible for the associations and ecclesial movements, the youth and all the faithful, with a cordial remembrance for the elderly centenarians who I was able to greet at the Church entrance, and all those who have joined us in spirit or via the radio and television. In a very special way I greet the sick and the suffering, with a particular thought for the lowliest.

It is the Lord's Day, but - given this special circumstance - the Liturgy of the Word has proposed to us the Readings for the celebrations dedicated to the Blessed Virgin. These are in particular texts planned for the Feast of the Birth of Mary which for centuries has been fixed on 8 September, the date of the consecration of the basilica built in Jerusalem above the house of St Anne, Mother of Our Lady. They are Readings which effectively always contain the reference to the mystery of her birth. First of all there is the Prophet Micah's marvellous oracle concerning Bethlehem, in which the birth of the Messiah is announced. The Messiah, the oracle says, was to be a descendant of

King David, like him a native of Bethlehem but a figure who would exceed human limitations: his "origin", it says, are "from ancient times", lost in the most remote ages, at the frontier of eternity. His greatness would reach "to the ends of the earth", as would also be his peace (cf. Mi 5: 1-4a). The coming of the "Lord's anointed", who was to mark the beginning of the people's liberation was described by the Prophet with an enigmatic expression: "until the time when she who is in travail has brought forth" (Mi 5: 3). Thus the Liturgy - which is a privileged school of the faith - teaches us to see in Mary's birth a direct connection with that of the Messiah, Son of David.

The Gospel, a passage from the Apostle Matthew, proposed to us precisely the account of Jesus' birth. However, the Evangelist introduces it with a summary of his genealogy, which he sets at the beginning as a prologue. Here too the full evidence of Mary's role in salvation history stands out: Mary's being is totally relative to Christ and in particular to his Incarnation. "Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ" (Mt 1: 16). The lack of continuity in the layout of the genealogy immediately meets the eye; we do not read "begot" but instead: "Mary, of whom Jesus was born who is called Christ". Precisely in this we perceive the beauty of the plan of God who, respecting the human being, makes him fertile from within, causing the most beautiful fruit of his creative and redeeming work to develop in the humble Virgin of Nazareth. Then the Evangelist brings on stage the figure of Joseph, his inner drama, his robust faith and his exemplary rectitude. Behind Joseph's thoughts and deliberations is his love for God and his firm determination to obey him. But how is it possible not to feel that Joseph's distress, hence his prayers and his decision, were motivated at the same time by esteem and love for his betrothed? God's beauty and that of Mary are inseparable in Joseph's heart; he knows that there can be no contradiction between them; he seeks the answer in God and finds it in the light of the Word and of the Holy Spirit: "The Virgin shall be with child and give birth to a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel (which means, God with us)" (Mt 1: 23; cf. Is 7: 14).

Thus, once again, we can contemplate Mary's place in the saving plan of God, that "purpose" which we find in the Second Reading, taken from the Letter to the Romans. Here the Apostle Paul expresses in two verses, unusually dense with meaning, the synthesis of what human life is from a meta-historical viewpoint: a parabola of salvation that starts from God and returns to him; a parabola entirely motivated and governed by his love. This is a salvific design totally permeated by divine freedom, which nonetheless awaits a fundamental contribution by human freedom: the creature's corresponds to the Creator's love. And it is here, in this space of human freedom, that we perceive the presence of the Virgin Mary, without her ever having been explicitly mentioned: she is in fact, in Christ, the first fruits and model of "those who love him [God]" (Rm 8: 28). The predestination of Mary is inscribed in the predestination of Jesus, as likewise is that of every human person. The "here I am" of the Mother faithfully echoes the "here I am" of the Son (cf. Heb 10: 6), as does the "here I am" of all adoptive children in the Son, that of us all, precisely.

Dear friends of Cagliari and Sardinia, thanks to their faith in Christ and through the spiritual motherhood of Mary and of the church, your people too are called to be integrated in the spiritual

"genealogy" of the Gospel. Christianity did not arrive in Sardinia with the swords of conquerors or by foreign imposition but germinated from the blood of the martyrs who gave their life here as an act of love for God and for men and women. It is in your mines that the Good News rang out for the first time. It had been brought by Pope Pontianus and the priest Hyppolitus and by many brothers condemned *ad metalla* [to work the silver, lead and iron mines] for their faith in Christ. Saturnius, Gavin, Protus, and Januarius, Simplicius, Lussorius, Ephysius and Antiochus were witnesses of total dedication to Christ as true God and Lord. The witness of martyrdom conquered a proud spirit such as that of the Sardinians, instinctively recalcitrant to all that came from over the sea. From the martyrs' example Bishop Lucifer of Cagliari drew the strength to defend orthodoxy against Arianism and, together with Eusebius of Vercelli, also from Cagliari, opposed the condemnation of Athanasius at the Council of Milan in 335, and for this both of them, Lucifer and Eusebius, were sentenced to exile, a very harsh exile. Sardinia has never been a land of heresies; its people have always shown filial fidelity to Christ and to the See of Peter. Yes, dear friends, in the sequence of invasions and dominations, faith in Christ endured in your peoples' soul as a constitutive element of your Sardinian identity itself.

In the fifth century, after the martyrs, many Bishops arrived from Africa who were obliged to suffer exile for refusing to adhere to the Arian heresy. They brought the riches of their faith with them to the Island. More than 100 Bishops, under the guidance of Fulgentius of Ruspe, founded monasteries and intensified the task of evangelization. Together with Augustine's glorious relics, they brought the wealth of their liturgical and spiritual tradition, traces of which you still preserve. Thus the faith became ever more deeply rooted in the hearts of the faithful until it became a culture and produced fruits of holiness. Ignatius of Laconi and Nicholas of Gésturi are Saints with whom Sardinia identifies. The martyr Antonia Mesina, the contemplative Gabriella Sagheddu, and the Sister of Charity, Josephine Nicóli, are the expression of a youth that was able to pursue great ideals. This simple and courageous faith continues to thrive in your communities, in your families, where one breathes the Gospel fragrance of the virtues that belong to your land: faithfulness, dignity, discretion, sobriety, the sense of duty.

And then, obviously, there is your love for Our Lady. Indeed, we are here today to commemorate a great act of faith made by your ancestors a century ago when they entrusted their lives to the Mother of Christ, choosing her to be the most important Patroness of the Island. They could not have known then that the 20th century was to be a very difficult century but it was certainly in that consecration to Mary that they subsequently found the strength to face the difficulties that arose, especially with the two World Wars. It could only be like this. Your Island, dear friends of Sardinia, could have no other protectress than Our Lady. She is the Mother, Daughter and Wife par excellence: "*Sa Mama, Fiza, Isposa de su Segnore*", as you like to sing. She is the Mother who loves, protects, advises, consoles and gives life so that life may be born and endure. She is the Daughter who honours her family, is ever attentive to the needs of her brothers and sisters and is prompt in making her home beautiful and welcoming; she is the Wife capable of faithful, patient love, of sacrifice and of hope. In Sardinia at least 350 churches and shrines are dedicated to Mary.

A people of mothers is reflected in that humble girl from Nazareth who with her "yes" enabled the Word to become flesh.

I well know that Mary is in your hearts. A hundred years later, let us thank her today for her protection and renew our trust in her, recognizing her as the "Star of the New Evangelization" at whose school we may learn how to bring Christ the Saviour to the men and women of our time. May Mary help you to bring Christ to families, little domestic churches and cells of society, which today more than ever are in need of both spiritual and social trust and support. May she help you to find appropriate pastoral strategies to ensure that Christ is encountered by young people who by their nature bring new dynamism but often fall prey to the widespread nihilism, thirsting for truth and ideals precisely when they seem to deny them. May she render you capable of evangelizing the world of work, the economy and politics which need a new generation of committed lay Christians who can seek competently and with moral rigour sustainable solutions of development. In all these aspects of Christian commitment you can always count on the guidance and support of the Blessed Virgin. Let us therefore entrust ourselves to her maternal intercession.

Mary is the harbour, refuge and protection for the Sardinian people who have within them the strength of oak. When the storm has passed the oak stands strong; fires rage and it sends out new shoots; the drought comes and it wins through once again. Let us therefore renew joyfully our consecration to such a caring Mother. I am sure that generations of Sardinians will continue to climb to the Shrine at Bonaria to invoke the Virgin's protection. Those who entrust themselves to Our Lady of Bonaria, a merciful and powerful Mother, will never be disappointed. May Mary Queen of Peace and Star of Hope intercede for us. Amen!