



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Mary leads us on a pilgrimage of faith

1. The passage from Luke that we have just heard presents Mary to us as a pilgrim of love. But Elizabeth draws attention to her faith and states the first Beatitude of the Gospels in her regard: "Blessed is she who believed". This expression is "a kind of 'key' which unlocks for us the innermost reality of Mary" (*Redemptoris Mater*, n. 19). As a conclusion to the catecheses of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, then, we would like to present the Mother of the Lord as a pilgrim in faith. As the Daughter of Zion, she walks in the footsteps of Abraham, the one who obeyed by faith, "[going] out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go" (*Heb 11: 8*).

This symbol of the pilgrimage in faith sheds light on the interior history of Mary, the believer *par excellence*, as the Second Vatican Council already suggested: "The Blessed Virgin advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and faithfully persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 58). The Annunciation is "the point of departure from which her whole "journey towards God' begins" (*Redemptoris Mater*, n. 14): a journey of faith which, knowing the prediction that a sword would pierce her heart (cf. *Lk 2: 35*), advanced down the tortuous paths of exile in Egypt and of inner darkness, when Mary "did not understand" the attitude of the 12-year-old Jesus in the temple and yet kept "all these things in her heart" (*Lk 2: 51*).

2. Jesus also passed his hidden life in semi-darkness, during which Mary must have heard Elizabeth's beatitude echoing within her through a true and real "heaviness of heart" (*Redemptoris Mater*, n. 17).

Certainly, glimmers of light were not missing from Mary's life, as at the wedding of Cana, where -

even in his apparent indifference - Christ granted his Mother's request and worked the first sign of revelation, inspiring faith in his disciples (cf. *Jn 2: 1-12*).

The two beatitudes mentioned by Luke are found in the same counterpoint of light and shadow, of revelation and mystery: the one that was addressed to the Mother of Christ by a woman in the crowd, and the one that Jesus addressed to "those who hear the word of God and keep it" (*Lk 11: 28*).

The peak of this earthly pilgrimage of faith was Golgotha, where Mary intimately lived her Son's paschal mystery: in a certain sense she died as a mother in the death of the Son and was opened to the "resurrection" with a new motherhood for the Church (cf. *Jn 19: 25-27*). There, on Calvary, Mary experienced the night of faith, like that of Abraham on Mount Moriah, and after the enlightenment of Pentecost she continued on her pilgrimage of faith until the Assumption, when the Son welcomed her into eternal bliss.

3. "The Blessed Virgin Mary continues to 'go before' the People of God. Her exceptional pilgrimage of faith represents a constant point of reference for the Church, for individuals and for communities, for peoples and nations, and in a sense for all humanity" (*Redemptoris Mater*, n. 6). She is the star of the third millennium, just as, at the beginning of the Christian era, she was the dawn that preceded Jesus on the horizon of history. Mary, in fact, was born chronologically before Christ and gave birth to him, introducing him into our human events.

We turn to her so that she may continue to lead us to Christ and to the Father, even in the dark night of evil and in moments of doubt, crisis, silence and suffering. We offer her the chant that the Eastern Church loves more than any other, the *Akathistos Hymn*, which exalts her lyrically in 24 stanzas. In the fifth stanza, dedicated to her visit to Elizabeth, it exclaims:

*"Hail, O Tendril whose Bud shall not wilt; hail, O Soil whose Fruit shall not perish!
Hail, O Tender of mankind's loving Tender; hail, O Gardener of the Gardener of Life!
Hail, O Earth who yielded abundant compassion; hail, O Table full-laden with mercy!
Hail, for you have greened anew the pastures of delight; hail, for you have prepared a haven for souls!
Hail, acceptable Incense of prayer; hail, Expiation of the whole universe!
Hail, O Favour of God to mortal men; hail, O Trust of mortals before God!
Hail, O Bride and Maiden ever-pure!"*

4. The visit to Elizabeth is sealed by the canticle of the *Magnificat*, a hymn that has come down through all Christian centuries as a perennial melody: a hymn that unites their hearts of Christ's disciples beyond the historical divisions, which we are committed to overcoming in view of full communion. In this ecumenical atmosphere, it is good to remember that in 1521 Martin Luther devoted a famous commentary to this "holy canticle of the Blessed Mother of God", as he expressed it. In it he says that the hymn "must be learned well and remembered by all", because

"in the *Magnificat* Mary teaches us how we should love and praise God.... She wants to be the greatest example of God's grace in order to spur everyone to have trust and to praise divine grace" (M. Luther, *Scritti religiosi*, edited by V. Vinay, Turin 1967, pp. 431-512).

Mary celebrates the primacy of God and his grace, God who chooses the least and the despised, the "poor of the Lord" spoken of in the Old Testament; she reverses their destiny and introduces them as the protagonists of salvation history.

5. From the moment when God looked on her with love, Mary became a sign of hope for the multitude of the poor, the earth's least ones who become the first in the kingdom of God. She faithfully followed the choice of Christ, her Son, who repeats to all of history's afflicted: "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (*Mt* 11: 28). The Church follows Mary and the Lord Jesus, walking on the tortuous roads of history, to lift up, promote and esteem the immense line of poor, hungry, humiliated and offended men and women (cf. *Lk* 1: 52-53). The humble Virgin of Nazareth, as St Ambrose observes, is not "the God of the temple, but the temple of God" (*De Spiritu Sancto*, III 11, 80). As such she guides all who turn to her to the encounter with God the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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I am happy to extend a special greeting today to the members of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations meeting in Rome for their General Assembly. You have come together to grow in a deeper understanding of your mission and to support one another as you seek to live out your commitment to Christian holiness, to feminine holiness. This form of discipleship is indispensable to the Church in the Third Millennium. Women, in fact, are uniquely gifted in the task of passing on the Christian message in the family and in the world of work, study and leisure. Catholic women who live by faith, hope and love, and who honour God's name in prayer and service, have always played a central role in transmitting the genuine sense of Christian faith and in applying it to every circumstance of life. Grateful for your loving commitment to Christ and his saving word, I urge you to look ever more confidently to Mary of Nazareth, so that your prophetic mission will bring forth ever greater fruits of Christian life and service.

Upon all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from Denmark, Sweden and the United States of America, I cordially invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Holy Father affirmed the Church's support for all efforts to eliminate racial and other forms of discrimination in society:

Today, 21 March, is the *United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination*. It also marks the beginning of the week of solidarity with those who are fighting this injustice.

The international instruments adopted, the world conferences, especially the next one to be held in Durban, South Africa, in September this year, are important stages on the way to affirming the fundamental equality and dignity of every person and to peaceful coexistence among all peoples. Despite these efforts, millions of human beings still do not see their "right of citizenship" in the human family recognized.

The Church joins in the efforts of those who defend human rights and offers her solidarity to all who, for racial, ethnic, religious and social reasons, are victims of discrimination. Spiritual and religious values, with their potential for renewal, contribute in an effective way to improving society. It is only right that the work of religious communities should be joined to the praiseworthy action of governments and international organizations in this area.

I would therefore like to repeat that no one is a foreigner in the Church and everyone must feel at home! To make the Church "the home and the school of communion" is a concrete response to the expectations for justice in today's world.