

The Mystery of the Immaculate Conception of Mary in the Thought of John Paul II

Resumo

Dirigindo-se às academias pontifícias, João Paulo II declarou que “o sesquicentenário da proclamação dogmática da Imaculada Conceição de Maria constitui “uma ocasião de renovado esforço teológico, cultural e espiritual em ordem a comunicar aos homens e às mulheres do nosso tempo o sentido e a mensagem mais autênticos desta verdade de fé”. Quando João Paulo II fala de Maria, ele apresenta-a de uma maneira pessoal e bem concreta de modo que todo o significado teológico, espiritual e histórico se torna vivo. Por conseguinte, se queremos apresentar a mensagem do dogma da Imaculada Conceição dum maneira compreensível para os homens e mulheres de hoje, não haverá caminho melhor do que examinar o riquíssimo ensinamento do Papa a respeito. É este precisamente o objetivo deste artigo resumir aquilo que o Santo Padre nos tem dito em relação ao mistério da Imaculada nos mais que 25 anos do seu pontificado.*

*Numa nota introdutória sobre as características principais da mariologia e espiritualidade Marianas de João Paulo II, o autor observa que para o Santo Padre a Mariologia não é uma campo marginal da teologia, mas antes o “lugar de encontro” das grandes verdades da fé cristã onde todas as linhas convergem. Particularmente, o dogma da Imaculada Conceição é - segundo ele - uma maravilhosa síntese doutrinal da fé cristã. Com efeito, João Paulo II contempla esta verdade da fé como expressão do mistério Trinitário: Na Imaculada Conceição “se manifestam, de maneira singular, a iniciativa admirável do Pai, a acção santificante do Espírito Santo e a perfeita redenção operada por Cristo”.** Por isso, na sua apresentação o autor segue um esquema Trinitário.*

* Discurso a VII Assembleia das Pontifícias Academias em 29 de outubro de 2002, em: *L'Oss. Rom.* (ed. port.) de 9 de nov. de 2002, p.5.

** Carta ao Presidente do comitê central para o ano mariano, em 22 de maio de 1988, em: *L'Oss. Rom.* (ed. port.) de 5 de junho de 1988, p.2.

*Eternamente escolhida por Deus Pai no seu Filho bem-amado, a Imaculada é a criatura perfeita que Deus, pela gratuidade do seu amor, acumulou com a plenitude da graça. “Nela, tudo é pura graça e só graça (‘sola gratia’).”*** Remida de maneira excepcional, ela é o fruto mais excelente da obra redentora de Cristo. No entanto, o privilégio da sua imaculada conceição tem por finalidade capacitá-la a responder com a perfeita liberdade do amor, não manchado pelo pecado, ao amor de Deus. Assim, à plenitude da graça corresponde a plenitude da fé na vida de Maria e a sua perfeita dedicação à Pessoa e missão do seu Filho. Plasmada pelo Espírito Santo e feita uma nova criatura, Maria é toda bela e santa, o início da nova humanidade e da Igreja como esposa santa e imaculada de Cristo.*

Em resumo, este estudo apresenta o significado eclesial e espiritual do mistério da Imaculada Conceição haurindo do e sintetizando o riquíssimo magistério de João Paulo II.

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Introduction

In an address to the pontifical academies, Pope John Paul II stated that the 150th anniversary of the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary “may be an opportunity to *renew the theological, cultural and spiritual endeavor to communicate to the men and women of our time the meaning and the genuine message of this truth of faith.*”¹ One hundred fifty years ago on December 8, 1854, with the Bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, Blessed Pope Pius IX defined the Immaculate Conception of Mary as a dogma of faith. The dogmatic formula was that “the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her Conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin” (DS 2803).

*** *Ibid.*

¹ John Paul II, Address to the Pontifical Academies on Oct. 29, 2002, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Nov. 13, 2002, p. 5 (If not indicated otherwise, all the quotations of the papal pronouncements are taken from the english weekly edition of the *L’Osservatore Romano*).

The present Holy Father - since the beginning of his pontificate - has presented the mystery of the Immaculate in a way that speaks to the heart of men and women of our time. Whereas the Catholic dogmatic theology of the nineteenth century that coined the language of the dogmatic constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* expressed this truth of faith in rather impersonal categories, John Paul II prefers to speak about Mary in a personal and concrete way. Thus the spiritual, historical and cultural meaning involved in the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception comes alive for our minds and in this way too its close connection with the most fundamental mysteries of the Christian faith becomes apparent. Hence, if one wishes to communicate to the men and women of our time in a contemporary way the meaning and genuine message of Mary's Immaculate Conception one only needs to explore the extremely rich and enlightening teachings of John Paul II on this truth of our faith.

In order to situate the Pope's mariological reflection on the Immaculate Conception in its proper context, we will begin with an introductory note on the characteristic traits of his Marian theology and spirituality.

I. The principal traits of John Paul II's Marian theology and spirituality

“Throughout my life I have experienced the loving and forceful presence of the Mother of our Lord. Mary accompanies me every day in the fulfillment of my mission as successor of Peter.”² This is the witness John Paul II gave to young people, during the year of the rosary, of his own filial relationship with the Blessed Virgin Mary. Indeed, the present Holy Father is an eminently Marian Pope, perhaps “Mary's Pope,” *par excellence*.³ When John Paul II speaks of Mary, he draws from his own deep experience as a son who gives witness to the love of his mother. Reveal-

² John Paul II, Message for the 18th World Youth Day dated March 9, 2003, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, March 19, 2003, p. 6-7.

³ Fr. Angel Luis Iglesias CSSR states: “A nadie se le oculta que Juan Pablo II es el Papa ‘mariano’ por excelencia. A buen seguro que en la historia del Pontificado Romano, a lo largo de los 20 siglos que lleva de existencia, no se encuentra un sucesor de Pedro tan marcado por el sello y la impronta del marianismo como el Pontífice felizmente reinante.” (Angel Luis Iglesias CSSR, *Reina y Madre, Grandes Temas Marianos*, vol I., Madrid - PS Editorial, 1987, p. 353-4).

ing in his own person “the secret of true Marian piety, which is a filial love of surrender and gratitude to Mary, a love of imitation and consecration to her person,”⁴ he is both a convinced and convincing witness of Mary’s presence in the life of the Church and of each individual believer. From the very beginning of his pontificate he has entrusted his petrine ministry and the whole Church to the Mother of God, thus leading the people of God into a deeper communion with the Blessed Virgin Mary, ushering in, one may say, a new Marian era.⁵

One might wonder what has influenced the Pope so deeply that he gives such primordial significance to the role of Mary in the Church and in the life of each of Christ’s disciples? It was - as he himself reveals - the reading of St. Louis de Montfort’s spiritual classic, *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary*. In his interview with André Frossard, the Holy Father explained the debt of gratitude he owes to this Saint for his doctrine and spirituality of Marian Consecration:

The reading of this book was a decisive turning point in my life... As a result, my devotion to the Mother of Christ in my childhood and adolescence yielded to a new attitude springing from the depths of my faith, as though from the very heart of the Trinity and Jesus Christ... My devotion to Mary, modeled on this pattern, has lasted since then. It is an integral part of my inner life and spiritual theology.⁶

Besides Louis de Montfort who has profoundly marked John Paul II’s Marian spirituality and devotion, there are still other factors that have contributed notably to it: Czestochowa, St. Maximilian Kolbe, Vatican II and Fatima.⁷ Among these factors it is, without any doubt, the Marian doctrine of the Council that has had the deepest impact on his theological

⁴ John Paul II, Homily on the occasion of his visit to the Argentine National Church in Rome on Nov. 13, 1998, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 2, 1998, p. 6.

⁵ In his inaugural address right after his election as Pope, he stated: “In this grave hour which gives us trepidation, we can do no other than to turn our mind with filial devotion to the Virgin Mary, who always lives and acts as a Mother in the mystery of Christ and of the Church, and repeat the sweet words *totus tuus* - totally yours - that we inscribed in our heart and in our “coat of arms” twenty years ago as the logo of our episcopal ordination” Address of John Paul II on Oct. 17, 1978 (*L’Oss. Rom.*, Oct. 26, 1978, p. 4).

⁶ André FROSSARD, *Be Not Afraid*, New York - Doubleday Image Books, 1984, p. 125.

⁷ Cf. Edward D. O’CONNOR CSC, *The Roots of Pope John Paul II’s Devotion to Mary*, in: *Marian Studies* 39 (1988) 78-114); see also: Antoine NACHEF, *Mary’s Pope, John Paul II, Mary and the Church since Vatican II*, Franklin, Wikosin - Sheed & Ward, 2000.

reflection on Mary. For the Holy Father, the chapter VIII of *Lumen Gentium* is “in a certain sense a *Magna Carta* of Mariology in our era”.⁸ Whereas the Mariology in the past centuries emphasized the privileges of Mary and her sublime dignity as Mother of God, placing her at times in unreachable distance to her children, the post-conciliar theological reflection focused on Mary’s presence and maternal mission in the mystery of Christ and of the Church.⁹ In his reflection on Mary, John Paul II follows the criterion the Council offered for discerning authentic Marian doctrine: Mary “occupies a place in the Church which is the highest after Christ and yet very close to us” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 54). He explains:

The *highest* place: we must discover this lofty position granted to Mary in the mystery of salvation. However, it is a question of a vocation totally in relationship to Christ.

The place *closest to us*: our life is profoundly influenced by Mary’s example and intercession. Nonetheless, we must ask ourselves about our effort to be close to her. The entire teaching of salvation history invites us to look to the Virgin... The chosen model of holiness, Mary guides the steps of believers on their journey to heaven.¹⁰

The task of mariological reflection is therefore “not only a question of correctly explaining the doctrine regarding Mary, but also of *bringing her person and her message closer to men and women of today*.”¹¹ John Paul II affirms that the mystery of the mother consists precisely in the closeness to her children:

The special characteristic of the motherly love that the Mother of God inserts in the mystery of the Redemption and the life of the Church finds expression in its exceptional closeness to man and all that happens to him.¹²

⁸ John Paul II, General audience of May 2, 1979, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, May 7, 1979, p. 1.

⁹ M. Hull comments that “the Council’s emphasis on Mary’s role in salvation history (past, present, future) by her inclusion in *Lumen Gentium* is the impetus for innovative theological speculation. The Council sought to reawaken Mariology by focusing on Mary’s role as integral to that of the Redeemer, to reground her significant role in the mission of the Church, and to restore a somewhat passive cultural devotion into an active exemplarism” (Michael F. HULL, *Mary from Lumen Gentium to Redemptoris Mater*, in: Teleconference on Mariology on May 29, 2002, <www.clerus.org>).

¹⁰ General audience of Jan. 3, 1996, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Jan. 10, 1996, p. 11.

¹¹ John Paul II, Letter to the 11th international Mariological Congress in Huelva (Spain), in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Oct. 7, 1992, p. 4.

¹² John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 22.

Being convinced of Mary's "closeness to man and all that happens to him" the Pope has opened up Mariology to the manifold aspects of our human existence. Whatever may be the subject of his reflections, John Paul II uses a reference to Mary to conclude with. Thus we find Mary even in encyclicals such as *Fides et Ratio*, about the relationship between faith and reason,¹³ and *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, which resumes the Church's social doctrine.¹⁴

Within this wide spectrum of Mariological thought, the Pope's interest is above all on the ecclesiological, anthropological and spiritual dimension of the mystery of Mary. This is reflected in his three principal Marian writings:

- *Redemptoris Mater*: Mary, Model and Mother of the Church (ecclesiological dimension),
- *Mulieris Dignitatem*: Mary and the vocation of woman (anthropological dimension)
- *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*: To Jesus through Mary (spiritual dimension)

The Pope himself explains:

I wished to stress in the encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* the essential link between Mary and the Church by emphasizing her mission within the community of believers. In the apostolic exhortation *Mulieris Dignitatem*, I later recalled how Mary enlightens and enriches the Christian humanism inspired by the Gospel, because in addition to the various aspects of the "new humanity" which is realized in her, she brings out the dignity and "genius" of woman.¹⁵

¹³ Cf. *Fides et Ratio*, n. 108: "I turn in the end to the woman whom the prayer of the Church invokes as *Seat of Wisdom*, and whose life itself is a true parable illuminating the reflection contained in these pages. For between the vocation of the Blessed Virgin and the vocation of true philosophy there is a deep harmony... This was a truth which the holy monks of Christian antiquity understood well when they called Mary 'the table at which faith sits in thought.' In her they saw a lucid image of true philosophy and they were convinced of the need to *philosophari in Maria*".

¹⁴ Cf. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n. 49: "Mary most holy, our Mother and Queen, is the one who turns to her Son and says: 'They have no more wine' (*Jn* 2,3). She is also the one who praises God the Father, because 'he has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away' (*Lk* 1,52-53). Her maternal concern extends to the personal and social aspects of people's life on earth."

In *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, the Holy Father introduces us in the school of Mary to be conformed to Christ with Mary:

The Rosary mystically transports us to Mary's side as she is busy watching over the human growth of Christ in the home of Nazareth. This enables her to train us and to mold us with the same care, until Christ is "fully formed" in us (cf. *Gal* 4,19).¹⁶

Although the Holy Father so far hasn't dedicated any apostolic letter to the mystery of the Immaculate Conception,¹⁷ nevertheless this mystery is present both in *Redemptoris Mater*, nn. 1.7-11 and *Mulieris dignitatem*, n. 11. Moreover, we are fortunate that in the more than 25 years of his pontificate he has pronounced a great number of homilies, addresses and prayers in which he provided the Church with his deep and original insights on this mystery.¹⁸ It is from this rich mariological output that we will draw in presenting John Paul II's thought on the Immaculate Conception. The Pope's teachings on the mystery of the Immaculate Conception are therefore extensively quoted so as to give the reader a taste of the originality of his thought.

II. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception: A marvelous doctrinal synthesis of the Christian faith

Some contemporary theologians have referred to mariological doctrine as "lower in the hierarchy of truth" and therefore "secondary".¹⁹ For the Pope, however, Mariology is the meeting point of the great fundamental Christian truth where all the lines converge and where connections are established. Trinitarian theology, christology, soteriology, ecclesiology,

¹⁵ John Paul II, Address to Pontifical Academies on Nov. 7, 1998, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 2, 1998, p. 4.

¹⁶ *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, n. 15.

¹⁷ It is expected that John Paul II will dedicate an apostolic letter to the Immaculate on the later part of 2004 on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of its dogmatization.

¹⁸ Among the series of his Marian catechesis, the Pope dedicated the following general audiences to the mystery of the Immaculate Conception: Jan. 24; May 8, 15, 29; June 5, 12, 19, July 3, 1996; published as book: JOHN PAUL II, *Theotókos, Woman, Mother, Disciple. A Catechesis on Mary, Mother of God*, Boston - Pauline Books & Media, 2000, 61-63, 87-111.

¹⁹ Cf. John Macquarrie, *Immaculate Conception*, in: Albert Stacpole OSB (ed.), *Mary's place in Christian dialogue*, Middlegreen - St. Pauls Publications, 1982, 98-107.

anthropology, spiritual theology - all of these touch upon Mariology. Following in the footsteps of St. Maximilian Mary Kolbe who saw the close link of the mystery of the Immaculate with the other mysteries of our faith and wished therefore to write a book of dogmatic theology “*sub luce Immaculatae*,”²⁰ John Paul II, too, sees the centrality of this mystery. He declares “that the dogma of the Immaculate Conception is as a *marvelous doctrinal synthesis of the Christian faith*.”²¹ In fact, this doctrine throws new light on the fundamental truth from which it has been derived showing new connections among them and thus strengthening the coherence of Christian faith.

The Holy Father stresses the profound link of the Immaculate Conception with the mystery of Christ and the Church, and with the mystery that is the very foundation of all other mysteries: the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Indeed, Mary Immaculate reflects the mystery of the Three Divine Persons and their works in history:

The Immaculate Virgin ... invites us not to fix our eyes on her but to pass beyond, and as much as possible, to *enter into the mystery in which she was conceived: the mystery of God who is One and Three*, full of grace and fidelity.²²

She “is in an exceptional way born of God: of the heart of the Most Holy Trinity. She is spiritually ‘related’ to God himself.”²³ When the Church greets Mary as *full of grace*, “she greets her *uniquely united to the Blessed Trinity*...”²⁴ This greeting highlights how deeply Mary is imbued with God’s own life, with his profound and ineffable mystery from the first moment of her conception.²⁵ She is the “dwelling place of the Most Holy Trinity.”²⁶ She “therefore appears as *the place of the love*

²⁰ Cf. James CURRY OFMConv, *The Mariology of Maximilian Kolbe, Marian Studies* 36 (1985) 81-97; H. M. MANTEAU-BONAMY OP, *Immaculate Conception and the Holy Spirit: The Marian teachings of Father Kolbe*, Kenosha, Wisconsin - Franciscan Marytown Press, 1977.

²¹ Angelus on Dec. 8, 1988, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 19-26, 1988, p. 4-5.

²² Angelus on Dec. 8, 2001, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 12, 2001, p. 2.

²³ Homily on Dec. 8, 1984, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 17, 1984, p. 16.

²⁴ Reflection in St. Mary Major on Dec. 8, 1996, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 11, 1996, p. 10.

²⁵ Cf. Prayer on Dec. 8, 1997, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 10, 1997, p. 1.

²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*; Reflection in St. Mary Major on Dec. 8, 1996, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 11, 1996, p. 10.

and action of the Persons of the Trinity.”²⁷ On his pilgrimage to Lourdes for the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, the Holy Father said:

I have greatly wished to make this pilgrimage to Lourdes in order to celebrate an event which *continues to give glory to the Triune God*. Mary’s Immaculate Conception is the *sign of the gracious love of the Father, the perfect expression of the redemption accomplished by the Son and the beginning of a life completely open to the working of the Holy Spirit*.²⁸

On another occasion he wrote: “In her is manifested in a unique way the *marvelous initiative of the Father, the sanctifying action of the Spirit and the perfect redemption operated by Christ*.”²⁹

Therefore, we can say that the dogma of the Immaculate Conception that originates in the Trinitarian Life of God is the most beautiful and perfect manifestation of the work of the Three Divine Persons in their unity and distinctiveness. It “introduces us into the *heart of the mystery of creation and Redemption* (cf. *Eph* 1,4-12; 3,9-11).”³⁰ Hence, it is the decisive point in

“salvation history” ... which begins with the creation of the universe and our first parents, continues in their sinful rebellion against God and its subsequent involvement of all humanity, and finds its climax in the work of redemption, whose fruits are poured out upon all believers through the Holy Spirit until Christ’s glorious return. The Immaculate Conception, therefore, rather than being something affecting Mary alone, concerns the whole Church and invites all of us to reflect deeply on God’s creative and redemptive will.³¹

In order to resume the Pope’s teaching on the mystery of the Immaculate Conception in a coherent way let us consider it in the Trinitarian perspective of salvation history in relation:

²⁷ Address to Mariological Colloquium on Oct. 13, 2000, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Oct. 25, 2000, p. 5.

²⁸ Homily in Lourdes on Aug. 15, 2004 (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/2004/documents/hf_ip-ii_ho.16.08.2004).

²⁹ Letter on the occasion of the international convention on “*Redemptoris Mater*” dated May 22, 1988, *Insegnamenti* Vol. XI/2 (1988) 1630-1634 (the translation is mine).

³⁰ Letter for the 12th World day of the sick dated Dec. 1, 2003, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Jan. 21, 2004, p. 7.

³¹ Angelus Dec. 8, 1991, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 16, 1991, p. 5.

- to God the Father Creator who chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him (cf. *Eph* 1,4),
- to God the Son who took on our human nature in order to redeem us, and
- to God the Holy Spirit who completes the work of the Father and the Son by his sanctifying action.

III. Masterpiece of God the Father:³² The “origin” of the Immaculate in the Father’s Heart

When we reflect on the theological question of Mary’s Immaculate Conception, we are not concerned how Mary was conceived in a biological sense. In fact, Pius IX’s definition prescind from all explanations about how the soul was infused into the body, and attributes to the person of Mary, at the first moment of her existence, the fact of her being conceived without the stain of original sin. Indeed, conception in a theological sense refers to the coming into existence of a person. Since the ultimate origin of a person is in God and therefore going infinitely beyond her origin in time, John Paul II emphasizes that the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception is

that moment in which the gaze of the Church, fixed on Mary, arrives furthest, not only at the very “beginning” of her life on earth, but also at the “beginning” of man’s history and of the history of salvation. Even further, in fact: *at the eternal Divine Thought and Love, in which Mary was conceived before, infinitely before, her conception on earth.*³³

Hence, before we consider Mary’s conception in the womb of her mother, we have to consider her conception in the mind of God. This is her very first conception, her conception from eternity in God’s design of salvation.

“Blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing” (cf. *Eph* 1,3)

In the Letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul writes:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed

³² Angelus Dec. 8, 1983, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 19, 1983, p. 2.

³³ Angelus Dec. 8, 1980, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 15, 1980, p. 2.

us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him (*Eph 1,3-4*).

These words - explains the Holy Father - refer to Mary in a particular and exceptional way. She, in fact, more than all men - and more than the angels - "was chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world," because in a unique and unrepeatable way she was chosen for Christ, she was destined to be His Mother.³⁴

This great Marian mystery, with which man's redemption begins in history, was already foreseen in that eternal plan of God the Father, in which Mary, preserved free from original sin in view of Christ's merits, was predestined to become in time the worthy Mother of the same Savior.³⁵

Yes. The Eternal Father chose Mary in Christ; he chose her for Christ. He made her holy, indeed, most holy. And *the first fruit of this choice and divine vocation was the Immaculate Conception*. This is her "origin" in God's eternal thought: in the Eternal Word: and this too will be her origin on earth, her birth in the splendor of the Immaculate Conception.³⁶

Not only Mary originates in God's eternal thought of love, but all of us were conceived, so to speak, in the loving heart of the Father who chose us in his Son before the foundation of the world. Hence, Mary's "Immaculate Conception" as the "decisive point in the history of salvation"³⁷ sheds light unto the mystery of election and predestination as it affects the whole human race:

God in his eternal love has chosen man from eternity: He has chosen him in his Son. God has chosen man, in order that he may reach the fullness of good by means of participation in his own life, Divine Life, by means of grace. He has chosen him from eternity, and irreversibly. Neither original sin, nor the whole history of personal faults and social sins have been able to dissuade the eternal Father from this plan of love of his. They have not been able to cancel the choice of us in the eternal Son, the Word consubstantial with the Father.³⁸

³⁴ Homily on Dec. 8, 1980, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 15, 1980, p. 2.

³⁵ Cf. Angelus on Dec. 8, 1983, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 12, 1983, p. 1.

³⁶ Homily on Dec. 8, 1983, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 19, 1983, p. 2.

³⁷ Homily on Dec. 8, 1978, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 21, 1978, p. 3-4.

³⁸ Homily on Dec. 8, 1978, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 21, 1978, p. 3-4.

“The Blessed Virgin saw shining upon her, as no other creature, the *face of the Father rich in grace and mercy.*”³⁹ As the Immaculate Conception, more than any other man, she bears in herself the mystery of this eternal destiny with which man has been embraced in God’s chosen Son:

- the destiny to the grace and the holiness of divine sonship,
- the destiny to glory in the God of infinite Majesty.⁴⁰

“She is the proclamation of a merciful God who does not surrender to the sin of his children,”⁴¹ - the Holy Father declares -, she is

the sign of God’s fidelity, which does not yield in the face of human sin. Her fullness of grace reminds us of the immense possibility for goodness, beauty, greatness and joy which are within the reach of human beings when they let themselves be guided by God’s will and reject sin.⁴²

Indeed,

in Mary shines forth God’s sublime and surprising tenderness for the entire human race: in her, humanity regains its former beauty and the divine plan is revealed to be stronger than evil, capable of offering ever new possibilities of life and salvation.⁴³

In Mary, “there is nothing that contrasts with the beauty willed by the Creator for the human being,” in her, “the Creator has kept the *original beauty of creation* uncontaminated.”⁴⁴ “As she came from the Creator’s hands, so she remained.”⁴⁵ Therefore, “*in Mary, the New Eve, Mother of the New Adam, the Father’s original, wondrous plan of love was reestablished in an even more wondrous way.*”⁴⁶

St. Anselm speaks of it in the Liturgy of hours: “God is the Father of created things, and Mary is Mother of recreated things. God is the Father of the constitution of all things, and Mary is Mother of the reconstitution

³⁹ Homily Dec. 8, 1998, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 16, 1998, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Cf. Homily Dec. 8, 1983, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 19, 1983, p. 8.

⁴¹ Angelus Dec. 8, 1993, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 15, 1993, p. 1.

⁴² Angelus Dec. 8, 1994, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 14, 1994, p. 2.

⁴³ Angelus Dec. 8, 1995, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 13, 1995, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Prayer Dec. 8 on Piazza di Spagna, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 11, 1996, p. 1.

⁴⁵ Angelus Dec. 8, 1989, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 18-26, 1989, p. 15.

⁴⁶ Angelus Dec. 8, 2000, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 13, 2000, p. 3.

of all things.”⁴⁷ The Immaculate Conception therefore is the first sign and at the same time the proclamation of the renewal of all things in Christ, “the beginning of a better world.”⁴⁸

“Full of grace” (Lk 1,28)

In the Annunciation, the Angel greeted Mary as “full of grace” (κεχαριτωμένη - *kecharitoméne*). The Holy Father notes:

He does not call her by her proper earthly name: Miryam (Mary), but by this *new name*: “full of grace.” What does this name mean? Why does the Archangel address the Virgin of Nazareth in this way?⁴⁹

The Pauline explanation of the biblical expression “grace” is indispensable, if we are to understand in a correct and satisfactory way the words addressed to the Virgin at the Annunciation: “Hail, full of grace!” (*Lk 1,28*).⁵⁰ These words come to her, as the Letter to the Ephesians shows, from the eternal thought of God, they are the *expression of the eternal Love*, the expression of the election “in the heavenly places, in Christ” (*Eph 1,4*).⁵¹

These words express a *singular election*. Grace means a particular fullness of creation through which the being, who resembles God, participates in God’s own interior life. *Grace means love and the gift of God himself*, the *completely free gift* (“given gratuitously”), in which God entrusts to man his Mystery, giving him, at the same time, the capacity of being able to bear witness to the Mystery, of filling with it his human being, his life, his thoughts, his will and his heart.⁵²

Grace “flows from that love which, in the Holy Spirit, unites the consubstantial Son to the Father.”⁵³ Therefore, the angel’s greeting “full of grace”, which in the Greek text of Luke’s Gospel reads κεχαριτωμένη, can be rendered as “particularly loved by God, entirely pervaded by his

⁴⁷ Homily Dec. 8, 1984, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 17, 1984, p. 16.

⁴⁸ Angelus Dec. 8, 1985, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 16, 1985, p. 16.

⁴⁹ *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 8.

⁵⁰ Cf. Homily Dec. 8, 1994, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 14, 1994, p. 3.

⁵¹ Cf. Homily Dec. 8, 1985, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 16, 1985, p. 1.

⁵² Angelus Dec. 8, 1978, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 21, 1978, p. 2.

⁵³ *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 8.

love, completely consolidated in it: as if entirely formed by it, by God's most holy Love."⁵⁴

Indeed, the *kecharitoméne* indicates a reality that has already taken place, not an event that will take place in the future. The biblical text uses the passive form of the perfect participle indicating that Mary at the time of the Annunciation was already full of grace. Its meaning is that Mary has been *transformed by the grace of God*. The Pope suggests that to render more exactly the nuance of the Greek word *κεχαριτωμένη*, "one should not say merely "full of grace", but "made full of grace," or even "filled with grace," which would clearly indicate that this was a gift God gave to the Blessed Virgin.⁵⁵ From the first moment of her existence, Mary was entirely transformed by the grace of God. Hence, she is and has always been "full of grace" (*κεχαριτωμένη*). Pius IX, who defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854, cited precisely *Lk 1,28* ("full of grace") as the best biblical foundation for this revealed truth.

Having a genuine interest in bringing to the fore the biblical meaning of "grace,"⁵⁶ John Paul II sees a significant echo of the expression "full of grace" in "the glorious grace he freely bestowed on us in his beloved" (*Eph 1,6*) of which Mary has received the fullness.⁵⁷ In fact, the verb *χαριτώω*⁵⁸ occurs only two times in the New Testament: in the text of the Annunciation (*Lk 1,28*) and in the Letter to the Ephesians that speaks of our eternal election in Christ (*Eph 1,6 ἐχαρίτωσεν*: "glorious grace").

⁵⁴ Homily Dec. 8, 1980, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 15, 1980, p. 1.

⁵⁵ General audience of May 8, 1996, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, June 15, 1996, p. 11.

⁵⁶ In *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 8, the Holy Father explains that "in the language of the Bible 'grace' means a *special gift*, which according to the New Testament has its source precisely in the Trinitarian life of God himself, God who is love (cf. *1 Jn 4,8*). The fruit of this love is 'the election' of which the Letter to the Ephesians speaks. On the part of God, this election is the eternal desire to save man through a sharing in his own life (cf. *2 Pt 1,4*) in Christ: it is salvation through a sharing in supernatural life. The effect of this eternal gift, of this grace of man's election by God, is like a *seed of holiness*, or a spring which rises in the soul as a gift from God himself, who through grace gives life and holiness to those who are chosen."

⁵⁷ Cf. *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 8.

⁵⁸ The verbs in *-όω* are causative. These verbs, then, effect a change of something in the person affected. Thus, the radical of the verb *χαριτώω* being *χάρις* (grace), the idea which is expressed is that of a *change* brought about by grace. Therefore *κεχαριτωμένη* signifies that *Mary has been transformed by the grace of God* (cf. I. de LA POTTERIE, *Kécharitôméné* in *Luc 1:28*, in: *Biblica* 69 (1987) 357-382, 480-508).

The Pope maintains that the greeting “full of grace” therefore

refers first of all to the election of Mary as Mother of the Son of God... If the eternal election in Christ and the vocation to the dignity of adopted children is the destiny of everyone, then the election of Mary is wholly exceptional and unique.⁵⁹

More than any other creature, Mary is the *first one who was chosen* “in the Beloved.”

Hence, she is the *image of the Divine choice of every creature*, a choice which was made from eternity, and was totally free, mysterious, and loving:

In the mystery of Christ she is present even “before the creation of the world,” as the one whom the Father “has chosen” *as Mother* of his Son in the Incarnation. And, what is more, together with the Father, the Son has chosen her, entrusting her eternally to the Spirit of holiness.⁶⁰

Mary is the creature in whom the Holy Trinity can fully manifest its *elective* love. She is God’s masterpiece, because God, by choosing her, poured into her the fullness of his love and life making her “full of grace” (κεχαριτωμένη):

What distinguishes the Virgin of Nazareth from all other creatures is the fullness of grace that is found in her. Mary not only received some graces; in her, everything is ruled and directed by grace, from the very beginning of her existence. She was not only preserved from original sin, but she received an admirable perfection of sanctity. She is the *ideal creature that God dreamed about*; a creature in whom there was never the slightest obstacle to the divine will. Because she was entirely penetrated by grace, in the depth of her soul everything is harmony and the beauty of the divine being is reflected in her in the most moving way.⁶¹

Mary’s fullness of grace is a consequence of God’s gracious choice. Before Mary could gain any merit or excel in the practice of virtues, God had already chosen her because he loved her in a singular way. In fact,

all that is granted to her is not due to any claim or merit, but only to God’s free and gracious choice... Mary is the pure fruit of God’s goodwill. He has

⁵⁹ *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 9.

⁶⁰ *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 8.

⁶¹ General audience of Dec. 7, 1983, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 12, 1983, p. 1.

so taken possession of her as to make her, according to the title used by the angel, “full of grace.”⁶²

The Immaculate Conception means therefore that *in Mary* “everything is mere grace and only grace (“*sola gratia*”)”⁶³ and that she is the first witness that “every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (*Jm* 1,17). With our spiritual eye fixed on Mary Immaculate we, too, can proclaim the truth concerning ourselves that was so eloquently expressed by the Apostle: “By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me was not in vain” (*I Cor* 15,10).

IV. The Immaculate: The masterpiece of Christ’s saving work⁶⁴

For many centuries theologians delved on the privilege accorded to Mary. Latin theology was firm on two things:

- every human being is infected with original sin and bears its consequences;
- this hereditary sin is remitted through the merits of Christ, Redeemer of the entire human race.⁶⁵

St. Augustine who has strongly influenced the ulterior theological reflection stressed Mary’s perfect holiness and the absence of any personal sin in her because of her lofty dignity as Mother of God: “The honor of Christ forbids the least hesitation on the subject of personal sin by His Mother.”⁶⁶ Nevertheless, he could not understand how the affirmation of a total absence of sin at the time of conception could be reconciled with the doctrine of the universality of original sin and the need of redemption for all Adam’s descendants. Around 1128, a monk of Canterbury, Eadmer, writing the first treatise on the Immaculate Conception, argued that Mary

⁶² General audience of May 8, 1996, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, May 15, 1996, p. 11.

⁶³ Letter on the occasion of the international convention on “*Redemptoris Mater*” dated May 22, 1988, *Insegnamenti* Vol. XI/2 (1988) 1630-1634 (the translation is mine).

⁶⁴ Angelus Dec. 8, 1999, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 15, 1999, p. 3.

⁶⁵ See AA. Vv., *Dictionary of Mary*, New York - Catholic Book Publishing Co, 1985, 137.

⁶⁶ AUGUSTINE, *De natura et gratia*, n. 42, cited by St. THOMAS, *Summa theologica*, III, q. 27, a. 4.

was preserved from every stain of sin by the explicit will of God because he “was obviously able to do this and wanted to do so. Thus, if he willed it, he did it” (*Tract.* 10). John Paul II gave a biblical foundation to the scholastic formula “*Potuit, decuit, ergo fecit!*” (It was possible, it was fitting, therefore it was done) that goes back to Eadmer.

“With God nothing is impossible”! (Lk 1,37)

The Holy Father refers these words of the Angel both to the virginal conception of the Son of God in the womb of Mary as well as to Mary’s Immaculate Conception. He believes that with these words the infinite power of God’s love and his grace are announced by the heavenly messenger:

If today the Church recalls these words, then it is also necessary for us to seek in them the answer to the question about the mystery of the Immaculate Conception. Since the omnipotence of the Eternal Father and the infinite power of love operating with the might of the Holy Spirit bring it about that the Son of God becomes man in the womb of the Virgin of Nazareth, so *the same power*, in consideration of the merits of the Redeemer, preserves his Mother from the heritage of original sin.⁶⁷

Despite the insights of Eadmer, the great theologians of the 13th century made St. Augustine’s difficulties their own, advancing this argument: Redemption consists in freeing those who are in the state of sin. If Mary had not contracted original sin, she could not have been redeemed by Christ and, consequently, this would lessen the universality of Christ’s mediation as the Redeemer of mankind. It was only Duns Scotus who found the key in overcoming these objections to the doctrine of Mary’s Immaculate Conception. He introduced into theology the concept of redemption by preservation. According to it, Mary was redeemed in an even more wonderful way, not by being freed from sin, but by being preserved from sin. The Holy Father explains:

Mary *experienced salvation more than everyone*; she experienced it *in a particular way*.⁶⁸ Seen in the history and in the ways of the Redemption, Mary’s Immaculate Conception signifies not only the first person to be redeemed, therefore the dawn of the Redemption, but it also signifies that while for all the rest of the human race redemption means “liberation” from

⁶⁷ Homily Dec. 8, 1981, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 14, 1981, p. 1.

⁶⁸ Homily Dec. 8, 1980, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 15, 1980, p. 1-2.

sin, for Mary, as much in need of redemption as all human beings, it means “preservation” from the same original sin, from the very first moment of her existence, in virtue of the merits of Christ, the one and only universal Redeemer.⁶⁹

“Where sin increased, grace overflowed” (Rm 5,20)

Mary is at the heart of this mystery. In her, redemption shows a saving power that is prevenient and permanent.⁷⁰ She is - in the words of John Paul II - “the greatest ‘success’ of the paschal mystery..., the most exquisite fruit of the seed of eternal life that God, in Jesus Christ, has sown in the heart of mankind in need of salvation after Adam’s sin.”⁷¹ The exceptional manner in which Mary experienced redemption manifests in a singular way God’s generosity towards the whole human race:

Christ, who is the author of divine life, that is, of grace, in every man, by means of the Redemption effected by him, must be *particularly generous with his Mother*. He must redeem her in an especially superabundant way from sin (“*copiosa apud eum redemptio*” - with him is plenteous redemption: Psalm 130,7). This generosity of the Son towards his Mother goes back to the first moment of her existence. It is called the Immaculate Conception.⁷²

The Pope stresses that the Immaculate Conception does not obscure but rather helps wonderfully to shed light on the effects of Christ’s redemptive grace in human nature.⁷³ Redemption does not only mean liberation or preservation from sin (*salvific grace*), but the seed of holiness (*sanctifying grace*) planted by the Redeemer in human hearts.⁷⁴ In Mary the effect of Redemption “was manifested with a total purity and a marvelous flowering of sanctity. The Immaculate One is the first marvel of

⁶⁹ Angelus Dec. 8, 1983, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 12, 1983, p. 1.

⁷⁰ Cf. Angelus Dec. 8, 1993, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 15, 1993, p. 1.

⁷¹ General audience of April 17, 1983, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, April 25, 1983, p. 2.

⁷² Angelus Dec. 8, 1978, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 21, 1978, p. 2.

⁷³ Cf. General audience of June 5, 1996, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, June 12, 1996, p. 11.

⁷⁴ Cf. *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 10: “By virtue of the richness of the grace of the beloved Son, by reason of the redemptive merits of him who willed to become her Son, Mary was preserved from the inheritance of original sin. In this way, from the first moment of her conception - which is to say of her existence - she belonged to Christ, sharing in the *salvific* and *sanctifying grace* and in that love which has its beginning in the ‘Beloved’, the Son of the Eternal Father, who through the Incarnation became her own Son.”

the Redemption.”⁷⁵ It is therefore in Mary and with Mary “that we can penetrate the meaning of the Paschal Mystery, allowing it to bear in us the immense richness of its effects and its fruits of eternal life.”⁷⁶

“I will put enmity between you and the woman” (Gn 3,15)

Tradition and the Magisterium have seen in the so-called Proto-evangelium (Gn 3,15) a scriptural source for the truth of Mary’s Immaculate Conception: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gn 3,15). Although the Latin version: “She will crush your head” does not agree with the Hebrew text, in which it is not the woman but her offspring who will crush the serpent’s head, the depiction of the Immaculate crushing the serpent, not by her own power but through the grace of her Son, is consistent with the original meaning of the passage, since the biblical concept establishes a profound solidarity between the woman and her offspring.⁷⁷ Indeed, “the Son’s victory is the Mother’s victory, the victory of the Immaculate Servant of the Lord.”⁷⁸ John Paul II declares:

The miracle of the Immaculate Conception is the *victory of Christ the Redeemer*. Sin, as Adam’s heritage, original sin, is conquered at the very first moment of the conception of her who had been chosen to be the Mother of the Redeemer. This miracle of grace was wrought by the “right hand” and “holy arm” of him who was nailed to the Cross for the redemption of the sins of all mankind. She who was eternally chosen to be his Mother was redeemed in a privileged way!⁷⁹

Speaking of Mary’s perfect redemption by Christ, the dogma states that the Blessed Virgin Mary, “in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, Redeemer of the human race, was preserved from every stain of original sin” (cf. DS 2803). When John Paul II presents the Immaculate Conception in relation to its opposite: sin, he prefers to speak of sin in its personal dimension rather than referring to it as “stain.” Considering Gn 3,15, he sees

⁷⁵ General audience of Dec. 7, 1983, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 12, 1983, p. 1.

⁷⁶ General audience of April 17, 1983, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, April 25, 1983, p. 2.

⁷⁷ General audience of May 29, 1996, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, June 5, 1996, p. 11.

⁷⁸ Prayer on Dec. 8, 2000, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 13, 2000, p. 3.

⁷⁹ Angelus Dec. 8, 1984, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 17, 1984, p. 17.

sin in its disastrous effect on man's relationship with God and creation. Sin causes *alienation* from God, because it consists in the refusal of his love and the denial of the truth about God and man. As complicity with the evil one, it involves a broken relationship, yes, in a certain sense "enmity" with God. "Christ, the Son of the Woman, reestablishes the grace of friendship with God. Human beings can leave their 'hiding place' of sin for the 'light' of divine adoption."⁸⁰ Indeed, with the Immaculate Conception, sin is overcome and the friendship with God is reestablished.

In Mary the reconciliation of God with mankind was effected, but in such a way that Mary herself had no personal need to be reconciled, since, being preserved from original sin, she has always existed in accord with God.⁸¹

Since Mary lived from the first moment of her existence in perfect friendship with God, the enmity between the demon and the woman is expressed most completely in her. This enmity does not refer only to Mary, but accompanies the history of humanity on earth and the history of salvation itself as the Second Vatican Council recalled: History in its deepest reality, is the scene of "an arduous struggle against the powers of darkness, which started at the world's beginning and will continue, as the Lord tells us, until the last day" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 37). Indeed,

the "enmity," foretold at the beginning, is confirmed in the Apocalypse (the book of the final events of the Church and the world), in which there recurs the sign of the "woman," this time "clothed with the sun" (*Rev.* 12,1). Mary, Mother of the Incarnate Word, is placed at the very center of that enmity.⁸²

The Holy Father emphasizes that Mary's Immaculate Conception is more than a privilege; it is rather a duty to closely participate in the eschatological struggle of her Son to destroy the works of the devil. Therefore her Immaculate Conception does not mean as if she had been transported outside of all those who have received the inheritance of the sin of our first parents. On the contrary, it means her insertion into the very center of the spiritual combat, of this "enmity" that in the course of human history places the "Prince of Darkness" and "the Father of Lies" in opposition to the Woman and her seed:

Through the words of the Book of Genesis we see Mary Immaculate in all the realism of her election. We see her at the culminating moment of this

⁸⁰ Angelus Dec. 8, 1990, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 10, 1990, p. 1.

⁸¹ General audience of Dec. 7, 1983, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 12, 1983, p. 1.

⁸² *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 11.

“enmity:” at the foot of the Cross of Christ on Calvary. There “she” will crush your head and you will strike her heel.”⁸³ Since Mary was intimately united with her Son in crushing the head of the Serpent, she continues to be involved in this spiritual combat until the end of times supporting her children in their daily struggles to overcome evil and sin:

We must consider her as our sure support in the struggle against the powers of evil, as the most brilliant light of truth, as an invincible reason for hope and joy. Mary speaks to us of a total victory over evil whereby, by following her - and therefore following Christ - we can hope to be totally purified from sin and also to become “holy” and “without blemish.”⁸⁴

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free”(Gal 5,1)

John Paul II places Mary, as a human person, at the center of Redemption. Freedom is essential for a person to attain to its perfection and fullness. He sees therefore a profound relationship of her freedom and her being the Immaculate Conception. He delineates that God wanted to give life in fullness to the human creature (cf. *Jn* 10,10), on the condition, however, that his initiative would be met with a free and loving response. Unfortunately man tragically cut off the vital dialogue with the Creator placing his “no” in opposition to the “yes” of God, and thus exchanged his freedom in God with the slavery to sin and Satan. While all of humanity was deeply involved in this enmity towards God, only Mary of Nazareth, conceived without sin, was completely open to the divine design so that God was able to accomplish in her his plan of mercy:

The Immaculate Conception introduces the harmonious interlacing between the “yes” of God and the “yes” that Mary pronounced without reserve when the Angel brought the heavenly announcement (cf. *Lk* 1,38). Her “yes” in the name of humanity re-opened the doors of Heaven to the world.⁸⁵

Since the Immaculate Conception indicates freedom from the heritage of sin, that is, freedom from the effects of the disobedience of the first Adam, she “is *the only creature who is perfectly free.*”⁸⁶ This perfect

⁸³ Homily Dec. 8, 1985, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 16, 1985, p. 1.

⁸⁴ Angelus Dec. 8, 1989, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 18-26, 1989, p. 15.

⁸⁵ Letter for the 12th world of the sick, dated Dec. 1, 2003, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Jan. 21, 2004, p. 7.

⁸⁶ Homily in Lourdes on Aug. 15, 2004 (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/2004/documents/hf_ip-ii_ho.16.08.2004).

freedom is achieved at the cost of the obedience of the second Adam: Christ who “for freedom has set us free” (*Gal 5,1*). In Mary’s heart there is no shade of selfishness, no trace of the original “*non serviam*.” The original temptation to become a “god in opposition to God” is totally alien to her.⁸⁷ It was precisely this freedom that enabled her to met God’s invitation with a perfectly free and loving response:

In her there is total openness to God’s power, which is love. She is completely transparent and shining in her faith: she is the one who is “blessed because she has believed”. In her there is no stain of sin, not even of original sin. The redemptive love of her Son embraced her and imbued her from the first moment in which she was conceived by her earthly parents.⁸⁸

Thus Mary’s response is an answer given by grace and in grace, which comes from Christ the Redeemer through the Holy Spirit. But this did not make it cease being an authentic expression of her freedom as a human creature. On the contrary, God’s love which from the first moment of her existence directed all of Mary’s acts ensured that Mary’s response, as a conscious act of free will, was an answer of love in a perfect way, and thus became the shining model for every person’s personal relationship with God.⁸⁹

Nowadays - observes the Pope - it is sometimes held, that each human being is free when he makes use of freedom as he wishes, and that this must be our aim in the lives of individuals and societies. In reality, freedom is a great gift only when we know how to use it consciously for everything that is our true good. This gift finds its full realization in the unreserved giving of the whole of one’s human person, in a spirit of love, to Christ and, with Christ, to all those to whom he sends men and women to serve others with the selflessness proper to love. For this “freedom Christ has set us free” (*Gal 5,1*) and ever continues to set us free.⁹⁰

The full truth about human freedom is indelibly inscribed on the mystery of the Redemption and shines forth in the creature who was able to correspond to God’s gift with absolute freedom of love, not stained by sin. The Virgin Mary is the model of perfect *human freedom* in responding to God’s plan. She is the sign of what God can do when he finds a crea-

⁸⁷ Cf. Homily Dec. 8, 1994, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 14, 1994, p. 4.

⁸⁸ Homily Dec. 8, 1991, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 16, 1991, p. 5.

⁸⁹ Cf. General audience of April 18, 1990, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, April 23, 1990, p. 11.

⁹⁰ Cf. *Redemptor hominis*, n. 21.

ture free to welcome His proposal. She reminds every human being, whatever his situation, that God loves him personally, that he desires only his good and follows him constantly with a plan of grace and mercy with which he must cooperate responsibly.⁹¹ Therefore - declares the Holy Father - the Immaculate Virgin has a message for everyone:

Be men and women of freedom! But remember: human freedom is a freedom wounded by sin. It is a freedom which itself needs to be set free. Christ is its liberator; he is the one who “for freedom has set us free” (cf. *Gal 5,1*). Defend that freedom!

Dear friends, in this we can count on Mary, who, since she never yielded to sin, is the only creature who is perfectly free. I entrust you to her. Walk beside Mary as you journey towards the complete fulfillment of your humanity!⁹²

“I am the servant of the Lord”

Besides being a sublime privilege that exalts Mary among all human creatures and the choirs of angels themselves, her sinless conception was the eminent condition of grace so that her whole person, from the very first instant, would be disposed *in the most complete freedom*, the freedom from original sin, to the service of Christ and his redemptive work, for all mankind.⁹³ Consequently, John Paul II always relates the privilege of the Immaculate Conception to God’s salvific plan:

We must above all note that Mary was created immaculate in order to be better able to act on our behalf. The fullness of grace allowed her to perfectly fulfill her mission of collaboration with the work of salvation... it is for sinners, that is for all of us, that she received an exceptional grace... the unique privilege of her Immaculate Conception puts her at the service of everyone.⁹⁴

In fact,

she desires nothing for herself except God’s glory and human salvation. For her, the privilege of being preserved from original sin is not a reason to boast, but one of total service to her Son’s redemptive mission.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Cf. Angelus Dec. 8, 1999, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 15, 1999, p. 3.

⁹² Homily in Lourdes on Aug. 15, 2004 (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/2004/documents/hf_ip-ii_ho.16.08.2004).

⁹³ Cf. Angelus Dec. 8, 1983, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 12, 1983, p. 1.

⁹⁴ General audience of Dec. 7, 1983, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 12, 1983, p. 1.

Therefore

the prodigy of the Immaculate Conception reminds believers of a fundamental truth: it is possible to reach salvation only through docile participation in the project of the Father, who wanted to redeem the world through the death and resurrection of His only-begotten Son.⁹⁶

Mary - the Immaculate One - stands at the foot of the Cross:

United with the Son in suffering... she cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the Saviors work of restoring supernatural life to souls. For this reason she is a Mother to us in the order of grace (*Lumen Gentium*, 61).⁹⁷

“In her role as Mother, she strives to make all her earthly children sharers in some way in the favor with which she was personally enriched.”⁹⁸

V. Mary Immaculate: The All-holy fashioned by the Holy Spirit

John Paul II points out the Trinitarian character of Mary’s Immaculate Conception. Mary is the perfect human creature that came unstained from the Creator’s hands. Redeemed in the most perfect way, she is the masterpiece of Christ’s saving work. But what is the Holy Spirit’s part in Mary’s fullness of grace?

The Holy Father declares that the Father and the Son entrusted her eternally to the Spirit of holiness.⁹⁹ The Holy Spirit as the Person-Gift between the Father and the Son, is at the same time the Divine Person by whom Father and Son enter into a real relationship with the world, especially with humanity. At the summit of this relationship stands Mary to whom the Holy Spirit communicates from the first moment of her existence through the power of God’s gracious love the saving and sanctifying grace of Christ, her Son and Redeemer.

⁹⁵ Angelus Dec. 8, 1997, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 10, 1997, p. 1.

⁹⁶ Letter for the 12th World Day of the sick, dated Dec. 1, 2003, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Jan. 21, 2004, p. 7.

⁹⁷ Cf. Homily Dec. 8, 1985, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 16, 1985, p. 1.

⁹⁸ General audience of Dec. 7, 1983, in: *L’Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 12, 1983, p. 1.

⁹⁹ *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 8.

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you”(Lk 1,35)

The Pope draws a similarity between the eternal generation of the Son, his virginal conception in the womb of Mary and the Virgin Mary’s Immaculate Conception. If the eternal generation of the Son by the Father is based on an indescribable love between two eternally co-existent Divine Persons, the generation of the Son in his humanity happens through the power of that same love that is the Holy Spirit in his Person. And if the virginal generation of the Son at the Annunciation through the power of the Holy Spirit is the cause and model of man’s regeneration in baptism, then Mary’s

Immaculate Conception represents the most perfect result of the gratuitous action of the Holy Spirit who forms her and makes her a new creation, virgin soil, a temple of the Spirit, from her very first moment... [Thus] in Mary’s conception, being born of man coincides with being reborn of the Spirit, and mankind is brought back to the beginning of creation.¹⁰⁰

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you” (Lk 1,35). These words of the Angel, referring to the virginal conception of the Son of God, recall, in a certain sense, also the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Mary at the moment of her conception:

In Mary, the Holy Spirit descended and acted, chronologically speaking, even before the Incarnation, that is from the moment of her Immaculate Conception... For her the Immaculate Conception constituted, in advance, a participation in the benefits of the Incarnation and Redemption, as the highpoint and fullness of the “self-gift” which God makes to man. And that is accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰¹

As it is for the Holy Spirit who is uncreated love, consubstantial with the Father and the Son, to realize the mystery of the human birth of the Son of God because solely from this Power, who is Love, can He be born,¹⁰² it is also by the power of the Holy Spirit that Mary, “at the moment of her conception in her mother’s womb, is generated, in all fullness, by God.”¹⁰³ “Free from original sin, she was filled from the first moment of her conception with the Holy Spirit: she was conceived ‘full of grace’ ...

¹⁰⁰ Angelus Dec. 8, 1983, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 12, 1983, p. 1.

¹⁰¹ General audience of April 18, 1990, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, April 23, 1990, p. 11.

¹⁰² Homily Dec. 8, 1988, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 19-26, 1988, p. 4.

¹⁰³ Homily Dec. 8, 1984, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 17, 1984, p. 16.

The Eternal Father sealed [her], with the power of the Holy Spirit,”¹⁰⁴ making her “the first heir to the holiness of her own Son.”¹⁰⁵

“And so the child will be *holy* and called the Son of God” (*Lk* 1,35). As the Spirit anointed the humanity of the Son with a unique fullness of holiness, in a similar way the Holy Spirit came upon the Virgin Mary (cf. *Lk* 1,35) sanctifying her in a singular way. Hence, there is a deep communion between the holiness of Christ and of his Mother. “No one has been more like Him, not only with the natural likeness of mother and son, but with the likeness of the Spirit of holiness.”¹⁰⁶ The Fathers of the Eastern Church therefore see not only Christ “the Holy One,” but also Mary “All-Holy” (*panhagia*)¹⁰⁷ as a transference of the Holy Spirit, the “All-Holy” (*Panhagios*). Her “entirely unique holiness” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 56) originates in the perfect holiness of the Holy Spirit who fashioned and formed her as a new creature. The Catechism of the Catholic Church calls Mary repeatedly “all holy” underscoring her closeness to the Holy Spirit, the author of holiness.

Blessed Pius IX stated in the Apostolic letter *Ineffabilis Deus* that Mary shows “such a fullness of innocence and holiness that one cannot comprehend greater, apart from that of God, and no one, apart from God, could grasp it.” Indeed, hers is the first and the highest realization of holiness in the Church, through the power of the Holy Spirit who is the Holy One and Sanctifier.

On the day of Pentecost this ecclesial holiness shone forth not only in Mary but also in the Apostles and in the disciples who “were all filled with the Holy Spirit” (*Ac* 2,4). The Holy Father therefore refers the words of the Angel “The Holy Spirit will come upon you” (*Lk* 1,35) also to the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost:

In the light of these words... does not the Mother of God appear as the model and figure of the Church? For the Church too was born into the history of humanity through the coming of the Holy Spirit! She was born on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came down upon the Apostles gathered in the Upper Room together with Mary.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Angelus Dec. 8, 1981, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 14, 1981, p. 1.

¹⁰⁵ Homily Dec. 8, 1978, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 21, 1978, p. 2.

¹⁰⁶ Homily Dec. 8, 1980, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 15, 1980, p. 2.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. JOSE CRISTO REY GARCIA PAREDES CMF, *La Panaghia*, in: *EphMar* 44 (1994) 223-240.

The Church looks therefore to Mary as her “model and figure” in the Holy Spirit. It is this ecclesiological dimension, proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council, that is the itinerary that allows us to read and to understand in all its width and depth the mystery of Mary:

Considered in this dimension, the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God and our Mother acquires a richer ecclesial significance. With her, the masterpiece of God the Father and the purest reflection of the grace of the Holy Spirit, the Church of Christ begins. In Mary we see the immaculate conception of the Church, the temple and the spouse without stain or wrinkle. It is in her that the Church feels it has attained its highest perfection, without a shadow of sin; and it is in her as the prototype, sign and help, that the ecclesial community, still a pilgrim on earth, is inspired and strengthened to advance in sanctity and in the struggle against sin.¹⁰⁹

As heir to the Second Vatican Council that has brought about “a great synthesis between Mariology and Ecclesiology,”¹¹⁰ John Paul II realized that the renewal of the Church in holiness¹¹¹ cannot be achieved except by looking to the most holy Virgin in whom she “has already reached that perfection whereby she is without spot and wrinkle” (cf. *Eph* 5,27). The Holy Father explains:

The Church today is called to make the Face of her Bridegroom shine forth with her *more radiant holiness*. In this far from easy effort, she knows she is sustained by Mary. From Mary she “learns” to be a “virgin,” totally dedicated to her Spouse, Jesus Christ, and a “mother” of many children whom she brings forth to eternal life.¹¹²

Mary is the type (perfect realization) and model of the Church.

If the Church looks to the Blessed Virgin as to her “model,” she does so because in Mary the Holy Spirit first accomplished those “mighty works of God,” which from the day of Pentecost have become part of the Church, part of her awareness and her mission through faith.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Homily Dec. 8, 1985, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 16, 1985, p. 1.

¹⁰⁹ Angelus Dec. 11, 1983, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 19, 1983, p. 2.

¹¹⁰ Address to the Roman Curia on Dec. 22, 1987, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Jan. 11, 1988, p. 6.

¹¹¹ Cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 30-31.

¹¹² Message for 77th World Mission Day dated Jan. 12, 2003: in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Febr. 26, 2003, p. 6.

¹¹³ Homily on Pentecost, May 22, 1988, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, June 13, 1988, p. 17.

At the beginning of the third Millennium after Christ,

the Church earnestly desires only one thing: to be the same Church that was born of the Holy Spirit, when the Apostles devoted themselves to prayer, together with Mary in the Upper Room in Jerusalem (cf. *Ac* 1,14). For from the very beginning they had within their community the One who “is the Immaculate Conception”.¹¹⁴

Mary is the model to which the Church looks, in order to become increasingly a community of Saints. She “is an icon of the Church, the symbol and anticipation of humanity, transfigured by grace, the model and the unfailing hope for all those who direct their steps towards the heavenly Jerusalem.”¹¹⁵

Hence, John Paul II proposes Mary Immaculate as model of holiness and as guide in our pilgrimage to our heavenly homeland:

Mary is an inexhaustible model of perfection; however much we try to imitate her, she will always have something to teach us. Her holiness and purity absolutely transcend that of all the rest of the human race, which bears the effects of sin and must be freed from them through a path of conversion and penance... Mary certainly did not have to correct evil inclinations, as we have to do... Instead, she shows us the way to go from good to better, to surmount trials and temptations, and to progress in perfection. Mary teaches us how one advances in faith, hope and charity.¹¹⁶

The Virgin Mary stands before us as a model of our pilgrim way. It is not an easy way: as a result of the fall of our first parents, humanity is marked by the wounds of sin, whose consequences continue to be felt among the redeemed. But evil will not have the last word! Mary confirms this by her whole life, for she is a living witness of the victory of Christ, our Passover.¹¹⁷

Tota pulchra es Maria

You are all beautiful, o Mary! When John Paul II reflects on the mystery of the Immaculate, he loves to contemplate the peerless beauty of Mary. In the words of the Archangel “Hail, full of grace!” the greatest

¹¹⁴ Homily Dec. 8, 1985, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 16, 1985, p. 2.

¹¹⁵ Apostolic letter *Oriente lumen*, n. 6.

¹¹⁶ To friends of Focolare Movement on Febr. 11, 1988, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Febr. 29, 1988, p. 22.

¹¹⁷ Homily in Lourdes on Aug. 15, 2004 (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/2004/documents/hf_jp-ii_ho.16.08.2004).

spiritual beauty, which has its beginning in God, is called by name: the beauty of God's grace.¹¹⁸ Mary's beauty is fully known only to God, but at the same time appeals so much to man. Citing the Polish poet Cyprian Norwid who wrote that "The form of love is beauty..." (*Promethidion, Bogumul*), the Holy Father believes that

beauty, the incarnation of love, is a source of the most powerful encouragement to work, to effort, and to the creative struggles for a better form of human life, it is an incentive to overcome the forces of death and to continual resurrection. Because love, beauty and life are intimately linked to one another.¹¹⁹

In fact, man is sensitive to visible beauty, which is perceived by the senses, but also to the beauty of the spirit. The renewed discovery of Mary's spiritual beauty can arouse in man new energies and new reasons to live, to work and to combat evil and sin and to rise again each day.

The vision of her human and spiritual beauty ought to be before our eyes, so often offended and blinded by profane images that assail us and even, in a certain sense, assault us. If we keep Mary before us - she who is blessed among women - we shall be enabled to align in ourselves both the plan and the structure of the new human being redeemed by her Son.¹²⁰

For Mary "is the human heart's immaculate sensitivity to all that is of God, all that is true, good and beautiful, all that has its source and fulfillment in God."¹²¹

In Mary humanity regains its former beauty and the divine plan is revealed to be stronger than evil, capable of offering ever new possibilities of life and salvation. What *great horizons are opened by the mystery of the Immaculate Conception!* - exclaims John Paul II. As true pastor, he always relates the mystery of the Immaculate to the various situations of human life:

- To the women of our time, who search, sometimes intensely, for their authentic dignity, she who is "All Beautiful" shows the great possibilities of the feminine genius when it is imbued with grace.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Angelus Dec. 8, 1979, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 17, 1979, p. 2.

¹¹⁹ Prayer Dec. 8, 1996, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 11, 1996, p. 1.

¹²⁰ General audience of Dec. 30, 1987, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Jan. 11, 1988, p. 3.

¹²¹ Angelus Dec. 8, 1991, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 16, 1991, p. 5.

- She reminds children and young people, who look with anxious trust to the future, that the Lord does not disappoint deep personal expectations and he reaches out to all who want to build a world of greater brotherhood and solidarity.
- To whoever is steeped in sin but knows that he longs for what is good, the Immaculate shows the concrete possibilities for redemption in the sincere search for truth and in trusting abandonment into the Lord's hands.
- To those suffering in body or spirit, and to those laid low by history, the Virgin proclaims the God of life, who invites his children to joy and freedom, despite the heavy consequences of sin that disfigure the world.
- In contemplating the Immaculate Virgin, her beginning and pattern, the Church rediscovers herself as the work of God, called to fulfill, amid the ambiguities and temptations of the world, her sublime vocation as "the bride of Christ without stain or wrinkle, radiant with beauty" (*Preface of the Immaculate Conception*).¹²²

The Holy Father encourages all of us to raise our hearts to Mary who reminds us with motherly yet demanding affection of the will of God, who calls us to accomplish his original plan for holiness, notwithstanding the difficulties caused by original sin:

May the mystery of the Immaculate Conception deeply influence our hearts, delighting us with her wonderful splendor, as in the case of St Maximilian Kolbe, the "Knight of the Immaculata"; on 12 May 1941, when he was already a prisoner bound for Auschwitz, he wrote to his confreres in Niepokalanow, "Let us be guided ever more perfectly by the 'Immaculata', wherever and however she wants us, so that, fulfilling our duties well, we may help all souls to be conquered for her love."¹²³

Conclusion

Pope John Paul II brings to the fore that Mary stands in a unique and exemplary relationship to the Three Divine Persons:

¹²² Angelus Dec. 8, 1995, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 13, 1995, p. 5.

¹²³ Angelus Dec. 8, 1988, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, -52 Dec. 19-26, 1988, p. 4.

- Chosen from all eternity in Christ, she was first conceived in the heart of the Father as the perfect creature, totally formed by God's love in view of her role as Mother of God.
- Through the eternal Son made Man, the order of *creation* was linked for ever with that of *redemption*, that is, *grace*. Our Lady, totally preserved from the slavery of evil and the object of God's special favor, anticipates in her life the path to be taken by the redeemed, the people saved by Christ.¹²⁴ Mary is "the *first-fruits of humanity redeemed by Christ*,"¹²⁵ the masterpiece of his saving work.¹²⁶
- Fashioned by the Holy Spirit and made a new creature, Mary is *Tota pulchra*, "All holy." The "fullness of grace," which is *her starting point, for all others is the goal*: for, as the Apostle Paul says, God created us to "be holy and blameless before him" (*Eph 1,4*). Therefore she is the *great sign of the holiness, love and glory of God* on earth.¹²⁷

John Paul II affirms, that Mary's Immaculate Conception means that in Mary everything is grace from the first moment of her existence and that she corresponds to God's gift with the absolute freedom of love, not stained by sin. Since God's grace is at one and the same time gift and duty, it demands our free cooperation following the example of Mary who perfectly cooperated with God's plan of salvation. By his profound and original reflections on the mystery of the Immaculate Conception, the Holy Father helps us to penetrate more deeply into this mystery relating it to the fundamental truth of our faith and accepting it to our daily lives. Mary Immaculate, a creature filled with Divine love, all goodness, all beauty, all holiness, continues to be the one who prays for us, who defends us from evil, but who also inspires and stimulates us to live our Christian vocation to be "holy and immaculate" (cf. *Eph 1,4*).

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¹²⁴ Angelus Dec. 8, 1998, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 16, 1998, p. 4.

¹²⁵ Prayer Dec. 8, 2003, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 10, 2003, p. 1.

¹²⁶ Angelus Dec. 8, 1999, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 15, 1999, p. 3.

¹²⁷ Homily Dec. 8, 1998, in: *L'Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 16, 1998, p. 4.