

MARY AND THE CHURCH

St. Augustine, in Sermon 25, affirms that Mary's greatness does not lie in the privilege of having generated the Son of God in the flesh. Rather, she is great thanks to the faith with which she welcomed, conceived, gave birth, and nourished the Son of God. It is her faith (obedience expressed with her *yes/fiat*) that generates, in her alone, the body of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Mary generates the flesh of Jesus in her mind, her will, and her heart, through an act of faith that is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. This fruitful faith is, for St. Augustine, the reason for her honor. To the Church, Mary is great much more because of her faith than because of her unique privilege of having given a human body to the Son of God.

The Gospels bear witness to the journey, the mission, and the pilgrimage of faith that Mary is called to live. John Paul II tells us in n. 2 of his encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* (quoting *Lumen Gentium*, 58) that Mary had to grow in faith to fully give birth to Jesus Christ. Mary is a disciple and a pilgrim in faith. A Christian, a missionary disciple, is called to follow and participate in Mary's journey of faith. Only in this way, thanks to faith, can the Holy Spirit give birth to Jesus in each one of us. Let us retrace with Mary the steps of her pilgrimage in faith, growing in her mission as a daughter, disciple, and mother.

Luke 1:26-38

The Annunciation, as well as the virginal conception of Jesus Christ in Mt 1:18-25, is the first moment of her faith. The “yes” of the Annunciation does not yet seem fully realized, although it is, on the part of Mary, total. It is the beginning of maternal obedience and, therefore, a “yes” that is humanly a stance of absolute availability. But it is not yet complete, because it has not yet been fully consummated. In the Annunciation, as she asks questions of the angel, Mary is still the protagonist. She says “yes” only after this dialogue and encounter. The Son of God, while destined to be salvation for all humanity, appears in the Annunciation to be as yet just the exclusive fruit of Mary’s virginal womb and the fruitfulness of the Holy Spirit.

Luke 1:39-45

When Mary visits Elizabeth, the latter recognizes Mary’s divine motherhood. It is the coming together of the Old Covenant and the New. The divine motherhood of Mary is portrayed as the fruit of her faith: “Blessed is she who believed that the word of the Lord would be done.”

Luke 1:46-56

With her Magnificat, we have Mary’s response to Elizabeth’s profession of faith. It is a song of exultation, which expresses Mary’s awareness that what she carries in her womb comes from God through her free adherence of faith.

And yet what the Holy Spirit does and achieves through Mary’s obedient mediation will not be solely for Mary but for all. From generation to generation, all of humanity and all creation will receive the benefits obtained through her virginal faith. In Mary is realized for all humanity the historical

mediation of the fulfillment of the ancient promises to Israel, the beginning of the reconciled world. Through the mediation of Israel in Mary, the world begins its journey of salvation and reconciliation. We are the new Israel: in Mary, by faith, the Church begins.

Luke 2:1-20

The birth of Jesus (see Mt 2:1-12) already shows, through the shepherds, the signs of the reconciliation of all peoples. Luke describes, in the shepherds, the beginning of the transfiguration of the world, while Matthew presents us, in the Magi, the universal reach and the greatness of the fruit of the Virgin Mary's womb. Here, the mother of Jesus does not speak, but keeps everything in the secret of her heart. She contemplates the unity of the Mystery, the meaning of the things that are happening to her and that she is called to live in faith.

Matthew 2:13-19

Through the story of the flight into Egypt and the massacre of the Innocents, we see that from early childhood, the relationship of Jesus Christ with Mary is marked by the shedding of blood, a clear sign of a bloody separation that leads to the maturity of faith. Luke presents this truth also in the circumcision episode (see Lk 2:21): the firstborn does not belong to Mary, and her maternal relationship already seems to take on a sacrificial form (the knife, the blood, and the name given to Jesus through the blood: Jesus means "Yahweh saves"). Jesus belongs to God, and separation from his mother will be violent. In the separation of the cross, thanks to faith, the Son of Mary is given to all, for the salvation of all, and becomes Lord of all, head of his body which is the Church (see Jn 12:32).

Luke 2:22-38

Simeon's prophecy speaks of the sword that will pierce Mary's heart as a specific maternal consequence of the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ. The child is a "sign of contradiction." He will reveal faith hidden in the hearts of people, in the depths of our spirit; when he is raised on the cross, he will draw all people to himself.

Luke 2:41-51

In Jerusalem, the adolescent Jesus abandons his parents and remains in the Temple, taking possession of what belongs to him (see Jn 2:13-22; Lk 4:16-30). Jesus says to his parents, "Did you not know that I must take care of the things of my Father?" The separation is clear for Joseph – he clearly is not Jesus' father – but it also refers to Mary.

In the following Gospel passages, what Christ says about the adult relationship between Mother and Son becomes clear. In a journey of discipleship, Jesus forms Mary's motherhood and opens it to the mission of motherhood of the Church through obedient faith in listening and in the life of her Word.

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John 2:1-12

In the story of the wedding at Cana, we see wine and marriage, both eschatological signs of the heavenly Jerusalem, where all of us, judged by the truth of God's Word and by his Love, will be together one with God: "I also saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev 21:2). To say

“heaven” is to say spousal union between God and humanity. The world will be judged in order to be reconciled.

At Cana, Mary tries to “take advantage” of her maternal privilege as mother in the flesh, but she receives a lesson from her Son, so that she can fulfill her true role. At Cana, Mary is mother, but she is not yet fully a daughter. Jesus Christ distances himself from her, because he wants to transfigure her privilege of motherhood in the flesh. First he addresses her, not calling her “mother,” but connecting her to the rest of humanity by calling her “woman.” Christ responds to his mother as the Lord of humanity, emphasizing the distance between himself and Mary with harsh words (“Woman, what do you want from me? My hour has not yet come,” Jn 2:4). Jesus also indicates to Mary the fullness of time of his passion: “If you grow in your faith,” he seems to tell her, “I will make you the mother of all humanity through your participation in the sacrifice of my cross.” Mary accepts the challenge of her Son and shows us that the way of faith is obedience to all that the Son says: “His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you’” (Jn 2:5). Mary, as a student on the path of discipleship, learns about the nature of faith from her Son through separation from him, through his death on the cross. Faith is fully accomplished only in his Passover, which will reveal her universal maternal mission.

Mark 3:31-35 (Mt 12:46-50; Lk 8:19-21)

Still motivated by her privilege in the flesh, Mary seeks Jesus as her own Son. He does not receive his mother, nor allow her to enter. He looks at the disciples and asks: “Who is my mother and who are my brothers?” And he answers his own question: “Whoever does the will of God, this one for me is brother, sister and mother.” Jesus is describing what happened in the Annunciation. He is saying that the faith lived by Mary transforms those who believe into mothers; through them, faith generates sons and

daughters of God. Jesus teaches Mary, revealing to her the true meaning and the universal scope of her privilege of fleshly maternity, to amplify her motherhood and make her Mother of the Church and of saved humanity.

Luke 11:27ff

“Blessed is the womb that carried you and the breasts at which you nursed.” To these words, Jesus replied, “Rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it.” The motherhood that generates (womb) and nourishes (breast) is generation in the Word that, listened to and obeyed, becomes flesh (that is, it is put into practice) and sacrifices itself (through the Eucharistic offering on the cross) in order to nourish and sustain faith by building up the Church, a community of believers.

John 19:25-37

The time has come. Jesus is hanging on the cross, exposed, and has handed himself over entirely to the Father. In this Jesus not only makes himself fully available to the will of the Father, but allows himself to be delivered by the Father, for the salvation of humanity. By surrendering himself, Jesus allows the Father to surrender him for our salvation. This is the reason that Jesus said earlier that when he was raised up from the earth, he would draw all people to himself (see Jn 12:32), and that all will “look upon him whom they have pierced” (Jn 19:37, see Zech 12:10). It is time! Within this “hour,” in this context, Jesus surrenders his Mother for us.

Jesus addresses his mother and calls her “woman” (female humanity), offering her as a mother to John. John receives Mary as “woman.” It is the fulfillment of what Jesus had said in Jn 2:4. Mary becomes the Mother of all the living, reversing and converting Eve’s disobedience (see Gen 3:20).

Mary's motherhood at the foot of the cross recognizes that Jesus is the fruit of her womb and that he surrenders her so that she may become the mother of all the living, Mother of the Church, of humanity, and of the reconciled world.

At the foot of the cross, a new and true Adam generates the true and new Eve. At the foot of the new tree, the old disobedience is conquered and redeemed (see Gen 3:9-15). Through the mediation of John the apostle, Mary becomes the Mother of all humanity. The Church, reconciled humanity, has its origin in the Paschal Mystery.

Jesus teaches Mary so that she can move from the "yes" of the Annunciation to the "yes" of the Cross. Here, at the foot of the cross, in silence, letting herself be surrendered, Mary realizes the utmost fidelity to her "yes." She lets herself be shaped, created, and used by God. If, in the Annunciation, she surrenders herself through the human word of her faith, at the foot of the cross she surrenders herself through the silence of loving and fruitful contemplation of the self-abandonment and surrender of her own Son.

And after the cross, Mary will not speak again. All that she says will always be to return and obey his Son, for our salvation. Even in Marian apparitions, it is the words of Jesus her Son that we hear, inviting us to do what he tells us through his Church.

Acts 1:14

The Church awaits the Spirit to confirm it, to introduce it into the fullness of Truth, to console it, and to defend it. At Pentecost, Mary, in silence, is in the midst of the apostles, at the center of the confirmation of the apostolic, Petrine, and Marian foundation of the Church. Mary is placed in the heart of the universal mission of the nascent Church. Now Christ is complete: He, the Head, and us, in Mary, his Body, united to Him in the Spirit. Mary, mother of all the redeemed, never lost the unique

and exclusive role of being the mother of Jesus: on the Cross, Jesus extends his motherhood to the whole Church, and at Pentecost, it is confirmed. In the Church her motherhood becomes universal. The faith of the Church can generate Jesus in the hearts of believers through the faith of and in the motherhood of the Virgin Mary, the fruit and work of the Holy Spirit (see *Lumen Gentium* nn. 53, 63-65). In this logic of filial generation in the Spirit of God, where freedom and faith meet in the Passover of Jesus, the sacrament of baptism originates and takes shape.

Marian faith, fruit of Mary's maternal collaboration, is subordinate to, relative to, and derived from the salvific mediation of Jesus Christ (see *Lumen Gentium*, 60-62). Everything in Mary comes to correspond to what Jesus had said to his disciples: "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it" (Lk 9:23; see Mt 16:24-27, Mk 8:34-38, Jn 12:25).

Mary denies herself, takes up her cross, and follows her Son in the glory of the cross and resurrection (in her Assumption, body and soul into heaven). Dying to herself, she participates as a mother in the cross of her Son and follows him, letting herself be taken to the point where, through the Spirit, her earthly motherhood of Jesus becomes universal motherhood in the Church.

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1 Corinthians 15:20-28

Christ, the new Adam, is the first of those who rise from the dead; he is the firstborn of all creation (see Col 1:15) and the firstborn of the dead (see Col 1:18). Just as he is the new Adam, his Mother is the new Eve (see Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses*, III, 22, 3-4; on this Mary-Eve parallelism, Irenaeus refers to Justin, whose thought is based on St. Paul's Christ-Adam parallelism). She will be the first to participate in his glorious

resurrection: “Just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ shall all be brought to life, but each one in proper order: Christ the firstfruits; then, at his coming, those who belong to Christ” (1 Cor 15:22-23). Mary, in her turn, as the mother of Jesus in her immaculate flesh, is the first among all created things to be resurrected; as the mother of the Church, she is the first work of creation fully fulfilled and glorified, and it is thus in her soul and in her body, that is, in her totality. Her soul was obedient through faith, and her body was shaped by her virginal obedience.

As a Mother, Mary draws us to the glory of the Son, interceding for us in Heaven. Assumed soul and body into heaven, she remains Mother of the Son and our Mother, a guarantee that what happened to her will happen also to us: we will be glorified in soul and body, on the day of our resurrection, if we are faithful as she was, if we believe with Marian faith, with her faith. Mary, in her motherhood, is the firm point and sure hope that the resurrection of Jesus Christ will be effective, will open eternal life for us, and that the new life of his resurrection be at work in us. It is for this reason that, in the Eucharistic Prayer, when we remember our living communion with the heavenly Church, the first glorified creature we name, with respect to the order of the resurrection of the dead (see 1 Cor 15:23), is the Virgin Mary, Mother of God. In her divine motherhood is the effective beginning of her ecclesial motherhood.

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Revelation 12:1-17, 21:1-14

The relationship between the woman clothed in the sun, with the moon under her feet, and the Christian community persecuted for its witness leads us to a greater understanding of the Marian principle in the Church. In the narration, the persecutions suffered by Christians are described in terms of apocalyptic battles, in the atmosphere of the eschatological victory of the woman by virtue of the birth and mission of the Son. The woman

crowned with twelve stars, giving birth in the midst of the battle between the dragon and her with her Son, speaks to us of a connection between the woman and the community of the Church. It shows us that this connection is much more than symbolic-nominalist and arbitrary. This connection emerges further if we consider that our dwelling place with God, in heavenly glory, is presented as a city that descends from Heaven, like the Bride of the Lamb, bride of the victorious Risen Lord.

It is possible to understand the woman who gives birth as Virgin Mary, in the Incarnation-Birth of Jesus Christ, at the same time as the mother of her Son and, as Church, the mother of children generated through and in her Son, always in the historicity of his passion and death on cross (see Rev 12:10-12). It is possible that John, in chapter 12 of the book of Revelation, has Mary in mind, the new Eve, daughter of Zion, who gave birth to the Messiah. We can glimpse the relationship between the generation of the faith of Christians in persecution and the generation of the Son of God in Mary and in them.

Beyond this, we have seen that the Virgin's ability to signify, represent, and be humanity as Virgin-Church Bride – as the already redeemed beginning of salvation and as co-operative in this salvation – is rooted in the fact that her Son clearly identified her as “woman” in his preaching on the kingdom of God, in his works that realized the kingdom of God, and up to the cross. Known as the Mother of Jesus, Mary is called “woman” by him, both at the wedding at Cana (see Jn 2:4) and at the foot of the cross (see Jn 19:26). Jesus himself indicates that the motherhood of his mother, Mary, extends to ecclesial motherhood: what she did (hearing and obeying the Word of God) makes her mother, in the flesh, of the Son of God, just as we, hearing and obeying to the Word of God, will be generated as disciples (whom Jesus calls “my brothers, my sisters”; see Mk 3:33-35, Mt 12:48-50, Lk 8:21) who are also capable of generating (in the same passages, he also calls them “my mother”). In calling his mother in the flesh “woman,” Jesus emphasizes the need for Mary to grow as a disciple in order to become, in

the mystery of the cross, the first of all creatures to be glorified. This, for us, has the theological meaning that she is the new Eve, mother of the living, the principle-beginning, prefiguration, and guarantee that our salvation, as humanity, is realizable and effective.

Mary, already glorified through her assumption into heaven in soul and body, as the first creature to participate in the redemptive efficacy of the Paschal Mystery of her own Son, remains present, like humanity already made definitively victorious, in the community of the Church that generates Christ in the faithful pilgrims still in the midst of worldly struggles and persecutions. She, already belonging totally to God, prefigures what will happen to all, in the glory of the Son. She guarantees it, to the extent possible, to all men and women, as a glorified creature and by maternal intercession for them all before her Son. In her already redeemed and glorified motherhood, Mary cooperates as a mother in the generation of sons and daughters in her Son; she cooperates in the generation of the Church. As the creaturely principle of the Church and of the world already and definitively reconciled with God the Father through Christ in the Spirit, Mary testifies to us that humanity together with all creation (sun, moon, stars, sky and earth, city), when they are saved, will be saved as Church and Bride (see Rev 21:1-7).

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