

Mary, Our Lady, Mother of God, and Our Mother

Introduction

God's mother is so wonderful that she completely surpasses words. But I must stammer something, because she loves me. Her awesome love inspires me to praise and glorify Mary, mother of Jesus. She is all-worthy of all glory because she opened all her heart to all of God. Her total acceptance enlivens us. How?

She gives Jesus to us. God invited Mary to be the mother of God made flesh: Jesus Christ. He is all life. Therefore Mary delivers all life. Mary provides super-abundant vitality. Christ said it best: "I came that you may have life, and have it more abundantly", Jn 10:10. When Mary accepted God's invitation, she reversed Eve's rejection of God's invitation. Mary accepted God in Nazareth to correct Eve, who rejected God in Eden. Mary's acceptance opened her to conceive the second Adam: Jesus Christ. Christ's loving obedience corrected Adam's selfish disobedience. Dying on the tree of the cross, Jesus reversed Adam's rebellion at the tree of knowledge. Jesus obeyed unto death to correct Adam's disobedience into death. Jesus washed away Adam's sin, and all human sin. This miracle of God's mercy overwhelms me. Speechless in the face of this super-abundant life, I seek help from wise and holy people, saints like John Paul II.

Mary mothered St. John Paul II from childhood, because his earthly mother died. Mary so inspired John Paul that she radiated through him. She activated him, infusing God's love into every choice he made. She nurtured him to grow intensely intimate with Christ. Mary always joins us to Jesus. John Paul exemplified Mary's care and Christ's transformation of everyone who welcomes them. Mary's perfectly feminine reception of all people attracts everyone to her. At their best, females welcome, nurture, and support life. Mary is the ideal soft, gentle, and comforting mother.

Mary rewards our feeble love with her tremendous love, encouraging our love to grow. This love-expansion reveals how magnificent she truly is. God even preserved her from Original Sin. Clearly, only a perfectly pure woman was fit to be God's mother. This is the profound meaning of "full of grace, the Lord is with you", as Gabriel announced to Mary, Lk 1:28. Returning again and again to contemplate this Scripture message, John Paul grew even more confident in Christ's mother, who tenderly adopted him. John Paul passed on his experience of Mary's motherly love.

St. John Paul's Account of Mary Mothering

In his encyclical, *Redemptoris Mater*, he shares Marian love with the world. "The Mother of the Redeemer has a precise place in the plan of salvation, for 'when the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying "Abba! Father!" Gal 4:4-6.' With these words of the apostle Paul, ... I begin reflecting on Mary in the mystery of Christ, and on her active and exemplary presence in the life of the Church. These words celebrate together the love of the Father, the mission of the Son, the gift of the Spirit, the role of the woman from whom the Redeemer was born, and our own divine adoption, in the mystery of the 'fullness of time'.

"This 'fullness' indicates the moment fixed from all eternity when the Father sent His Son 'that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life', Jn 3:16. It denotes the blessed moment when the Word that 'was with God ... became flesh and dwelt among us', Jn 1:1, 14, and made Himself our brother. It marks the moment when the Holy Spirit, Who had already infused the fullness of grace into Mary of Nazareth, formed in her virginal womb the human nature of Christ. This 'fullness' marks the moment when, with the entrance of the eternal into time, time itself is redeemed, and being filled with the mystery of Christ, becomes definitively 'salvation time'. Finally, this 'fullness' designates the hidden beginning of the Church's journey. In the liturgy, the Church salutes Mary of Nazareth as the Church's own beginning, for in the event of the Immaculate Conception, the Church sees projected, and anticipated in her most noble member, the saving grace of Easter. And above all, in the Incarnation, she encounters Christ and Mary indissolubly joined: He who is the Church's Lord and Head, and she who, uttering the first fiat of the New Covenant, prefigures the Church's condition as spouse and mother.

"Strengthened by the presence of Christ (Mt 28:20), the Church journeys through time towards the consummation of the ages, and goes to meet the Lord Who comes. But on this journey she [Church] proceeds along the path already trodden by the Virgin Mary, who 'advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and loyally persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross' (*Lumen Gentium*, 58)." (*Redemptoris Mater* Introduction, sections 1 and 2)

Comment

St. John Paul's luminous words share his profound love and understanding of Our Lady. She radiates "the love of the Father, the mission of the Son, the gift of the Spirit, [her] role . . . , and our own divine adoption, in the mystery of the 'fullness of time'". What amazing truths, condensed so well by St. Paul, and unfolded by St. John Paul. God the Father invites Mary. Fatherly love overcomes Eve's rebellion by initiating a new perfect woman who will obey Him. Fatherly mercy overwhelms sin, so that His justice will prevail in every detail. Why? Because the New Eve, Mary reverses the Old Eve's choice, and the New Adam corrects the Old Adam's sin. Each person freely acts to perfectly balance mercy with justice. The Son incarnates, thereby revealing God in the flesh. He is the New Adam, obeying God, removing sin, and renovating all humans who freely follow Him by obeying the Father. The Holy Spirit gives the New Adam to Mary, and then to the world. After Christ's earthly ministry, the Holy Spirit will breathe through Pentecost to ignite the world. Mary's role is pivotal. Because she agrees, God adopts us, and accomplishes all this when the time is full.

When is the time full? St. John Paul illuminates five facets of the divine diamond, reflecting readiness for Christ's coming. 1) God the Father was ready to save mankind. It was "the moment fixed from all eternity when the Father sent His Son 'that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life', Jn 3:16." Prophets prepared people to accept Jesus. The Father knew how ripe that yearning for the Messiah was. God was ready, and His people were ready. 2) God the Son was ready to accomplish a great miracle: "the Word that 'was with God . . . became flesh and dwelt among us', Jn 1:1, 14, and made Himself our brother." The Son loved to obey the Father by becoming man to redeem us. 3) God the Holy Spirit was ready. He "had already infused the fullness of grace into Mary of Nazareth, [and now] formed in her virginal womb the human nature of Christ." The Spirit infused the Son into the single cell that grew into a fully formed baby, born in Bethlehem. Thus He came to join us in our struggle to regain God. 4) God the Trinity was ready for "the moment when, with the entrance of the eternal into time, time itself is redeemed, and being filled with the mystery of Christ, becomes definitively 'salvation time'." At that moment, the innocent New Adam began curing sinful humanity. He would grow up to save all people from disaster: sin. 5) God and the people were ready for "the hidden beginning of the Church's journey." To sustain feeble humans, Christ built the Church, against which the gates of hell shall not prevail.

These five reminders highlight how people, divine and human, were ready for the "fullness of time". Other facets of the divine diamond also shine. Chief among them is fulfillment of prophecies. For example, Mary fulfills Isaiah: "and a virgin shall conceive", Is 7:14. Similarly, she and her husband Joseph were of David's tribe. The child was born in Bethlehem. There are more, but these fulfillments suffice to illustrate the fullness of time for prophecies.

God created time, and can do what He wants with it. John Paul identifies "time bending" when God made the conception of "Mary the Church's own beginning, for by the Immaculate Conception, the Church sees **projected**, and **anticipated** in her most noble member, the saving grace of Easter." God the Son purged all sin by His death. Then He conquered death by rising from the dead. He applied that purgation/conquest to His mother, ahead of time, to conceive her without Original Sin. This perfect purity is necessary because by "the Incarnation, Christ and Mary [are] indissolubly joined." Obviously, God can't join with sin. So His mother must be sinless. Jesus anticipated His redemption/resurrection by applying His sanctifying grace to His mother before He achieved His redemptive acts. God's creation of Mary illustrates His magnificent blend of mercy with justice. He applies Christ's saving gift of paying every sin-debt.

St. John Paul summarizes these marvels with the masterful sentence: They are "indissolubly joined: He who is the Church's Lord and Head, and she who, uttering the first fiat of the New Covenant, prefigures the Church's condition as spouse and mother." This union of divine Person with created person expands our minds beyond mere creatures. Mary provided the created ovum, which the Holy Spirit inspired with the Uncreated Son, establishing the God-man. Mary nurtured His body in her womb, and thereafter until He matured. This mother-child union is so intimate that we cannot conceive it. It overflows every concept in which we try to contain it. But this overflow is exactly our destiny. Incarnate God alone fills our desire. God made us to be overwhelmed by His presence. This infinite mystery feeds our unending need. Though we cannot comprehend this mystery, we love to dwell in it, and expand along with it, on our way to God Himself.

John Paul expresses this reality masterfully. "Strengthened by the presence of Christ (Mt 28:20), the Church journeys through time towards the consummation of the ages, and goes to meet the Lord Who comes." That is precisely Mary's path, as the Pope quotes from the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*, 33, Mary "advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and loyally persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross". Mary shows us the way. Her good example inspires us to struggle forward. Moreover, she supports and comforts us every step of the way. If only we turn to her, she

mothers us through every inch of our journey to God. She modeled faith, hope and charity then, and nurtures our faith, hope and charity now. Her mothering flows to us in every instant that we welcome her care.

Another Way to Express this Abounding Truth, by Pope Benedict XVI

Naturally, we welcome Mary's care. Moms are most welcome. God's effusive love flows through Mary to us all. Pope Benedict XVI develops the fact that God chose Mary, and relied upon her free acceptance at the Annunciation. Because Mary freely agreed, she united in God's own creative decision, expressing His infinite love. [See *Benedictus; Day by Day with Pope Benedict XVI*; p 312.] This union with Christ is so expansive that we can't compress it into an idea. But we can experience it, because Jesus gave Mary to us to be our mother also. Pope Benedict expresses this reality elegantly. "Yes, we can say that Mary is close to us, as no other human being is, because Christ becomes man for all men and women, and His entire being is 'being here for us'. Christ, as the Head, is inseparable from His Body, which is the Church. He forms with her a single living subject. The Mother of the head is also the Mother of all the Church. She is totally emptied of herself. She has given herself entirely to Christ, and with Him is given as a gift to us all."

Comment Benedict presents expanding riches here. When we repeat these words to ourselves with an open heart, we experience Mary's loving presence. She lives for one purpose, and one purpose only, to bring Jesus to us. If we allow her, she pours Christ into our hearts. She mothers Him in us, giving life to all who welcome life. Then, finally, we rest in the love which Jesus is. Refreshed by divine Love, we can welcome Him more entirely, and accept more of His Love.

Benedict continues: **Text** "Indeed, the more the human person gives himself, the more he finds himself. Mary is so interwoven in the great mystery of the Church that she and the Church are inseparable, just as she and Christ are inseparable. Mary mirrors the Church, anticipates the Church in her person, and in all the turbulence that affects the suffering, struggling, Church, she always remains the Star of salvation."

Comment Benedict reminds us of our truest experience. The more we give ourselves away, the more we find ourselves. Perhaps this is more striking in negative form: the more we serve **ourselves**, the more we **disappear**. Our experience teaches us, painfully, that self-service destroys the self by starving it of the other people it needs. The more we wrap ourselves up in ourselves, the smaller the package. Eventually, we pray to prefer the positive action, because giving ourselves away discovers both ourselves and other people. This expanding discovery beats contracting by self-serving.

Text Benedict describes how Mary guides us like a reliable star in the sky: "She is the true center in which we trust, even if its outside bothers us. In Mary, the Immaculate, we find the essence of the Church without distortion. We ourselves must learn from her to become 'Church People'. Then we can, like St. Paul, present ourselves 'blameless' in the sight of the Lord. That's Christ's desire, as Paul says in Col 1:21-22, and Eph 1:4. Mary is holy Israel. She says 'yes' to the Lord. She puts herself totally at His disposal, and thus becomes the living temple of God." 312

Comment Benedict inspires us to soar into Mary's glory by reflecting on these words. With them to guide us, we can explore Mary's treasure of love. No doubt, external events bother us as if thorns covered the outside of life. But Mary shows us that inside, at the center, love prevails. Superficial thorns can't pierce the love-center. Instead, it persists through all thorny trials. Benedict reminds us that St. Paul exposed Christ's desire to reconcile alienated men, even sinners, through redeeming suffering, death, and resurrection. "Although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach", Col 1:21-22. Jesus came precisely to redeem us, and Mary accepted God's invitation to be His mother for the same reason. Mary obeyed because she loved God, Who loved our redemption.

St. Paul crystalizes Christ's desire: "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him in love", Eph 1:4. Jesus wanted this absorption into loving holiness to unite us, to be one with us in love. Loving unity is the heart of the Church. Because Mary welcomed God-made-man, and nourished Him through His earthly ministry, she accepted and nurtured His divine purpose. Benedict helps us look past the surface thorns, into the central love of the living Church. Mary nurtures this development, from God in her womb, all the way through Christ's ministry, to the end of time. Christ's second coming will perfect creation. The New Jerusalem will triumph over thorns, and all God's people will unite in heavenly bliss. These are the wonders Mary's decision to obey unleashed. May we learn from her how to love so much that we obey totally, thus accepting God's gift of Love Himself.

Christ Reveals Mary

Jesus Christ is divine revelation in human flesh. He is fully God, and fully man. God joins us in Jesus. We can gaze at God's incarnation in Christ. Jesus is not limited to His created body, but shines through it. We love to stretch beyond creation, into God's revelation, to share in this sheen. Mystery is our destiny. Nothing less satisfies us. St. John Paul II lived this mystery, stretching deep into Christ's presence. He shared some of what Jesus provides, His blessings.

Text ““Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places’, Eph 1:3. These words reveal the eternal design of God the Father, his plan of man's salvation in Christ. It is a universal plan, concerning all men and women created in the image and likeness of God (see Gen 1:26). Just as all are included in the creative work of God ‘in the beginning’, so all are eternally included in the divine plan of salvation, to be completely revealed in the ‘fullness of time’, with the final coming of Christ. In fact, the God who is the ‘Father of our Lord Jesus Christ... chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace’, Eph 1:4-7.

“The divine plan of salvation, fully revealed to us with the coming of Christ, is eternal. According to the teaching contained in the letter just quoted, and in other Pauline letters (Col 1:12-14; Rom 3:24; Gal 3:13; 2 Cor 5: 18-29), it is also eternally linked to Christ. It includes everyone, but it reserves a special place for the ‘woman’ who is the Mother of him to whom the Father has entrusted the work of salvation. As Vatican II says: ‘she is already prophetically foreshadowed in the promise made to our first parents after their fall into sin’ (Gen 3:15). Likewise, she is ‘the Virgin who is to conceive and bear a son, whose name will be called Emmanuel’, Is 7:14. In this way, the Old Testament prepares that ‘fullness of time’ when God ‘sent forth his Son, born of woman ... so that we might receive adoption as sons’, Gal 4:4. The coming into the world of the Son of God is an event recorded in the first chapters of the Gospels according to Luke and Matthew.

“Mary is definitively introduced into the mystery of Christ through this event: the Annunciation by the angel. This takes place at Nazareth, within the concrete circumstances of the history of Israel, the people who first received God's promises. The divine messenger says to the Virgin: ‘Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you’, Lk 1:28. Mary ‘was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be’, Lk 1:29. What could those extraordinary words mean, especially: ‘full of grace’?

“If we wish to meditate together with Mary on these words, and especially on the expression ‘full of grace’, we can find a significant echo in the very passage from the Letter to Ephesians quoted above. And if after the announcement of the heavenly messenger, the Virgin of Nazareth is also called ‘blessed among women’, Lk 1:42, it is because of that blessing with which ‘God the Father’ has filled us ‘in the heavenly places, in Christ’. It is a spiritual blessing which is meant for all people, and which bears in itself fullness and universality (‘every blessing’). It flows from that love which, in the Holy Spirit, unites the consubstantial Son to the Father. At the same time, it is a blessing poured out through Jesus Christ upon human history until the end, upon all people. This blessing, however, refers to Mary in a special and exceptional degree, for Elizabeth greeted her as ‘blessed among women’.

“The double greeting is due to the fact that in the soul of this ‘daughter of Sion’ there is manifested ... all the ‘glory of grace’ which ‘the Father... has given us in his beloved son’. The messenger greets Mary as ‘full of grace’. He calls her thus as if it were her real name. He doesn't call her by her proper earthly name: Miryam (= Mary), but by a new name: ‘full of grace’. What does this name mean? Why does the archangel address the Virgin of Nazareth in this way?

“In Bible language ‘grace’ means special gift. In the New Testament, the gift is from the Trinitarian life of God himself, God who is love (see 1 Jn 4:8). The fruit of this love is ‘the election’ of which Ephesians speaks. On the part of God, this election is the eternal desire to save man through a sharing in his own life in Christ (see 2 Pt 1:4). 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. Through grace, He gives life and holiness to those who are chosen. In this way, there is fulfilled, i.e. there comes to be, that ‘blessing’ of man ‘with every spiritual blessing’ that ‘being his adopted sons and daughters... in Christ’, in him who is eternally the ‘beloved Son’ of the Father.

“... the Gospel ... mingles revelations and ancient promises. [That mingling] enables us to understand that among all the ‘spiritual blessings in Christ’ this is a unique ‘blessing’. In the mystery of Christ, Mary 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. Moreover, together with the Father, the Son has chosen her, entrusting her eternally to the Spirit of holiness. In an entirely exceptional way, Mary is united to Christ, and similarly she is eternally loved in this ‘beloved Son’, who is of one being with the Father, in whom is concentrated all the ‘glory of grace’. Simultaneously, she is, and remains, perfectly open to this ‘gift from above’ (see Jas 1:17). The Council teaches that Mary ‘stands out among the poor and humble of the Lord, who confidently await and receive salvation from him’, *Lumen Gentium*, 55.” *Redemptoris Mater*, Part one, sections 7-8.

Comment St. John Paul condenses so much in these paragraphs that we should separate some sections, to dwell deeply upon them. Remember that John Paul influenced the bishops of Vatican II, impressing them so much that they later elected him pope. His ability and humility enabled him to lead many of the leading cardinals. When he returned from the Council, he implemented Vatican II in Poland. This encyclical is a shining example of implementing Vatican II principles.

John Paul emphasizes that Christ leads the way to everything worthwhile. Jesus is God. Therefore He knows best, and loves best. Mary actually followed Christ's lead, even though she changed His diapers. Jesus brings us every blessing, as St. Paul exclaims in Ephesians. God's plan, unfolding in Christ, includes everyone. It is the most universal of all plans because it cures our universal disease: sin. Because God is beyond time, He knows the entirety of history before He creates the universe. At the Annunciation, He already knows that Mary will agree to mother Him. He knows that His Son will take flesh in Mary's womb, and that she will care for Him perfectly. This divine participation in human life is God's ultimate outreach to each and every one of us. Every step Jesus takes announces that God is Love. Most emphatically, Christ expresses total love by dying on the cross to redeem us. St. Paul's condenses all this into the expression “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace”, Eph 1:4-7.

The riches of God's grace expand so widely that we can't confine God's gift. God's love explodes over us, flooding us with His gifts. We never finish recounting them, but here's a sketch. God gives us life. He loves us into existence. He forgives our sins, encourages our efforts to live well, and shows us the best possible example by living among us for 33 years. Above all, he takes all our sins upon His innocent self, to make divine retribution. Then He shows us our destiny by rising from death into everlasting life. He invites us to follow Him to heaven, where we will live in the “many mansions” of “my Father's house”, Jn 14:2. In their multiplicity and immensity, God's gifts overwhelm us. They won't fit into words, or paragraphs, or even into papal encyclicals. But we love to receive them, and to enjoy them, even if we forget to thank God for them. John Paul helps us pay attention and give thanks. Concentrate on these gifts to enjoy them better.

From all eternity, God planned to save us, as Christ revealed by His life, death, and resurrection. Mary enabled, nurtured, and encouraged Jesus from conception through birth, into maturity. She focused God's love, so that the Holy Spirit could impregnate her when the angel Gabriel invited her to mother Christ. All the prophecies came true because of her obedience. God's gifts flowed through her agreement to obey God, as Matthew and Luke proclaim.

God implanted infinite meaning in the “fullness of grace”, so we will never exhaust His gift. But we find more meaning with every attempt. Gazing upon Mary enables us to focus upon more grace. When we were kids, we loved gazing at mom. Words were superfluous. Mom looked at us, we looked at mom. That was enough. Love beyond words flowed between us. Simple gazing improved our love, without any mechanism grinding away. Similarly, as we accept more divine gift, our capacity for grace grows. With some practice, we develop rapidly, and expand magnificently, because we cooperate with God's gift. Thankful contemplation of Mary's “fullness of grace” is so joyfully instructive that we love gazing at our heavenly mom. St. Therese of Lisieux reminds us that a baby trying to climb the stairs evokes mom's love with every futile effort, so mom descends, picks the infant up, and carries it. Mom is the image and likeness of God. He loves us even more than a mother her babe. Remember the most loving experiences you've had. Even more awaits you when God surprises you with infinitely increasing love. Gentle Mary helps us welcome God's love.

Love is God's deepest activity. As John Paul reminds us, it is “that love which, in the Holy Spirit, unites the consubstantial Son to the Father”. Though its immensity escapes us, we intuit that love is the activity uniting Father, Son, and Spirit. Gazing at Mary's love eases us into eternal, infinite, divine love. It so unifies them that it makes three Persons one God. God created us to contemplate this never-ending mystery. It is the ultimate gift, the greatest grace that God can offer. God made us to think and to love, so He will not impose His gift upon either our minds or our wills. Instead, He invites us to start from obvious, observable, creatures, then figure out that He exists and loves us. At that point we can knowingly and lovingly accept His gifts, leading to the ultimate gift of Himself. Overflowing with gifts, God eventually provides the infinite, eternal, perfect gift of Himself. But He gives only if we knowing and freely receive.

This Gift is too much for us to comprehend, or fully accept. Therefore, we open ourselves to gradually grow more knowing and loving by gazing on revelation in the flesh. Jesus gives us God. He protects us from overexposure by being one of us. Lest His stupendous presence kill us, He comes to Mary as a single-celled bit of life. He grows, as we did, in Mary's womb. He is born, like us, a babe. He matures, as we did, but perfectly. Rather than blind us in a flash of divine light, He shines through the veil of human flesh. He bends down to our level, to raise us up. Just as His mother helped him take His first steps, so she helps us follow Him. This surpassing gift illustrates God's superabundant love.

As John Paul notes, this grace "elects" us to approach ever-closer to God. If we accept this divine invitation, we "elect" to join those that God has "elected" by His gift. We become so one that our heads spin. That's why we rest, and then consider God's gift from many angles. We use many words to point to the flashes of illumination and warmth that emanate from God's presence in Christ. When His immensity daunts us, Mary will encourage us, urging us ever closer to her beloved Son. Mothers know their children so well that they provide exactly what the kids need. She hugs them at precisely the right time. Then she pushes them just enough that they venture forth. Her love carries us through trials, and lifts us toward God. She is the first of the "elect" to accept God's election, and the mother of all the "elect" who follow Jesus.

The greatest spiritual blessing that St. Paul recalls in Ephesians is "being adopted sons and daughters ... in Christ". God raises us from lowly creatures to be His own children. As Christ's brothers and sisters, we are Mary's children also. Therefore she cares for us as only a mother can. How unified this process is. God alone can accomplish such unity. If we accept God's offer to adopt us, then He showers us with gifts that lead ultimately to the Great Gift: God Himself. If we agree, and grab this Gift, God takes us into Himself. Then we return to our Source, and achieve our Destiny. Right now we rely on Mary, who "stands out among the poor and humble of the Lord, who confidently await and receive salvation from Him". What a glorious process. How great God's gift is. How magnificent our lives can be, if we believe!

Ask Mary to Believe as She Does

Pope Benedict XVI reflects on "Mary the Great Believer", *Benedictus*, p 140. He emphasizes Mary's profound faith to inspire us to believe more fully, in order to accept God's gifts. Benedict's simple words are eloquent: **Text** "Mary is the great believer who humbly offered herself to God as an empty vessel for him to use in his mysterious plan. She did not try to live according to human calculation, but put herself completely at the disposal of God's mysterious, incomprehensible design. All she wanted to be was the instrument and servant of the Word. Therein lies her true fame. She remained a believer despite all the darkness, and all the inexplicable demands God made on her. She believed even in the face of certain incomprehensible facts. Today God is still mysterious. Indeed, he seems to have a special kind of obscurity in store for each person's life. But could he ever render any life as dark and incomprehensible as he did Mary's?"

"This is the real reason for her greatness, and her being called blessed. She is the great believer. Consequently, she is represented to us, not as a distant haloed figure, but as forever the young girl who entered Elizabeth's house with the shining light of mystery on her brow, surrounded by the radiance of purity and hope. But, like Elizabeth, Mary cannot remain silent at this moment. ... moved by powerful joy ... 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior'. Mary deflects Elizabeth's praise from herself to God. It is he who deserves all praise. Thus Mary shows the way for all future praise of herself. It is to be praise of God."

Comment Benedict reminds us that Mary rejected human calculation, to open completely to God's infinite plan. His infinite plan surpasses our limited understanding. Mary did not know how God would make her pregnant with Himself. She reminded Gabriel that she "knew not man". But if God wanted to impregnate a virgin with a divine baby, Mary would agree. She believed so deeply that she accepted the "fullness of grace", the ultimate Gift. Then God became man in her. It is her faith in God that opened her completely to God. God's ways infinitely surpass her ways, so she knew that her intellect was inadequate to the events that God initiated in and through her. Therefore, she offered all praise and glory to God. This deflection of Elizabeth's praise fits truth best. May Mary's faith inspire us to believe more completely, so that God can fill our hearts entirely. Let's ask Mary to empty our hearts of vain desires, so that God can infinitely enliven us.

Mary's Uniqueness in Christ

As we strive to express Mary's inexpressible loving care, we must emphasize that she lived totally for her Son, Jesus Christ. Her ego never reduced her service to God. Mary manifested Jesus. Her stupendous achievement is just cause for great pride. Ordinary mothers would take extraordinary credit for Jesus. He was, after all, much more accomplished than any other son. Mary's profound humility entirely erased every desire, except to share her son with us.

John Paul expresses her humility more elegantly. **Text** "The election of Mary is wholly exceptional and unique. So is the singularity and uniqueness of her place in the mystery of Christ. The divine messenger says: 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High', Lk 1:30-32. When the Virgin, disturbed by that extraordinary greeting, asks: 'How shall this be, since I have no husband?', she receives from the angel the confirmation and explanation of his previous words. Gabriel says to her: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God', Lk 1:35.

"The annunciation is the revelation of the mystery of the Incarnation at the very beginning of its earthly fulfillment. God's salvific giving of himself and his life, indirectly to all creation, but directly to man, reaches its high point in the mystery of the Incarnation. This is indeed a peak among all the gifts of grace conferred in the history of man and the universe: Mary is 'full of grace' because it is precisely in her that the Incarnation of the Word, the hypostatic union of the Son of God with human nature, is accomplished. As the Council says, Mary is 'the Mother of the Son of God. As a result, she is also the favorite daughter of the Father, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. Because of this gift of sublime grace, she far surpasses all other creatures, both in heaven and on earth', *Lumen Gentium*, 53." *Redemptoris Mater*, Part One, 9.

Comment John Paul gives the reason why Mary is above all creatures, even angels. She is God's mother, sanctified by her divine son. Scripture is our launch pad to rocket into heavenly events. God accomplishes this miracle of grace. Luke recounts it. We strive to catch up with God's miraculous deed. Gabriel tells us that God fuses Himself with human nature. This union is unique. It deserves its own name, reserved for its singularity. Theologians use "hypostatic" to mean the very foundation, below all superficial connections. At the very base of human nature, God joins with man. A negative statement emphasizes the absolutivity of this union: there is no difference between God and man in Christ. God alone can create a hypostatic union that abolishes the difference between creature and Creator. This unity boggles the mind. But Jesus reveals this stupendous miracle when God the Son becomes man. Full of awe, we accept this gift. In joy, we wonder about this grace. It is too much for us to grasp, but just right for us to love. It is the main marvel that Gabriel announces.

In the brilliance of this divine light, we could easily forget God's secondary miracle. He skips biological interaction to impregnate Mary Himself. The Holy Spirit creates the sperm that penetrates Mary's ovum. Thus the virgin conceives, as Isaiah proclaimed. If we wonder about these mysteries, we discover in them a wealth of reality that previously escaped us. By contemplating God's deeds, we enter His glory, which He shares with us. God made us precisely to expand forever into His achievements. Though we can't comprehend His power, we can praise and glorify Him.

Our practical task is to set aside 15 minutes to dwell with Mary and the Spirit in the Incarnation event. Then we join God and Mary in the Incarnation event. John Paul dwelt long and often in this mystery. That's why he became so one with God's deed that he expressed it so clearly. If we delight in considering Christ's Incarnation, He increases our understanding along with our love. Jesus gives us the super-abundant love that God pours forth for us in this miracle. We can rely on God to flood us with his intelligible light and delectable love, whenever we celebrate His achievements. Because He loves Mary so intimately, our thinking of her extends His love to us. She surpasses all other creatures indeed, but gives all the credit to God. Her humility is her truth. Therefore God created and loved Her beyond our ability to comprehend.

Yet we extend our comprehension with every effort we make, so we profit by reading more of John Paul. He exposes more reasons for Mary's sublime divine gifts. **Text** John Paul describes the "'Glory of grace... God, the Father... has bestowed on us in his beloved Son. In him we have redemption through his blood', Eph 1:6-7. According to the belief formulated in solemn documents of the Church, this 'glory of grace' is manifested in the Mother of God through the fact that she has been 'redeemed in a more sublime manner', *Lumen Gentium*, 53. By the richness of the grace of the beloved Son, by 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/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. Consequently, through the power of the Holy Spirit, in the order of grace, which is a participation in the divine nature, Mary receives life from him to whom she herself, in the order of earthly generation, gave life as a mother. The liturgy does not hesitate to call her 'mother of her Creator', and to hail her with the words which Dante Alighieri places on the lips of St. Bernard: 'daughter of your Son', *Divine Comedy*, Paradiso, 33:1. Since Mary receives this 'new life' with a fullness corresponding to the Son's love for the Mother, thus corresponding to the dignity of the divine motherhood, the angel at the Annunciation calls her 'full of grace'.

“In the salvific design of the Most Holy Trinity, the mystery of the Incarnation constitutes the superabundant fulfillment of the promise made by God to man after original sin, that first sin whose effects oppress the whole earthly history of man (Gen 3:15). So there comes into the world a Son, ‘the seed of the woman’, who will crush the evil of sin in its very origins: ‘he will crush the head of the serpent’. As we see from the words of the Protogospel, the victory of the woman’s son will not take place without a hard struggle, extending through all human history. The ‘enmity’ foretold at the beginning, is confirmed in the Apocalypse, with its sign of the ‘woman’, this time ‘clothed with the sun’, (Rev 12:1).

“Mary, Mother of the Incarnate Word, is at the very center of that enmity, that struggle which accompanies the history of humanity on earth, and the history of salvation itself. In this central place, she who belongs to the ‘weak and poor of the Lord’, bears in herself, like no other human, that ‘glory of grace’ which the Father ‘has bestowed on us in his beloved Son’. This grace determines the extraordinary greatness and beauty of her whole being. Mary thus remains before God, and before all of humanity, as the unchangeable and inviolable sign of God’s election, spoken of in Ephesians. “In Christ...he chose us...before the foundation of the world...he destines us...to be his sons’, Eph 1:4-5. This election is more powerful than any experience of evil and sin, than all the ‘enmity’ marking the history of man. In this history Mary remains a sign of sure hope.” *Redemptoris Mater*, Part One, 10-11.

Comment John Paul administers a healthy dose of Scripture here! He shows God shining through Scripture to illuminate His great gift to Mary. So much of God’s word interacts here that we must pause to catch our breath. Ephesians, Luke, and Revelation provide linked messages expressing Christ’s redemptive acts, flowing from Mary’s agreement with God’s invitation. This flow aids our daily struggle to overcome evil. Perhaps we should dwell upon these passages to see how they interlock. St. John Paul obviously did. He is a magnificent example of a theologian on his knees, learning from wondering about God in prayer. If we yearn to learn, and read to satisfy our need, we open ourselves to God’s glory. Jesus is His glory in flesh. Scripture is His glory in words. Scripture supplements Christ. When we accept both gifts, we grow into Jesus as fast as we allow Him to transform us. Mary shows the way by accepting Christ as her Son. Dante learns from Mary to express her wonders well in words. “You are daughter of your Son” attaches our limited minds to the unlimited mystery that God created Mary to be His mother. It “does not compute” because it transcends computing. When we accept mystery, we escape computing restrictions, and soar into the Promised Land. Let’s transcend more with John Paul.

Text “**Blessed is she who believed.** Immediately after narrating the Annunciation, Luke guides us in the footsteps of the Virgin of Nazareth towards ‘a city of Judah’, Lk 1:39. Scholars say that this city is the modern Ain Karim, in the mountains, not far from Jerusalem. Mary arrived there ‘in haste’ to visit Elizabeth her kinswoman. ...at the Annunciation, Gabriel mentioned Elizabeth, who in her old age had conceived a son by her husband Zechariah, through the power of God. ‘Your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son. This is the sixth month with her who was called barren, for with God nothing will be impossible’, Lk 1:40-42. Elizabeth’s exclamation became part of the Hail Mary, one of the Church’s most frequent prayers. Still more significant are Elizabeth’s words: ‘Why is it granted me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?’, Lk 1:43. Elizabeth bears witness to Mary. She recognizes and proclaims that before her stands the Mother of the Lord, the Mother of the Messiah. The son Elizabeth carries in her womb also shares in this witness: ‘The babe in my womb leaped for joy’, Lk 1:44. This child, John the Baptist, will point out Jesus as the Messiah.

“While every word of Elizabeth’s greeting is filled with meaning, her final words seem to have fundamental importance: ‘And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord’, Lk 1:45. These words link with the title ‘full of grace’ of the angel’s greeting. Both of these texts reveal an essential Mariological content: the truth about Mary, who has become really present in the mystery of Christ, precisely because she ‘has believed’. The fullness of grace announced by the angel means the gift of God himself. Mary’s faith proclaimed by Elizabeth at the Visitation, indicates how the Virgin of Nazareth responded to this gift.” *Redemptoris Mater* Part One, 12

Comment John Paul reviewed three events so full of meaning and value that we can never exhaust them by learning and loving them. Before it occurred, God applied Christ’s redemption to His mother. Therefore she was conceived without sin. By preventing Original Sin, God created Mary perfectly pure. This is her Immaculate Conception. God created us to wonder in awe at this miracle. But God is just starting His magnificent miracles. The second awesome wonder is God becoming man in Mary’s womb: the Incarnation. The third stupendous event is that Elizabeth conceived in old age, past fertility. When Mary visited, God manifested His glory yet again. The Incarnate God evoked a joyful leap of the unborn witness, John the Baptist, at the Visitation. What can anybody say? Out of profound prayerful union with God, manifest in these miracles, John Paul says so much that we can unpack many treasures.

God is so kind that He supports Mary’s exceptional belief in the Incarnation by revealing a miracle. Cousin Elizabeth is pregnant. The precursor, greatest of all the prophets, John the Baptist is in his sixth month of gestation in Elizabeth’s womb. This supernatural achievement bolsters Mary’s faith, increasing it exponentially. As her faith soars heavenward, the rest of God’s life in Mary, her hope and charity, keep pace. So she walks to Ain Karim to assist her cousin for the most difficult final three months of pregnancy. God’s life of grace, identified as faith and charity, carries Mary through the journey. Upon meeting, the already-born women greet, and the unborn men greet, evoking John’s joyful leap. God inspires Elizabeth to utter words that ring God’s glory through the ages: ‘blessed are you who believed’.

Again and again, God tests his chosen ones, giving them what look like insoluble problems. But God provides all the grace they need to believe their way through each challenge. From their good example, we can learn to face our minor trials with confidence in His sustaining gift of His divine life. One dimension of divine life is faith. By faith, God’s chosen ones see the meaning of events which appear to faithless people to be shimmering illusions. Another dimension of divine life is charity. By charity, God’s chosen ones attend exclusively to God’s love. They accept the grace of God’s abundant love, and love Him back as best they can. This reciprocal love grows exponentially, beyond measure, into God Himself. Mary shows us faith and love in action during this Visitation.

God reveals Himself in all three of these mysteries. We can grow into God by simply repeating the mere words expressing these mysteries. The words draw us deeper into God’s actions in these mysteries. Then we transcend words to follow God’s acts. Ultimately, his acts lead to Himself. Like a spiral, expanding upwards into God, our awesome wonder ascends ever into God. Benedict XVI gives us a fine example of pondering the infertile becoming fertile, of woman in life.

Text “It is significant that the woman always figures in Israel’s thought and belief, not as a priestess, but as prophetess and judge-savior. What is specifically here, the place assigned to her, emerges from this. The essence of what has previously been seen is repeated and strengthened: the infertile one, the powerless one, becomes the savior, because she opens to the revelation of God’s power. After every fall into sin, the woman remains ‘mother of life’... God’s divinity is no longer revealed in his ability to punish, but in the indestructibility and constancy of his love... To leave woman out of the whole of theology would be to deny creation and election (salvation) history, and thereby to nullify revelation. In the women of Israel, the mothers and the saviors, in their fruitful infertility, God expresses most purely and most profoundly what creation is, and what election is, what ‘Israel’ is as God’s people. And because election and revelation are one, what ultimately becomes apparent in this, for the first time, is who and what God is.”

Comment Woman reveals God’s gentle love, which balances His just punishment. We see only a small part of God’s infinity. So His just punishment looms over us like unrelenting condemnation. But a genuine woman lives God’s mercy. That witness is her prophetic gift. She saves life. She conceives it, and preserves it in her womb by sharing her own blood with the babe. Then she births it, and nurturing with her own milk. Woman saves life when it is helpless. Even if she is infertile, carrying no life in her womb, woman reveals God’s power to love. Even her failure to love, her sin, invokes God’s mercy. By mercy He shows how indestructible His love is. Woman’s infertility can be fruitful, especially if she faithfully awaits God’s will, as Elizabeth did all those long years. Her acceptance of infertility made her fertile in the life of God. His grace becomes perfect in powerlessness. Who and what God is shines most clearly in His creation of something out of nothing. When he elects us to become, He loves us into existence, revealing Himself in all His glory. He nurtures us every instant, just as woman cares for her beloved children. Mary, the perfect woman, reveals God perfectly.

God’s Life Lives in Us as Faith Which Obeys

St. John Paul shows how Mary lives her belief by obeying. Remember that Eve disobeyed, so Mary obeys to set human history back on the road to order. Mary’s son Jesus, the new Adam, obeys unto death, to re-order human history completely. **Text** “As the Council teaches, ‘The obedience of faith’, Rom 16:26; Rom 1:5; 2 Cor 10:5-6, must be given to God who reveals. It is an obedience by which man entrusts his whole self freely to God’, *Dei Verbum*, 5. [Mary perfectly realized this faith.] The ‘decisive moment was the Annunciation. ...Elizabeth’s words highlight that moment: ‘Blessed is she who believed’. Indeed, at the Annunciation, Mary entrusted herself to God completely, with the ‘full submission of intellect and will’, manifesting ‘the obedience of faith’ to Him who spoke to her through His messenger, *Dei Verbum*, 5. She responded, therefore, with all her human and feminine ‘I’. This response of faith included both perfect cooperation with ‘the grace of God that preceded and assists’, and perfect openness to the action of the Holy Spirit, who ‘constantly brings faith to completion by His gifts’, *Lumen Gentium*, 56.

‘The word of the living God, announced to Mary by the angel, referred to her: ‘Behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son’, Lk 1:31. By accepting this announcement, Mary became the ‘Mother of the Lord’, and the divine mystery of the Incarnation was accomplished in her. ‘The Father of mercies willed that the consent of the predestined Mother should precede the Incarnation’, *Lumen Gentium*, 56. Mary gives this consent, after she heard everything the messenger had to say. She says ‘Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word’, Lk 1:38. This ‘fiat’ of Mary: ‘let it be done to me’, was decisive, on the human level, for God to accomplish the divine mystery. Mary’s words harmonize with Christ’s, as phrased by Paul: ‘Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me... I have come to do your will, O God’, Heb 10:5-7. The mystery of the Incarnation was accomplished when Mary uttered her ‘fiat’: ‘Let it be done to me according to your word’. This made possible, as far as it depended on her in the divine plan, to grant her Son’s desire.

“Mary uttered this fiat in faith. In faith she entrusted herself to God without reserve, and ‘devoted herself totally, as the handmaid of the Lord, to the person and work of her Son’, *Lumen Gentium*, 56. Rightly therefore, does Elizabeth praise Mary: ‘Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord’. These words have already been fulfilled. Mary of Nazareth presents herself at the threshold of Elizabeth and Zachariah’s house as the Mother of the Son of God. This is Elizabeth’s joyful discovery: ‘The mother of my Lord comes to me’.

“Compare Mary’s faith to Abraham’s. St. Paul calls the first patriarch ‘our father in faith’, Rom 4:12. In the salvific economy of God’s revelation, Abraham’s faith constitutes the beginning of the Old covenant. Mary’s faith at the Annunciation inaugurates the new Covenant. ... Abraham ‘in hope believed against hope that he should become the father of many nations’, Rom 4:18. Mary ... believed that through ... the power of the Holy Spirit she would become the Mother of God’s Son... as the angel revealed: ‘The child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God’, Lk 1:35.

“Certainly the annunciation is the culmination of Mary’s faith awaiting Christ. It’s also the start of her ‘journey towards God’, the beginning of her whole pilgrimage of faith. On this road ... the ‘obedience’ she professes ... will be fulfilled. Mary’s ‘obedience of faith’ during her pilgrimage shows surprising similarities to the faith of Abraham. ... [Both] ‘in hope believed against hope’. During some stages of this journey, the blessing granted to her will be revealed vividly. To believe means ‘to abandon oneself’ to the truth of the word of the living God, knowing ... ‘how unsearchable are his judgments, and how inscrutable his ways’, Rom 11:33. Mary, by the eternal will of the Most High, stands at the very center of those ‘inscrutable ways’ and unsearchable judgments’. ... She conforms herself to them in the dim light of faith, accepting fully, and readily, everything that is decreed in the divine plan.” *Redemptoris Mater* Part One, 13-14.

Comment John Paul unites so many truths in these few sentences that we must separate them, to profit fully from them. St. Paul bubbles over into three expressions of faith’s obedience. Perhaps his most striking expression is the prayer at the end of Romans, chapter 16:25-27. “Glory to him who is able to give you the strength to live according to the Good News I preach, and in which I proclaim Jesus Christ, the revelation of a mystery kept secret for endless ages, but now so clear that it must be broadcast to pagans everywhere, to bring them to the **obedience of faith**. This is only what scripture proclaims, and it is all part of the way the eternal God wants things to be. He alone is wisdom. Give glory therefore to him through Jesus Christ for ever and ever. Amen.” This doxology, or word of praise, synthesizes many mysteries. Strength to live the Good News is the gift of God’s life through baptism, expressed in the initiating virtue of faith. All other virtues flow from faith. Paul passes faith on to us from Jesus Christ, gives divine life to believers. By His life, Jesus reveals how to believe in the Father, then love Him, and therefore desire to please Him by obeying Him. Christ reveals many mysteries, hidden from endless ages, but now manifest by Incarnate God. Christ’s life, death, and resurrection make it so clear that Paul must trumpet to everyone, everywhere. Then they will live their faith, completing it in obedience. Jesus ‘was obedient unto death”, Phl 2:8. Thereby, He dramatically showed us how to express love by obeying.

St. Paul sounds his trumpet again in Rom 1:5: “Through him, (Jesus), we received grace, and our apostolic mission to preach the **obedience of faith** to all pagan nations, in honor of his name”. Christ showers Paul with gifts to transmit the divine message revealed by Jesus. These gifts are graces to preach effectively. The bottom line supporting all his preaching is to imitate Christ by obeying as He obeyed. Jesus was God. So He knew everything. But He deprived Himself of divine knowledge, so that He could show us how to live in faith. Christ believed on the cross that His apparently senseless death would atone for sin. By this obedience, Jesus shows us to believe, to love, to please, and therefore to obey. St. Paul passes on this central message from Jesus to us. St. John Paul passes it on to us. It is Christ’s main message.

Because of its vital importance, Paul trumpets it again in 2 Cor 10:5-6: “Our war is not fought with weapons of

flesh, yet they are strong enough, in God’s cause, to demolish fortresses. We demolish sophistries and the arrogance that tries to resist the knowledge of God. Every thought is our prisoner, captured to be brought into **obedience** to Christ”. Here Paul reminds us that human weapons will not achieve our goal of union with God. Instead, we must demolish lies and pride that resists God’s revelation with belief that flowers as obedience to Christ. Jesus is the only one who can achieve God’s goals. Christ is the only one who loves the Father so much that He will obey Him unto death. This redemptive death pays the infinite debt of sin, thereby eliminating sin. Jesus demolishes both Adam and Eve’s sin that fouled the universe at its origin, and our lesser sin. All sins crumble under divine attack. As time unfolds, we sin again. So Christ gives us faith to obey, and to repent our sins. In the sacrament of Penance, we follow Jesus to Calvary, to accept His blood to wash us clean. This obedience flows from our faith, believing that Christ has redeemed us by his bloody death.

John Paul incorporates all this in his few sentences, referring to it by simple references to Paul’s epistles. As we unfold all this, we open the great gift that *Redemptoris Mater* is. By reading it, we open ourselves to Mary, God’s mother and ours. She leaps into our open hearts, bringing Jesus to us. God’s message to us is very simple. We garble it by adding irrelevant details. We also change the topic frequently, to distract ourselves from God’s love. Like children, we upset the Father’s order, revealed by the Son, and sustained by the Holy Spirit. Then we repent best by running to Mary. She envelops us in maternal love, calms us, and leads us to Jesus for full repentance. She does this because she never garbled God’s message. She never changed the topic. She never resisted the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit. Therefore, she believed perfectly, entrusting herself to God completely.

Her openness to the Holy Spirit was perfectly feminine. Wide open, she received Jesus, and nourished His life. She believed perfectly, so she saw God in this tiny babe. God’s perfect plan is that she nourish our lives, because we are Christ’s brothers and sisters. She is the mother we so desperately need. No wonder that John Paul turned to her so often and so entirely. His immense intimacy with Mary overflows to us, enlivening our love for our heavenly mother. Love is the perfect way to relate to mothers, earthly and heavenly. Mothers are all about love. Their personal examples make all mothers models of personal love. Mothers must believe that the wiggling little baby is worth birthing, bathing, diapering, and feeding. Great is their faith. Mothers must obey their babes, to meet every need. Mothers stand tall because they stoop to meet baby’s need. It is impossible to adequately express the love, faith, and obedience of earthly mothers. How much more do Mary’s virtues exceed expression.

But John Paul says magnificent things, like his exceptional insight comparing Mary with Abraham. Probably for the first time, we see Abraham’s faith constituting the Old Covenant, and Mary’s inaugurating the New. Each believed against all observable odds. Mary’s faith was greater than Abraham’s, but each set flowing stupendous graces from God. Abraham’s belief initiated the People of God, over the ages, outnumbering the stars. Christ grafted us into Abraham’s descendants, and improved the personal covenant between God and us. Jesus fulfilled all the intervening prophecies, synthesizing Old and New Covenants into the everlasting bond God wants with us. Decisive moments in time and place are vital for God’s plan. He intervenes from His transcendence, to become imminent to us. He personally contacts us. He asks us to relate personally to Him. Mary models this interaction between divinity and humanity, person to person. Indeed, God’s ways are unsearchable and inscrutable. Mary is the center of contact between God and man. She mothers the perfect intersection: Jesus Christ, the God-man. Though this interaction escapes our understanding, we love to gaze upon it.

Fr. Louis Evely gazes deeply into mother Mary. **Text**: “Because Mary is the most faithful of all creatures, the most continually consenting, the most perfectly responding to God, she is also the most creative. Mary is a mother because God is Father. She was the creature in whom God was best able to show himself as Father. God has willed to need men, to depend upon us. His first and favorite dependence is his dependence upon Mary. He asked her to consent to be invaded and filled by God, to have nothing of her own any more – no plan, no future, no children, no husband – but to receive everything from Him and give it back to others. Our Lady became simultaneously mother of God and of men, mother of the savior and of the redemption. She is the mother of us all because she is the mother of Christ, whose members we are”, *Credo*, 83. For St. Paul’s original Mystical Body insights, see Romans 7:4, and 12:4; 1 Cor 12:12.

Comment So many people love Mary so profoundly, that we consider only a few folks. Fr. Evely expounds the sentence from the Apostle’s Creed: “born of the virgin Mary”. Among the many things he notes is Mary’s profound faith and obedience. Mary consents, responding perfectly to God. Therefore, she is most open to God the creator, and is most creative. No woman births a child to match Mary’s. No woman interacts as closely with God as Mary. Because God invited Mary to consent, He depended upon her for incarnating His son in her. Stretch our minds as far as we may, we can’t catch up with God’s infinite love. He loves us to be, and to freely accept His gifts. How can God be so humble? How can

God reach down to deal with us at all, much less depend upon our decision? But Mary's decision made way for God to incarnate in her womb, and the rest is history.

Fr. Evelyn merely mentions that Christ made us members of His body. His body is Mystical because it surpasses physical bodies. When Jesus resurrected, His body became so spiritual that "physical" restricts its reality. Christ's body transcends mere physics by participating directly in God's absolute Spirit. So St. Paul's says: "Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the **body of Christ**, so that you might be **joined** to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God", Rom 7:4. Effervescent as usual, Paul sings Christ's glory for joining us to Him as one body. Similarly, "...we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another", Rom 12:4. More specifically: "For even as the body is one and *yet* has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ", 1 Cor 12:12. Paul was the first to express this Mystical Body in words. But he described it as he experienced it when Jesus met Paul outside Damascus. Living experience that Christ is joined to His beloved followers struck Paul hard. Because Mary is Christ's mother, and He is one with us, she is our mother. Her motherhood resonates in Scripture just as she lived, quietly pointing to Jesus.

Fr. Evelyn emphasizes God's invitation to us to participate in all salvation. **Text** "Why, the economy-minded will ask, if only God acts, don't we always go straight to God? Because only the infinite variety of the saints can show us the infinite variety of God's inventive goodness. We know God better for knowing the saints. We need them all to show us the riches of God's love. The saints "complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions". Col 1:24. What things are lacking? Christ lived only one short human life of thirty-three years. He couldn't be a father or mother, soldier or king, a nurse or galley slave. But He can live all these states of life through those who are in them, and who let themselves be invaded by Him. Everything that we love in the saints comes from God. He has given them an infinite variety of "complementary humanities". The story of the saints is always the story of what God can do in the lowliness and weakness of His servants. In His saints, we see God." *Credo*, 82-83. **Comment** Mary is the saint of saints. So she illustrates this dynamic perfectly.

Text "With the Annunciation, Mary was the first to receive Christ's body within her. Hers was the first Communion, [the first Eucharistic interaction]. She knew a thousand times better than we, that she was not welcoming Him for herself alone. She was not receiving Him for her own sake. She could never have Him to herself, because He would never belong to himself. The mother of the Savior was from the first a self-sacrificing mother. [She lived for her son, and the members of His mystical body.]" *Credo*, 83-84

Comment Mary could not keep her son for herself, because He did not keep Himself for Himself. He was totally for others, for His beloved Trinity, and for us. Thus Mary echoes Jesus so perfectly that she disappears in His light. She never appears more than needed to point to Him. She never speaks more than needed to tell us to follow Him. May she bless our efforts to love her more and more, we pray through Jesus Christ her beloved son, Who made us His body.

Mother of the Messiah

John Paul's clear explanation of Scripture shows that each passage leads us way beyond words, into God's very being. Scripture is not about words, but about realities to which words refer. Scripture's words launch us into the ultimate adventure which God is. Thank God for inspiring men to write the code that God intended. Thank God for inspiring men to decipher that code, and to add to our understanding by expressing some of the infinite riches Scripture contains. For example, John Paul continues his encyclical by considering who Mary would birth.

Text "When ... Mary hears of the Son whose Mother she is to become, and to whom 'she will give the name Jesus' (meaning Savior), she also learns that 'the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David'. Also 'he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will never end', Lk 1:32-33. All Israel hoped for this. The promised Messiah is to be 'great', and the heavenly messenger announces that 'he will be great', both by bearing the name of Son of the Most High, and by inheriting David's rule. He is therefore to be a king. He is to reign 'over the house of Jacob'. Mary grew up in the midst of her people's expectations. Could she guess the significance of the angel's words? What is that 'kingdom which never ends'?"

"Although through faith she may have perceived in that instant that she was the mother of the 'Messiah King', nevertheless she replied: 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word', Lk 1:38. From the first moment, Mary professed above all the 'obedience of faith'. She abandoned herself to the meaning which was given to the words of the Annunciation by him from whom they proceeded: God Himself." *Redemptoris Mater*, Part One, 15.

Comment The angel Gabriel announces marvelous news to Mary. The code word "Jesus" means savior, which means messiah, whom the prophets described, who would save Israel from all troubles. Every practicing Jew eagerly anticipated the Messiah. All women wanted to mother the Messiah. Gabriel announces that Mary is the long-awaited one. She will be the mother of the Messiah. Gabriel further defines the Messiah as David's descendant. But instead of David's brief reign, the Messiah will reign forever. His kingdom will never end. What could that mean? We can only guess what Mary guessed about the angel's message. Scripture tells us that she did not become giddy with her own importance. Instead, she agreed as a handmaid agrees, utterly at her master's service. She said: do as you wish. Her response shows great faith, and love to match, so that she considered only God's desire, and hastened to obey. Her living faith is a good example to us all. John Paul offers Mary's exemplary "obedience of faith" to guide us. Then he shows where faith led Mary.

Text "Later, a little further along this way of the 'obedience of faith', Mary hears words uttered by Simeon in the Temple of Jerusalem. It was now forty days after the birth of Jesus, when, in accordance with the precepts of the Law of Moses, Mary and Joseph 'brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord', Lk 2:22. He was born in extreme poverty. Luke tells us that when the Roman authorities ordered the census, Mary went with Joseph to Bethlehem. Having found 'no place in the inn', she gave birth to her Son in a stable, and 'laid him in a manger', Lk 2:7.

"A just and God-fearing man, Simeon, appears at the beginning of Mary's 'journey' of faith. His words, suggested by the Holy Spirit (Lk 2:25-27), confirm the truth of the annunciation. For we read that he took up the child Jesus in his arms. Simeon's words match the meaning of his name, which is Savior: 'God is salvation'. Turning to the Lord, he says: 'For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel', Lk 2:30-32. At the same time, Simeon tells Mary: 'Behold this child is set for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be contradicted, to reveal the thoughts of many. A sword shall pierce your heart', Lk2:34-35. Simeon thus casts new light on Gabriel's announcement. Jesus is the Savior, 'a light for revelation' to mankind. This was manifested on Christmas night, when shepherds came to the stable (Lk 2:8-20). The Magi also manifest it (Mt2:1-12). ... At the very beginning of his life, the Son of Mary and His mother experience the truth of Simeon's words: 'a sign that is contradicted. Simeon's words are like a second Annunciation to Mary, for they tell her the actual historical situation in which the Son shall accomplish his mission, i.e. in misunderstanding and sorrow. While this announcement confirms her faith in the accomplishment of the divine promises of salvation, it also reveals that she will have to live her obedience of faith in suffering, at the side of the suffering Savior. Her motherhood will be mysterious and sorrowful. Thus, after the Magi visit, when they paid homage (Mt 2:11), Mary had to flee to Egypt... for 'Herod searches for the child, to destroy him', Mt 2:13. In Egypt they remain under Herod's death, Mt 2:15." *Redem. Mater*, Part 1, 15-16.

Comment John Paul stresses the immensity of her responsibility. She is the Savior's mother, and must name him accordingly. His ancestor David saved his people from Saul's tyranny, and from many enemies. But David saved only a few from a few troubles, and for a short time. Jesus would save all, from everything, forever. Simeon made that clear in the code words that Luke provides. From Abraham, through, Moses and all the prophets, Israel strained toward this perfect salvation. What could this salvation mean? Obviously it means more than Mary can comprehend. But she accepts God's invitation in perfect truth. She is God's handmaid, to do whatever He wishes. Her obedience of faith activates her love and her life. Though her faith, love, and obedience surpass our understanding, we are sure that she lived that dynamic synthesis. So we gaze at her life with loving eyes. That gaze unites us ever-more with her awesome obedience. John Paul stretches our comprehension towards Mary's acceptance of God's invitation. If we gaze again and again, Mary's holiness urges us along our path of faith-obedience.

God asks; Mary agrees. The utter simplicity of this dynamic covenant overwhelms us. So we embroider it with words that sustain our approach to God. In our deepest hearts, we want to follow Mary into faith-obedience. Let our depth act out this yearning! Be real! Then we will extend our understanding ever more into Mary's living response to God. As we agree with Mary's faith-obedience by following her good example, we accept more of God's grace, and grow more godly. God's grace is His life, and ultimately Himself. Mary glows with God because she perfectly accepts Him.

When she presents Jesus at the Temple, Simeon connects the major dots of Israel's expectation with the baby Jesus whom he holds in his hands. In addition to the main points that John Paul makes, other details help us fix Jesus in His proper place. Having seen the Messiah, Simeon can now die in peace, Lk 2:29. Anna prophesizes that Jesus will save Jerusalem, and all who earnestly believe, Lk 2:38. Mary's responsibility is to cherish and nourish God in the flesh. The Son bends to us, mercifully living the details we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. When we falter from following Him, we

can return to any specific sensation about His earthly life, and restart. God became flesh to help our flesh ascend to God. John Paul blends God's descent into details with His soaring into Pure Spirit. Back and forth we go, until we soar free into God. When we are disappointed, Mary encourages us. When we are over-excited, Mary calms us. Her mothering helps us through, just as she helped Jesus through infancy into His saving mission. Every step involves specific details that we can use to prop up our advance into God.

Jesus is the 'light of revelation' because He reveals God in His body. God breathes in Christ. God looks with Christ's eyes, and smiles with His lips. God nestles into Mary His mother, and loves her totally. Gazing on Jesus gazing at Mary, we relax into the light of revelation. Simeon looks into the future, to see Christ saving all people who accept salvation. These loving followers rejoice in the kingship which David initiated, but Jesus completes. The more we gaze, the more we see, connecting the Presentation in the Temple with salvation from sin. Nothing can stop us from progressing with Christ through His infancy to His teaching, to His redemption on the cross, to His resurrection, and finally to His glory in heaven. This entire faith-journey wells up in us as we listen to Simeon's prophesy.

Though God wells up in us when we gaze at Mary and Jesus, pain overcomes us on occasion. God shared our pain when Christ suffered and died. Mary joins His suffering, as Simeon predicts. God endures more pain than we can stand, to show us how to endure our small sufferings. Jesus lives out His love through suffering. Love is the key, as Mary manifests and Christ perfects. Love leads them to live beyond suffering. If either Mary or Jesus had focused upon pain, they would have missed the point entirely. Instead, they look past pain into God's love. In loving context, they see that suffering saves anyone who loves to do God's will. That's why John Paul says that Simeon's announcement "reveals to her that she will have to live her obedience of faith in suffering, at the side of the suffering Savior, and that her motherhood will be mysterious and sorrowful". That sorrowful mystery begins when Mary learns that Herod seeks to kill the child who will grow up into Israel's king. This is the first contradiction of Christ, and sorrow of flight from Herod the murderer. After Herod dies, Joseph can bring Mary and Jesus back to live with the chosen people. But it is safer to return to Nazareth.

Text "When the Holy Family returns to Nazareth after Herod's death, the hidden life begins. She 'who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord', Lk 1:45, lives the reality of these words day by day. Daily as her side is the Son to whom 'she gave the name Jesus'. Therefore, in contact with him, she certainly uses this name ... long used in Israel. ... [He] is ... 'the Son of the Most High (Lk 1:32). Mary conceived and birthed him...by the power of the Holy spirit... who overshadowed her (Lk 1:35), just as, at the time of Moses, the cloud covered the presence of God (Ex 24:16; 40:34-35; I Kings 8:10-12). Therefore, Mary knows that the Son she birthed as a virgin is precisely that 'Holy One', the Son of God, whom Gabriel announced.

"During the years of Jesus's hidden life in Nazareth, Mary too is 'hid with Christ in God', Col 3:3, through faith. Faith is contact with the mystery of God. Every day Mary is in constant contact with the ineffable mystery of God made man, a mystery that surpasses everything revealed in the Old Covenant. From the moment of the annunciation, the mind of the Virgin-Mother has been initiated into the radical 'newness' of God's self-revelation, and has been made aware of the mystery. She is the first of those 'little ones' Jesus meant when He said: 'Father,...you have hidden these things from the wise and revealed them to babes', Mt 11:25. 'No one knows the Son except the Father', Mt 11:27. Then how can Mary 'know the Son'? Of course, she does not know Him as the Father does. Yet she is the first of those to whom the Father 'has chosen to reveal Him', Mt 11:26-27; 1 Cor 2:11. Only the Father knows the Son completely, because He begets Him in the eternal 'today' (Ps 2:7). But the Father reveals Him to Mary, in faith, because she is His Mother, and believes. She is blessed because 'she has believed', and continues to believe, day after day, amidst all the trials and adversities of Christ's infancy and hidden years in Nazareth. There He 'was obedient to them', Lk 2:51. He was obedient both to Mary and to Joseph, since Joseph took the place of His father in people's eyes. For this reason, the Son of Mary was regarded by the people as 'the carpenter's son', Mt 13:55.

"The mother of that Son, mindful of the Annunciation and subsequent events, bears within herself the radical 'newness' of faith: the beginning of the New Covenant. This is the beginning of the Gospel, the joyful Good News. But it is not difficult to see in that beginning a particular heaviness of heart, linked with a sort of night of faith...a kind of veil through which one has to draw near to the Invisible One, and to live in intimacy with the mystery. This is the way that Mary lived in intimacy with the mystery of her Son, and went forward in her 'pilgrimage of faith', while Jesus 'increased in wisdom...and in favor with God and man', Lk 2:52. God's predilection for Him was manifested ever more clearly to people's eyes. The first human creature thus permitted to discover Christ was Mary....

"But, founding Him in the temple, His mother asked: 'Why have you treated us so?' ...Jesus answered: 'Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?...They didn't understand this saying', Lk 2:48-50. Jesus knew that 'no one knows the Son except the Father'. Thus even His mother, knowing best...still lived intimately with this mystery only through faith! She lived side by side with her Son under the same roof, and persevered 'in her union with her Son'. She 'advanced in her pilgrimage of faith', *Lumen Gentium*, 58. Also in Christ's public life (Mk 3:21-35). Day by day there was fulfilled in her Elizabeth's Visitation blessing: 'Blessed is she who believed'." *Redemptoris Mater*. Part One, 17.

Comment John Paul draws surprising benefits from the thirty years that Jesus spent hidden from almost everyone. Christ dwelt in silence all that time. So He sanctified silence, blessing ordinary work and family life by infusing divinity into its simplicity. Ponder the fact that God lived among us hidden for thirty years! This was thirty years of family love, extended to village society. Joseph and Jesus built homes and furniture. Mary kept house. Yet God was working silently in Christ. John Paul connects this presence with Old Covenant presence in Moses. From Abraham, through the other Patriarchs, the prophets, and the priests, God lived in mere signs and symbols. Jesus was here in the flesh. Mary pondered all this in her heart, Lk 2:51. Her pondering extended from one extreme to another. It is true that no one knows the Son except the Father. But it is also true that the Son reveals Himself to babes. As we stretch into God, we reflect on these two extremes. The more we reflect, the more reality we see Christ reveal. God's self-revelation is forever new, and He is forever. Pure Spirit, infinite Truth, Goodness, Unity, and Power must escape limits. New-old mean nothing to timeless God. Only such perfection can create something from nothing. He loves to reveal Himself to anyone honest. "Unless you become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of God", Mt 18:3. But honest admission that we are weak makes us meek enough to be "little ones". Then Jesus reveals His divinity to us. He loves to reveal Himself to his creatures.

Mary is the very first of us to admit the truth, be as little as she is, and therefore enjoy Christ's divinity. John Paul immediately acknowledges that Mary doesn't exceed faith's limits, to know Jesus as the Father does. But she knows by faith as much as a creature can. This fresh knowledge is the start of the New Covenant, vastly improving previous covenants because God Himself comes to be one of us. Mary is the first to whom God reveals this truth. She is blessed 'because she has believed'. But she also endures some "heaviness" some night of faith that St. John of the Cross developed. So she suffered Christ lost in the Temple. Mary shows us how to balance joy and sorrow in life.

Mary, Our Silent Mother

Scripture recounts only a few of Mary's words. Somehow, her silence is perfect, but we wonder why. Perhaps we sense a profound reason for Mary's silence. The Apostolic Fathers of the Church knew it well. They overlapped the original Twelve Apostles of Our Lord. So the group of Apostolic Fathers includes the Apostles and men who met them and learned the Good News personally from them. Ignatius of Antioch is an outstanding example. He was the second bishop after St. Peter in Antioch. Romans soldiers captured Ignatius, dragged him to Rome, and killed him there in the year of Our Lord 107. Romans killed him because he inspired many pagans to become Catholic. His letters urge his followers to be Catholic by accepting everything that Jesus did and said. He heard God's presence in silence. Mary's silence is a sign of God's presence. This "mystical" silence inspired the Apostles and early Fathers. They revered Mary's silence.

Text "Silence is part of the mystery of God. Ignatius of Antioch affirmed that Christ himself 'came forth from silence'. 'Even those things Jesus did in silence are worthy of the Father'. And he adds: 'Whoever grasps the words of Jesus is able to hear his silence as well'. We could apply this arcane explanation to the primitive Church's silence about the holy virgin. Indeed, in speaking to the bishop of Philadelphia, Ignatius makes the significant distinction, 'He accomplishes more by his silence than others who speak in vain', *To Philadelphians* 1, 1. Apparently, the primitive church remained faithful to this Ignatian principle. The few references to Mary in the writings of the earliest Fathers reveal a capacity to emphasize her mysterious maternal presence in the faith and life of the first Christians – a presence rendered even more intense and intriguing by silence. ...

"Ignatius was faithful to his convictions concerning the mystical value of silence. His references to Mary are rare and brief. But they affirm an extremely significant fact: the mystery of the birth of Jesus from the Virgin Mary had entered into the most ancient liturgical tradition of the Church. In fact, he hands down some of the most ancient professions of the Christian faith, which were doubtless used in liturgical celebrations, especially during the rite of baptism, and in which there is an explicit mention of the Virgin. In these texts, brief, but incisive, and full of vigor, he presents Mary as Mother of Christ according to his human nature, just as the heavenly Father is his Father according to his divine nature. Mary's motherhood becomes part of God's plan of salvation, and is the fruit of the Holy Spirit's intervention. To the Christians

of Tralles, Ignatius presents Mary as the woman who has inserted Christ into the line of David's descendants, and thus as the instrument for the realization of the messianic prophecies. In another passage, he points Mary out as the person who guarantees the reality of the Savior's human nature. He was born of her in the same way that every child is born of his own mother.

“From Ignatius' statements, it is clear how important the ancient Christians considered it to express their faith in God-made-flesh by explicitly mentioning his birth from the Virgin. It does not seem difficult to understand their motivation. [For example, Docetists denied the reality of the Incarnation. Christ was not really man. Instead, He was merely an image. Ignatius affirmed the Church's faith in the reality of the Incarnation, hence the value of Christ's redemptive death. Mary carried Him in her womb, birthed Him, and raised Him.]” *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, 28-30.

Comment During the first century, within the seventy years between the death of Jesus and St. Ignatius becoming bishop of Antioch, the Apostles spread the Good News. They did not present abstract arguments. They revered Mary's silence. During those years, Mary nurtured the new-born church. Her silent support insured maximum growth and development of the early Catholics. But even then Satan strove to divide the divine unity in the Church. The Docetist heretics refused to accept Christ's revelation that He was God in the flesh. Instead, then insisted that Jesus was just a delusion. If that lie were true, then God did not die on the cross, and our sin-debt was not paid. Therefore we were not saved from sin. The God-man did not die to redeem us. Ignatius defended Catholics against this deadly error. He broke his reverential silence about Mary. He insisted that she was the mother of God made man. She was also ever-virgin. Ignatius wrote this on his way to die in 107 AD. Many of his statements that follow were parts of the baptismal liturgy, the vital sacrament that initiates Christ-life in the person who joins the Church. The water symbolizes Jesus comes bringing divine life, washing away sin's death. Mary birthed Christ. Here is Gambero's conclusion, and some examples of Ignatius' writing.

Text “The Marian testimony of Ignatius of Antioch, though extremely succinct, has great value. It echoes the gospel message. It refers to the Church's most ancient professions of faith. And it comes from a man who, as bishop, was vested with teaching authority.

“Ignatian professions of faith: ‘There is only one Physician, having both flesh and spirit, born and unborn, God become man, true life in death, from Mary and from God, first passible and then impassible: Jesus Christ our Lord,’ *To Ephesians* 7, 2. ‘For our God Jesus Christ, according to God's economy, was conceived by Mary of the seed of David, but also by the Holy Spirit. He was born and baptized, that by his Passion he might purify water’, *To Ephesians* 18, 2. ‘Stop your ears when anyone speaks to you of anything except Jesus Christ, David's descendant and Mary's son’, *To Trallians* 9, 1. ‘The Lord is truly descended from David according to the flesh, and the Son of God by the will and power of God. He was truly born of a virgin, and baptized by John’, *To Smyrnaens* 1,1.” *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, 31.

Comment These are English translations of the very words Ignatius wrote to first-century Catholics, to help them fight heretics. He passed on the living tradition in letters to faithful Catholics. He followed Paul's good example by correcting errors, emphasizing the most relevant truths, and encouraging the faithful. Every Catholic knew that Mary mothered Jesus, who was God the Son. Christ revealed these truths, and died and rose to confirm them. Then Jesus asked feeble men to pass His message on to others. With the Holy Spirit's help, Ignatius passed on the Gospel so well that Roman officials saw Catholics growing stronger than the state. Rome could not allow that growth to continue. Instead, Rome tried to strangle this young religion in its cradle. Nero killed Catholic leaders, destroying both Peter and Paul, along with thousands of lesser leaders, and followers. But the blood of martyrs watered the seed of faith. Pagans saw how excellent moral examples these martyrs were. So they joined the Church. Mary's silence inspired Ignatius, whose sterling example enabled the Church to grow. Mary mothered, and the Spirit animated people to follow Christ.

Mary's profound silence expressed her undistracted worship of God. When God instructed her to speak, she spoke effectively, then returned to worship. Early followers of Christ respected that silence, and practiced it, speaking seldom and seriously. Thus they enacted what Jesus said: “Let your speech be yes, yes, or no, no. Anything beyond that is evil”, Mt 5:37. Paul echoes Him: “The Son of God, Jesus Christ, wasn't yes and no. But was all yes in Him”, 2 Cor 1:19. Silence is good news to us who are battered by noise. Noise hurts. Silence heals. Jesus tells us to speak sparingly. The Apostles reiterate Christ. The living tradition of the Church affirms silence. Here's an example from St. John Paul II.

Text “We draw close to this presence [of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit] above all by letting ourselves be taught an adoring silence, for at the culmination of the knowledge and experience of God is his absolute transcendence.

We reach it through the prayerful assimilation of scripture and the liturgy, more than by systematic meditation. In the humble acceptance of the creature's limits before the infinite transcendence of a God who never ceases to reveal himself as God – Love, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ in the joy of the Holy Spirit, we see expressed the attitude of prayer and the theological method which the East prefers and continues to offer all believers in Christ.

“We confess that we need this silence, filled with the presence of him whom we adore. In theology we exploit the sapiential and spiritual soul of silence. In prayer we never forget that seeing God means coming down the mountain with a face so radiant that we are obliged to cover it with a veil (Ex 34:33). In our gatherings we make room for God's presence, and avoid self-celebration. In preaching we learn not to delude ourselves that it is enough to heap word upon word to attract people to the experience of God. In commitment we refuse to be locked in a struggle without love and forgiveness.

“Man needs silence today. Often he avoids silence for fear of meeting himself, feeling empty, and asking himself about meaning. Instead, man deafens himself with noise. All, believers and non-believers alike, need to learn a silence that allows the Other to speak when and how he wishes, and allows us to understand his words.” *Orientalis Lumen*

Comment Mary taught John Paul to approach God in silent awe. Adoring silence responds properly to transcendent Trinity. Beyond words, God inspires silence. We can speak of half-way measures, faltering steps toward God. But God's presence silences us. Speaking at that adoring moment breaks the spell. Scripture is God's word that lifts us above words into God. Liturgy is God's work that exalts us past words into God's life. For example, the Mass, the Eucharistic sacrifice, is work that only God can do. Yet He invites us to join His divine activity, transcending time to join His sanctifying act on the cross. This ultimate sacrifice replaces ineffective lambs with God's lamb, Jesus, who finally eliminates sin. The Mass should awe us into silence. Mary was the first to accept Christ into Her womb, into her heart, into her life. No was as one with Jesus as she. So no one was as reverently silent. Silence becomes her, in both senses: 1) silence exists as she exists, and 2) silence enhances her beauty. Along with the Apostolic Fathers, we can learn silence from Mary the master of adoring silence.

Because silence is so foreign to our everyday life, let's gaze more intently on Mary. No doubt, she knew Psalm 62: “truly my soul silently waits for God”. But Scripture also recommends speech. Christ tells the Pharisees who want to hush the people on that glorious Palm Sunday: “If these become silent, the stones will cry out”. Immediately before that He strictly admonished the disciples to keep silent about his ministry. Mary understood that her Son insisted on proper balance of speech and silence. This balance echoes through Scripture.

Genesis 1:3 emphasizes that God's word creates: “Then God said: ‘Let there be light’, and there was light”. Here we know God as language, speaking creation into being. In John 1:1 Jesus is the Logos, from before creation, the Word of God. Gerard Manley Hopkins expands from the Logos to describe the Trinity as “Utterer, Uttered, Uttering”. But God's infinity escapes speech. Therefore St John of the Cross wrote “Silence is God's first language”. Meister Eckhart thought “nothing is so like God as silence”. Because God is infinite reality, we can't confine him to either speech or silence. We devise each word to fit creatures. So they don't fit God.

Yet our struggle with speech and silence makes sense. Theologians insist that both belong because God wants us to use our minds. God can't give what he doesn't have. He gave creatures speech, so He must speak. As soon as we learn that God speaks, we know that God is beyond the limits of creatures. So we must cleanse speech of those restrictions. One way of purifying speech of creatures' defects is to deny that God has those defects. Our easiest way to accomplish this denial is to affirm the opposite of speech, namely silence. John Scotus Eriugena expressed this purification magnificently. “We do not know what God is. God Himself does not know what He is, because He is not anything. Literally God is not, because He transcends being.” God's infinity requires us to balance positive and negative statements we make about him. Mary balanced her understand best because she transcended words.

If we follow her, we learn something about God that is so simple that words can't express it. Words remind us of our non-verbal approaches to God. Mary knew all this without all these words. Her silence penetrated all these confusing words with simplifying knowledge. Mary identified with Jesus. Thereby she identified with His knowledge and His love. This identification is precisely the union that we all desire. Once identified, she did not need words. On occasion, she used words to help people advance toward their own identification with Christ. But she did not need words herself. She transcended words by uniting directly with God's action. Her activity and God's activity joined. What God did, she did. This is our ultimate destiny, the goal we seek with every act. After attaining unity, Mary did not need words.

But Our Lady used words to pray. Mary spoke vocal prayers. The Our Father is the perfect prayer, revealed by Jesus. He also established our most important prayer, the Mass, the Eucharistic Sacrifice. At Mass Mary spoke the prayers in union with Christ's disciples. The Catholic Catechism expounds the value of vocal prayer.

Text "Through his Word, God speaks to man. By words, mental or vocal, our prayer takes flesh. Yet it is most important that the heart should be present to him to whom we are speaking in prayer: Whether or not our prayer is heard depends not on the number of words, but on the fervor of our souls. Vocal prayer is an essential element of the Christian life. To his disciples, drawn by their Master's silent prayer, Jesus teaches a vocal prayer, the Our Father. He not only prayed aloud the liturgical prayers of the synagogue but, as the Gospels show, he raised his voice to express his personal prayer, from exultant blessing of the Father to the agony of Gethsemani. Mt 11:25-26; Mk 14:36. The need to involve the senses in interior prayer corresponds to a requirement of our human nature. We are body and spirit, and we experience the need to translate our feelings externally. We must pray with our whole being to give all power possible to our supplication. This need also corresponds to a divine requirement. God seeks worshippers in Spirit and in Truth, and consequently living prayer that rises from the depths of the soul. He also wants the external expression that associates the body with interior prayer, for it renders him that perfect homage which is his due. Because it is external and so thoroughly human, vocal prayer is the form of prayer most readily accessible to groups. Even interior prayer, however, cannot neglect vocal prayer. Prayer is internalized to the extent that we become aware of him to whom we speak. Thus vocal prayer becomes an initial form of contemplative prayer. *Catechism, 2700-2704.*

Comment The Catechism reminds us of our nature, our deepest being. God created each of us to be spirited flesh, incarnate spirit. Therefore we glorify God by acting as He created us. First we think what we intend to say. So our words start as mental acts. When we speak them, they become vocal. It is sad that we can detach our minds from our vocal prayers, reciting them mindlessly. Those prayers are often wasted. But when we unite spirit and flesh in fervent prayer, we act out God's creation of spirited flesh most completely. Mary prayed vocally, as her Magnificat proclaims. See Lk 1: 46-55. Saying this prayer aloud unites us with Mary as she unites herself with God. Our vocal prayer acts out our mental decision to glorify God. Little by little, we pray along with Mary. But even greater prayers await us. Mary leads us from vocal prayers into spiritual meditation, as the Catechism recounts.

Text "Meditation is above all a quest. The mind seeks to understand the why and how of Christian life, in order to adhere and respond to what the Lord is asking. The required attentiveness is difficult to sustain. We are usually helped by books, and Christians do not want for them: the Sacred Scriptures, particularly the Gospels, holy icons, liturgical texts of the day or season, writings of the spiritual fathers, works of spirituality, the great book of creation, and that of history the page on which the 'today' of God is written. To meditate on what we read helps us to make it our own by confronting it ourselves. Here, another book is opened: the book of life. We pass from thoughts to reality. To the extent that we are humble and faithful, we discover in meditation the movements that stir the heart and we are able to discern them. It is a question of acting truthfully in order to come into the light: 'Lord, what do you want me to do?' There are as many and varied methods of meditation as there are spiritual masters. Christians owe it to themselves to develop the desire to meditate regularly, lest they come to resemble the three first kinds of soil in the parable of the sower: Mk 4:4-7, 15-19. But a method is only a guide; the important thing is to advance, with the Holy Spirit, along the one way of prayer: Christ Jesus.

Meditation engages thought, imagination, emotion, and desire. This mobilization of faculties is necessary in order to deepen our convictions of faith, prompt the conversion of our heart, and strengthen our will to follow Christ. Christian prayer tries above all to meditate on the mysteries of Christ, as in *lectio divina* or the rosary. This form of prayerful reflection is of great value, but Christian prayer should go further: to the knowledge of the love of the Lord Jesus, to union with him." *Catechism 2705-2708*

Comment Mary leads us from vocal prayer deeper into God, by considering what He does. When we meditate, we strive to understand God's word and work. Mary pondered these things in her heart when she meditated. First, she strove to learn what God said and did, then she strove to love His action. We follow her when we meditate. The mysteries of the rosary are wonderful opportunities for us to rise from vocal prayer into meditation. The more we rise, the more we appreciate silence. Silence becomes mediation because we discover more by listening than by speaking. As the Catechism affirms, meditation is more difficult than saying vocal prayers. But practice perfects our meditation by strengthening our spirit for more direct union with God. Often, scripture launches us into meditation. Now and then, we catch ourselves mediating as we read Scripture. Meditation is so natural that a sunset can inspire it. The sunset's beauty leads us to God. In His presence, words fade away. Instead of speech, thought unites with God. Jesus is the way of prayer, helping us advance

along His revelation deeper into His presence. All our abilities serve meditation. That complete activation deepens our convictions, prompts our conversion, and bolsters our Christ-life. Vocal prayer and meditation are steps upward toward contemplation, which is improved union with God. The Catechism describes this highest form of prayer.

Text "What is contemplative prayer? St. Teresa answers: 'Contemplative prayer [*oracion mental*] in my opinion is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us.' Contemplative prayer seeks him 'whom my soul loves', Song of Songs 1:7; 3:14. It is Jesus, and in him, the Father. We seek him, because to desire him is always the beginning of love, and we seek him in that pure faith which causes us to be born of him and to live in him. In this inner prayer, we can still meditate, but our attention is fixed on the Lord himself. The choice of the *time and duration of the prayer* arises from a determined will, revealing the secrets of the heart. One does not undertake contemplative prayer only when one has the time: one makes time for the Lord, with the firm determination not to give up, no matter what trials and dryness one may encounter. One cannot always meditate, but one can always enter into inner prayer, independently of the conditions of health, work, or emotional state. The heart is the place of this quest and encounter, in poverty and in faith. *Entering into contemplative prayer* is like entering into the Eucharistic liturgy: we 'gather up' the heart, recollect our whole being under the prompting of the Holy Spirit, abide in the dwelling place of the Lord which we are, awaken our faith in order to enter into the presence of him who awaits us. We let our masks fall, and turn our hearts back to the Lord who loves us, so as to hand ourselves over to him as an offering to be purified and transformed. Contemplative prayer is the prayer of the child of God, of the forgiven sinner who agrees to welcome the love by which he is loved and who wants to respond to it by loving even more. But he knows that the love he is returning is poured out by the Spirit in his heart, for everything is grace from God. Contemplative prayer is the poor and humble surrender to the loving will of the Father in ever deeper union with his beloved Son. Contemplative prayer is the simplest expression of the mystery of prayer. It is a gift, a grace; it can be accepted only in humility and poverty. Contemplative prayer is a covenant relationship established by God within our hearts. Contemplative prayer is a *communion* in which the Holy Trinity conforms man, the image of God, to his likeness. Contemplative prayer is also the pre-eminently intense time of prayer. In it the Father strengthens our inner being with power through his Spirit 'that Christ may dwell in [our] hearts through faith' and we may be 'grounded in love', Eph 3:16-17. Contemplation is a *gaze* of faith, fixed on Jesus. 'I look at him and he looks at me'... This focus on Jesus is a renunciation of self. His gaze purifies our heart; the light of the countenance of Jesus illumines the eyes of our heart, and teaches us to see everything in the light of his truth and his compassion for all men. Contemplation also turns its gaze on the mysteries of the life of Christ. Thus it learns the interior knowledge of our Lord, the more to love him and follow him. Contemplative prayer is *hearing* the Word of God. Far from being passive, such attentiveness is the obedience of faith, the unconditional acceptance of a servant, and the loving commitment of a child. It participates in the 'Yes' of the Son become servant and the Fiat of God's lowly handmaid. Contemplative prayer is *silence*, the symbol of the world to come, or silent love. Words in this kind of prayer are not speeches; they are like kindling that feeds the fire of love. In this silence, unbearable to the 'outer' man, the Father speaks to us his incarnate Word, who suffered, died, and rose; in this silence the Spirit of adoption enables us to share in the prayer of Jesus. Contemplative prayer is a union with the prayer of Christ insofar as it makes us participate in his mystery. The mystery of Christ is celebrated by the Church in the Eucharist, and the Holy Spirit makes it come alive in contemplative prayer so that our charity will manifest it in our acts. Contemplative prayer is a communion of love bearing Life for the multitude, to the extent that it consents to abide in the night of faith. The Paschal night of the Resurrection passes through the night of the agony and the tomb - the three intense moments of the Hour of Jesus which his Spirit (and not 'the flesh [which] is weak') brings to life in prayer. We must be willing to 'keep watch with [him] one hour', Mt 26:40.

"[Summary] The Church invites the faithful to regular prayer: daily prayers, the Liturgy of the Hours, Sunday Eucharist, the feasts of the liturgical year. The Christian tradition comprises three major expressions of the life of prayer: vocal prayer, meditation, and contemplative prayer. They have in common the recollection of the heart. Vocal prayer, founded on the union of body and soul in human nature, associates the body with the interior prayer of the heart, following Christ's example of praying to his Father and teaching the Our Father to his disciples. Meditation is a prayerful quest engaging thought, imagination, emotion, and desire. Its goal is to make our own in faith the subject considered, by confronting it with the reality of our own life. Contemplative prayer is the simple expression of the mystery of prayer. It is a gaze of faith fixed on Jesus, attentiveness to the Word of God, a silent love. It achieves real union with the prayer of Christ to the extent that it makes us share in his mystery." *Catechism, 2709-2724*

Comment Mary is silent because she contemplates God. The Catechism expresses our progression through vocal prayer to meditation to contemplation. It's worth reading over and over. The more we read, the more we unite with Our Lady in her prayer. Jesus was the only human who contemplated more completely than Mary. But he had a divine advan-

tage. Their good example rouses us to pray as they did, to advance into profound contemplation. Rapt in God, we understand their silence. Harassed by noise, we may fear silence. Perhaps we have the “Stockholm Syndrome”, identifying with our attacker to reduce his anger. We may even say we enjoy the noise that oppresses us. Mary invites us out of that confusion into silence. There we find our loved ones, especially God, Who loves us best.

As St. Theresa of Avila reminds us, contemplation is enjoying our friends. Their very presence satisfies us. Words add nothing to our joy. After progressing through vocal prayer and meditation, we come ever closer to our dear friends in Christ. Our awe attaches us to them so tenderly and so completely that they completely absorb us in mutual love. Contemplation fuses our highest abilities: knowing and loving. This blend delights us beyond words. Silence alone becomes our ecstasy. There is such unity that everything fits into one, leading to the One Who loves us beyond everything. God is The Friend, the Lover, Love Himself. Contemplating Him is the reason we live. He created us to contemplate Him eternally. As Revelation recounts, heaven is both silent worship and joyful hymns of praise. That is as far as language can take us. Contemplation takes us much closer to God. Because Mary was so close to God, she contemplated so completely that heaven began for her right here on earth. Her silent example inspired the Apostles and disciples. Her visits lifted early Christians merely by her loving presence. She perfectly balanced vocal prayer with profound contemplation. So let us gaze at her in silence. Then we experience exactly what the Catechism says: “Contemplative prayer is a *communio* in which the Holy Trinity conforms man, the image of God, to his likeness.” Jesus was the preeminent image of God, and Mary was next in line. So Jesus contemplated best, because He was a member of the Holy Trinity, divinely united. Mary was next most united to God. In that union, words were superfluous.

But prayer is essential. Prayer is the life of the Holy Trinity. Father, Son, and Spirit are perfectly united with each other by stupendous love, which is Trinitarian prayer. God invites us to join in His prayer-life. When we do, we lift words up from human objects into divine praises. God’s greatest miracle, His most creative act, is to spiritualize mere matter in us. Ultimately, He elevates material stuff into divine union. Mary was the first human to unite so completely. If we stretch our words, we could say that God became Mary during her perfect prayer. God became Jesus in her womb. No greater unity can occur between God and man than Jesus Christ. Right after Him, Mary’s unity ranks next. Prayer is all about union, so Mary’s prayer surpasses all except Christ’s. We could easily be lost in awe at this reality.

Though Mary’s vocal prayer is so exalted, her meditations excel that level, and her contemplation soars yet higher toward God. Her silence is very active, alive with prayer. That’s why her few words are so powerful. Her contemplative participation in God’s life surcharges her words with surpassing value. Her silence is for her prayer, which is for God. Her silence is so completely for God that she unites with Him entirely. What could she say about this perfect union?

Human friendship escapes our description. How much more indescribable is divine friendship. As Theresa of Avila affirms, prayer is friendly conversation. God espoused Mary. The Holy Spirit impregnated her. There is no more complete friendship than that. So Mary is God’s best friend among humans. They must have had the richest conversations. In contemplation, they were the most united. Contemplation is silent because it is so intense. Everything the human does unites in contemplation, to spiritualize every atom of the human body. Partial contemplation can admire any creature’s truth, goodness, and beauty. Full contemplation admires God, Who is Truth, Good, and Beauty. When Mary’s contemplation united her thought with Truth, her love with Good, and her emotions with Beauty, she and God were one.

Mary shows us how to advance from simple vocal prayer, through meditation, into contemplation. At every step of the way, especially when confusion grips us, we can turn to Mary for guidance and encouragement. She delights in helping us. She also prods us to continue praying. Her silent aid hovers over us. But she never imposes her assistance. Instead, she respects our free choice. Call to her, and she comes. She loves to assist our efforts to reach God. When she accepted God’s invitation, she engaged in our salvation. Jesus effects our redemption, but Mary is right there to help us accept forgiveness. Most likely, when you were a child, you ran first to mother for forgiveness. She encouraged you to repent, and to ask your father for reconciliation. Mary helps us so gently that we approach her first.

Wherever we are in living our prayers, Mary eagerly supports, encourages, and urges us on to closer union with God. Mary assures us that God loves us, that He wants us to love Him, and that He will help us achieve unifying love. Her silence fits her primary purpose of mothering Jesus in us. The Bible tells us that she nurtured Christ to maturity. She will do the same for us if we seek her where she is to be found, in silence. Mary is too busy helping to speak.

Scripture records Mary’s Magnificat, her longest speech. Its powerful praise crams meaning and value into a few

words. Later on, we shall pray her Magnificat with Mary. For now, it is enough to recognize that all her words praise and glorify God, especially God made flesh in her. When Mary speaks, her words carry the value of her silent service. Every word she utters emerges from her contemplation of God. Perhaps we could say that her silent contemplation guilds every word. It becomes golden because of her profound union with God. Another attempt to properly describe her words would be that God renders them divinely effective. Her Son enlivens her words, so that they take flight to the Trinity on high.

When she silently appears at Knock, Ireland, her motherly presence is enough for people to appreciate. They come by the millions to be with her, to feel her loving care, to bring her their broken hearts, and request repair. All who humbly ask receive, without words. This silent nurturing represents most of Mary’s work. No doubt, we can all attest to her silent service in everyday life. She provides heart-healing care, so that we can face the next hardship of life. By her silent love, we live through the bleakest of trials, and face the most terrifying troubles. For these, and for all your kind gifts, we thank you Mary, Christ’s mother and ours. May your silence nurture appropriate silence in us, so that we can fully live the awe that God inspires in us.

Mary at the Foot of the Cross

Mary’s silence is most eloquent as she stands below her bleeding son, while He pays the ultimate price of sin. John Paul pierces her silence to help us understand her helping hand, guided by the blessing of her faith.

Text “This blessing reaches its full meaning when Mary stands beneath her Son’s cross (Jn 19:25). Vatican II says that this happened [in the] ‘divine plan’, by ‘suffering deeply with her only-begotten Son, and joining herself with her maternal spirit to His sacrifice, lovingly consenting to the immolation of the victim to whom she had given birth ... faithfully preserving her union with her Son, even on the Cross’, *Lumen Gentium*, 58. It is a union through faith – the same faith with which she received the angel’s revelation at the Annunciation. At that moment, she also heard the words: ‘He will be great...and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever. Of his kingdom there will be no end’, Lk 1:32-33.

“Now standing at the foot of the Cross, Mary is the witness, humanly speaking, of the complete negation of these words. On that wood of the Cross, her Son hangs in agony as one condemned. ‘He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows...he was despised, and we esteemed him not’: as one destroyed (Is 53:3-5). How great, how heroic, then is the obedience of faith that Mary shows in the face of God’s ‘unsearchable judgments’! How completely she ‘abandons herself to God ‘without reserve, offering the full assent of her intellect and her will’, *Dei Verbum*, 5, to Him whose ‘ways are inscrutable’, Rom 11:33)! How powerful is the action of grace in her soul. How all-pervading is the influence of the Holy Spirit, and of His light and power!” *Redemptoris Mater* Part One, 18

Comment St. John Paul pours forth the result of deep contemplation of Mary at the cross. She fulfilled God’s plan, not only to birth Jesus but to accompany Him at the highlight of His earthly mission. Mary lived through His sacrifice, standing with Him when He paid the ultimate price of sin: death. Against her natural agony to protect Him, she used her faith to see beyond natural limits. She saw Christ’s love of God, poured out in His life blood. She agreed that God’s perfect union of justice and mercy required infinite satisfaction for infinite offense. Only the free gift of God’s Son’s death could pay this infinite price. God’s living gift of His life enabled Mary to see beyond the agony to the glory of perfect satisfaction for infinite offense. God’s gift of supernatural faith revealed to Mary God’s perfect solution to a seemingly insoluble problem. Her agreement with the divine Person to cure death by His death, adds the feminine dimension to Christ’s male dimension. Her agreement to suffer as virgin bride, and mother of God, completes the renewal of God’s life among humans. Jesus completely renews masculine obedience to God. Mary renews feminine obedience by hers.

Perhaps this is the first time we see this perfect fit of masculine and feminine service in Jesus and Mary. John Paul’s meditations and contemplations enable him to express this magnificent truth. At first glance, Christ’s salvific work probably overwhelmed us, masking Mary’s cooperation with the work that Jesus did. Her cooperation illuminates the scene enough for us to see both male and female humanity loving enough to obey through death. Loving obedience is the perfect response to Love Himself. Persons of the Trinity share their infinite love. This sharing opens a channel through Jesus, Who chooses to come through Mary. The more we contemplate God’s action, the more perfectly it shines into our faith. Mary’s faith was perfectly enlightened. She perceived God taking flesh in her. Her mothering enabled Him to live as we do, to minister to us, and on the cross to pay our sin-debt in full. Jesus came to redeem us by His salvific death. To maintain her union with Him, Mary agrees fully. Their unity radiates from her silent stance beneath His cross.

Can we endure the stress of extending our faith toward hers? Do doubts arise? How can all prophesy be true when two prophesies seem to contradict each other? John Paul quotes those that conflict the most. Luke gives us Simeon's prophesy that Christ will be "great...reign of the house of Jacob forever". Yet, Isaiah insists he will be "despised and rejected by men". Which is right? In God's infinitely perfect plan, each is right, but at different times. Mary lived the earthly glory of God becoming man. She nurtured the God-man as He grew to maturity. Now she supports Him in His greatest trial, agonizing on the cross. As John Paul points out, God's ways are "inscrutable". When Mary's human sight failed, she relied upon her tremendous faith to see as God saw. By faith, Mary saw that she must tolerate this intolerable death of the perfectly innocent man. Behind this horrid death she saw God's infinite love. She saw infinity interact with finite humans to do God's infinitely just and merciful work. God's work solved the insoluble problem of sin. By fascinating faith, Mary saw all this, and more. Behind the visible events of Jesus dying on the cross, invisible reparation and salvation radiated.

Mary did not see each detail of redemption, but she saw that God's love would guide every detail to fit perfectly. Therefore she agreed unconditionally, though it broke her heart to lose her son. Her maternal suffering complemented Christ's filial suffering. Together they repaired the feminine and masculine rebellion of Eve and Adam. Together they compensated God for the original rebels' offense. Jesus used His infinite divine ability to compensate God infinitely. Mary used her finite human ability to compensate God finitely. Together, they perfectly compensated for Original Sin.

John Paul leads us into God's inscrutable ways. Though we do not exhaust the meaning and value of God's redemption, we see more and more of it. The more we see, the more resources we apply, to see still more. How gracious of God to provide saints like John Paul, the Gospel writers, St. Paul, and above all Mary. Wordless at the cross, Mary's actions speak volumes. She does not need words to do her deeds. Her perfect agreement with Christ's perfect sacrifice perfects God's plan to save us. If we ramble through John Paul's words again, we find more truth and goodness to know and to love. Jesus and Mary shower us with the true and the good, to help us advance into God. When we pray, we follow.

Another holy man, Fr. Louis Evely, shares the fruit of his contemplative prayer with us. **Text** "It was at the foot of the cross that Mary became totally a mother, because it was there that she accepted most perfectly to give everything. She gave back to the Father the dearest thing she had. In the same gesture, she gave Him to the world. Giving Him to the world, delivering her Son to the world, she made the world a world of sons, and gave the world to the Father. At that moment, agonized-ly bringing us to life in the life of the Son she was giving us, she became fully our mother. All the 'privileges' she had received had been to lead up to that great *fiat*. She became the crown of humanity by this total consent. She is the supreme handmaid, for she accepted that everything should be done to her according to the word of the Lord. Her work goes on always. As long as the body of her Son is incomplete, her motherhood continues. Now, as in the past, she gives birth: in the joy of Bethlehem, and the pain of Calvary." *The Credo*, 32

Comment Evely's prayer gives us several marvelous insights. Now that he expresses them, they seem obvious. We reflect on our common experience, and see how insightful he was. Mothers accept the seed that fertilizes their egg. A new life, a new person, now grows in their womb. They accept this growth, sustain it with their own nourishing blood, and give themselves to this new life. It is their child. They love it, even if they can't see it. They love in faith, by faith, and through faith. They believe that this new child is worth morning-sickness, and other pregnancy-pains. They believe that this child is worth birth-pains. Their belief enables their cooperation with God's masterful creation of a new person. Mary accepted even more perfectly, because she gave her beloved Son back to the Father. Her heart opened entirely, so that the fullness of her gift gave Jesus to the whole world. By giving Jesus to all, Mary gave divine life to each and every one of us. Her generous acceptance made her our mother. Every decision she made, condensed into her gift of her son. Her son was all she had. But she gave it unreservedly to God. This made her the "crown" of humanity, our greatest member.

Naturally, Jesus is the greatest human. But he is not merely human. He is divine-human. Among merely humans, Mary is the greatest. William Wadsworth offered her this complement: "Mary is our tainted nature's solitary boast". With Evely's insight, we see more reasons to boast of Mary. The handmaid does what her mistress says. Mary obeyed God more than we can comprehend. Standing at the cross, Mary accompanied Jesus to the end. Thus she became the supreme handmaid. The end of Christ's agony completed Mary's participation in His salvific act. We who come later can choose to accept membership in His body. As long as Mary's sons are searching for Jesus, hoping to unite in His body, her work continues. Her care for each of us surpasses our comprehension. But we can rely on that care even if we don't understand it. If we rely on her mothering, to save us, we will keep going with her on the way to Christ. Just as she was joyful in Bethlehem, and devastated under the cross, so we experience our minor joys and sorrows. Along with Mary, we can thrive to the best of our ability. She freely offers her help. All we have to do is believe and accept. John Paul develops this truth.

Text "Through this faith, Mary is perfectly united with Christ in His self-emptying. For precisely on Golgotha, 'Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men', Phl 2:5-8. At the foot of the Cross, Mary shares through faith in the shocking mystery of this self-emptying. This is perhaps the deepest 'kenosis' of faith in human history. Through faith, the Mother shares in the redeeming death of her Son. In contrast with the faith of the disciples who fled, hers was enlightened. On Golgotha's cross, Jesus definitely confirmed that He was the 'sign of contradiction' foretold by Simeon. ... also fulfilled on Golgotha: the words which Simeon addressed to Mary: 'and a sword will pierce your heart'.

"Yes, truly 'blessed is she who believed'! Elizabeth's words...here at the foot of the Cross, seem to re-echo with supreme eloquence. The power contained within them penetrates us. From the Cross, from the very heart of the mystery of Redemption, the prospect of that blessing of faith radiates. It goes right back to 'the beginning'. As a sharing in the sacrifice of Christ, the new Adam, it becomes in a certain sense the counterpoise to the disobedience and disbelief embodied in the sin of our first parents. Thus teach the Fathers of the Church, especially St. Irenaeus: 'The knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience. What the virgin Eve bound through her unbelief, the Virgin Mary loosened by her faith', *Lumen Gentium*, 56. In the light of this comparison with Eve, the Fathers of the Church call Mary the 'mother of the living', and often speak of 'death through Eve, life through Mary', *Lumen Gentium*, 56.

"In the expression 'Blessed is she who believed', we can therefore find a kind of 'key' which unlocks for us the innermost reality of Mary, whom the angel hailed as 'full of grace'. If as 'full of grace' she has been eternally present in the mystery of Christ, through faith she became a sharer in that mystery in every extension of her earthly journey. She 'advanced in her pilgrimage of faith', and, in a direct and effective way, she made present to humanity the mystery of Christ. She still continues to do so. Through the mystery of Christ, she too is present within mankind. Thus the mystery of the Son clarifies the mystery of the Mother." *Redemptoris Mater*, Part One, 18-19.

Comment God's grace raises us into divinity. Grace is the gift of divine life. Divine life is more than we can understand, but precisely what we need. It is so simple that we can't deal with it directly. Instead, we find facets of it that are easier to grasp. Faith is one of those facets. Divine faith surpasses human faith. But they are similar. So we work from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Mary's faith is a decision, like human faith, to believe in something we can't see. Mary believes that God will become her child, as the angel said. This other facet of faith helps us extend from human faith in a human authority to divine faith in the Ultimate Authority. Though human authorities are fallible, Authority is infallible. Mary's belief enabled Jesus to grow in her immaculate womb. His miracles proved that he was divine, affirming Mary's faith.

Deeper still, John Paul saw that Mary's faith at the foot of the cross united with her Son as he poured Himself out to save His beloved people. St. Paul gushed so many truths about Christ's emptying that we profit from taking them one at a time. Jesus was God. "His form was God's form" means that His being is God's being. Out of love, Christ emptied His being of divinity, to take the being of a servant, a human creature. His likeness of man was complete because He was a man. He was also God. Paul's enthusiastic expressions can overwhelm us. Because we can't confine the infinite fact, we forget that Jesus was incarnate God, divinized man. He humbled Himself to become man, so that He could obey God all the way to death. Death on the cross pays sin's penalty. The more we review this fact, the more its light and warmth penetrate our dark, cold lives. Add Mary to this stupendous fact, and we complete the description of God's loving redemption.

Mary perfectly united with Jesus. She emptied herself along with Him. No humans ever emptied themselves so much. Mary's sharing with Jesus rounds out redemption because Eve shared Adam's revolt. Simeon's prophesies come true on the cross, because this child became the 'sign of contradiction', and Mary's soul was 'pierced'. All this pain is sad, but required. Adam and Eve wanted to know evil, and did by sinning. To right their wrong, Jesus and Mary had to live through the death that evil imposes. Jesus and Mary took upon their innocent selves all the harm that Adam and Eve caused. God respected human freedom for each pair, relying upon Jesus and Mary to suffer sin's bitter fruit, thereby reversing disobedience into obedience. They fully served justice by their full mercy, taking sins upon their sinless selves.

Contemplating Mary at the foot of the cross, we see her greatest blessing is the wondrous unity that Jesus and Mary achieved. Like lightning slashing through a cloud, the power of these words flashes into us. If we do not yet see the flash, then look again. We eventually join John Paul beholding the radiance of Mary's faith. Brilliant grace radiates from the perfection of redemption. New Adam and Eve repent the sin of old Adam and Eve, replacing their rebellion with obedience. Thus Jesus and Mary repair the rift that Adam and Eve imposed. Eve disrupted her unity with God by disobedience, and tied all her children to this disruption. Mary untied disobedience by obeying. Then Jesus applied infinite divinity

to destroy the original disobedience, and repair the infinite damage of offending infinite God. The Church Fathers rightly summarize this blessing as “death through Eve; life through Mary”. John Paul identifies the “key” unlocking Mary’s heart. Her fullness of grace is super-abundant divine life. God gives this astounding life because Mary opens her heart entirely. She opens at a given time. God transcends time. So, from eternity, Mary is present in Christ’s mystery. With the fullness of grace, Mary accepts the fullness of faith to make humanity present to Jesus. The mother and the Son are one.

Behold Your Mother

St. John Paul traces the steps Jesus took to make Mary our mother, as the Gospels recount them. **Text** “The Gospel of Luke records the moment when ‘a woman in the crowd raised her voice’, and said to Jesus: ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that nursed you!’, Lk 11:27. These words expressed praise of Mary, His mother in the flesh. Because Mary was not with Christ in his ministry, these words brought Mary out of her hiddenness in Nazareth. Through these words, the gospel account of Jesus growing flashed for an instant. They recalled Mary’s conception, giving birth and nursing. Thanks to this motherhood, Jesus, the Son of the Most High (Lk 1:32), is a true son of man. He is ‘flesh’ like every other man. He is ‘the Word become flesh’ (Jn 1:14). He is flesh and blood of Mary! *Lumen Gentium*, 60.

“But Jesus replies... ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God, and keep it’, Lk 11:28. He wishes to divert attention from motherhood understood only as a fleshly bond... in order to direct it towards those mysterious bonds of the spirit, which develop from hearing and keeping God’s word.

“Even more clearly, this shift into spiritual values is seen... when ‘his mother and brothers are standing outside, and wish to see him’. He replies: ‘My mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God, and do it’, Lk 8:20-21. This he said ‘looking around on those who sat about him’, Mk 3:34. Or, in Mat 12:49: ‘stretching out his hand towards his disciples’. These statements fit with the reply of the twelve-year-old Jesus to his parents after they found him in the Temple. When Jesus left Nazareth to begin his public life throughout Palestine, he was completely and exclusively ‘concerned with his Father’s business’, Lk 2:49. He announced the Kingdom of God and his Father’s business which add a new dimension and meaning to everything human, and therefore to every human bond... Within this new dimension, ‘brotherhood’ means something different from ‘brotherhood according to the flesh’... from the same set of parents. ‘Motherhood’ too, in the dimension of the Kingdom of God, and in the radius of the fatherhood of God himself, takes on another meaning. In the words reported by Luke, Jesus teaches precisely this new meaning of motherhood.

“Is Jesus thereby distancing himself from his mother according to the flesh? Does he perhaps wish to leave her in the hidden obscurity which she herself has chosen? If this seems to be the case from the tone of those words, one must nevertheless note that the new and different motherhood which Jesus speaks of to his disciples refers precisely to Mary in a very unique way. Is not Mary the first of ‘those who hear the word of God, and do it’? Therefore does not the blessing uttered by Jesus in response to the woman in the crowd refer primarily to her? Without any doubt, Mary is worthy of blessing by the very fact that she became the mother of Jesus according to the flesh... But she is worthy also, and especially because already at the Annunciation she accepted the word of God. She believed it, obeyed God, and kept the word and ‘pondered it in her heart’, Lk 1:38. 45; 2:19, 51. Her whole life accomplished it. Thus we can say that the blessing proclaimed by Jesus is not in opposition to the blessing uttered by the unknown woman. Rather it coincides with that blessing in the person of this Virgin Mother, the ‘handmaid of the Lord’, Lk 1:38. If it is true that ‘all generations will call her blessed’, Lk 1:48, then it can be said that the unnamed woman was the first to confirm unwittingly that prophetic phrase of Mary’s Magnificat, and to begin the Magnificat of the ages.

“Through faith, Mary became the bearer of the Son given to her by the Father through the power of the Spirit, while preserving her virginity intact. In that same faith she discovered and accepted the other dimension of motherhood revealed by Jesus during his messianic mission. One can say that this dimension of motherhood belonged to Mary from the beginning, from the moment of the conception of her Son. From that time, she was ‘the one who believed’. But as the messianic mission of her Son grew clearer to her eyes and spirit, she herself as a mother became ever more open to that new dimension of motherhood which was to constitute her ‘part’ beside her Son. She said from the very beginning; ‘Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word’, Lk 1:38. Through faith, Mary continued to hear and to ponder that word, in which the self-revelation of the living God became ever clearer, in a way ‘which surpasses knowledge’, Eph 3:19. This Mary as Mother became the first ‘disciple’ of her Son, the first to whom he seemed to say: ‘Follow me’, even before he addressed this call to the Apostles (Jn 1:43).” *Redemptoris Mater*, Part One, 20.

Comment St. John Paul shows how Jesus took steps to make Mary our mother. Christ consistently unfolded the Father’s divine plan for redemption by steps we did not notice before. John Paul reverses our first interpretation of the words Jesus spoke. The Word included enlivening advanced meanings for these words. Our faith meets the challenge to grow by pondering these words. Like finally fitting together fragments of a puzzle, at last we see the whole instead of the parts. One fragment is that the unknown woman praised Mary sight-unseen. But Mary birthed the central part, Who is Jesus. He is so divine, as incarnate God, that the woman knows that His mother must be super-abundantly blessed. When the woman praises Mary, she places Mary front and center on the world stage. His mother enabled His advance from pregnancy, to birth, and growth to maturity. All Mary’s nurturing “flashes out in the midst of the crowd”.

At first sight, Christ’s reply seems to put Mary down, and raise up strangers who “hear the word of God, and keep it”. But John Paul reminds us that Mary was the first to “hear the word of God, and keep it”. So she is the first disciple. The full picture shows Mary leading the way to hearing God’s word. She is the prime disciple, more blessed than those who follow her lead. “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God, and do it” follows the same pattern. Mary is the prime example of hearing and doing God’s word. Similarly, when the twelve-year-old Jesus was “about his Father’s business”, He was accomplishing the purpose for which Mary bore Him.

John Paul highlights wonders that may have escaped us when we pondered these events. Jesus creates a new dimension for the universe. This new dimension is the gift of divine life. Christ is that gift in the flesh because He divinizes humanity in His very Person. He is God-man. This divinizing dimension did not exist before. Now every human relationship is enriched by unity with God. Jesus proclaims this added dimension to be the “Kingdom of God”. It rises above all created value because its divinity exceeds creation. Whoever commits himself to God’s Kingdom enters this divine dimension. Embarking on this dimension, we enter the “radius of the fatherhood of God Himself”.

This stupendous dimension transcends description. But we know it by the words and deeds of Jesus. Our experience includes it because we receive divine life in Baptism, and live it as long as we advance toward God. Mary was the first to live in this dimension. Within it, human standards fade away. In it, Mary sees more of God’s vision. We who accept God’s gift of His own life, also begin to see with God’s eyes. Christ never distances Himself from Mary. In fact, He advances nearer to her through this divine dimension. Mary enjoys a new and different motherhood. If we join her, we enjoy a new and different family. This divine life opens the meaning of “hear the word of God, and do it”. “Keeping God’s word and pondering it in her heart” means living in this divine dimension. God unites Mary to His life.

Because God’s life is beyond words, Jesus stretches the words. He also sets them in opposition, to boost us out of ordinary meanings into divine meanings. The unnamed woman was the first to confirm that “all generations will call you blessed” when she said “blessed is the womb that bore you”. Thus she began the Magnificat of the ages. We know that she began the Magnificat by connecting the dots into their pattern. We believe that Christ is God, so He speaks of divine things. We keep these divine things in our heart, and ponder them. John Paul did just that, and gave us this magnificent meditation on Mary. In the light of her achievement, we see that Mary was the first disciple of her Son, the first He invited to follow Him, even before He called the Apostles. His invitation to divine life initiates a new dimension of existence. These steps orient us to Christ’s gift of Mary to be our mother. John Paul notes the next step at the wedding feast of Cana.

Text “Particularly eloquent is the passage in John’s Gospel which presents Mary at the wedding feast of Cana. She appears there as the Mother of Jesus, at the beginning of his public life. ‘There was a marriage at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the marriage, with his disciples’, Jn 2:1-2. Jesus and his disciples were invited together with Mary, as if by reason of her presence at the celebration. The Son seems to have been invited because of his mother. We are familiar with the result of that invitation. Jesus begins his signs by changing the water into wine. So the Evangelist says that Jesus ‘manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him’, Jn 2:11.

“Mary is there...contributing to the ‘beginning of the signs’ which reveal the messianic power of his Son. ‘When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him: “They have no wine”. Jesus said to her: “O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come”’, Jn 2:3-4. In John’s Gospel that ‘hour’ means the time appointed by the Father when the Son accomplishes his task, and is to be glorified. See Jn 7:30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1; 17:1; 19:27. Even though Jesus’ reply to his mother sounds like a refusal..., Mary nevertheless says to the servants: ‘Do whatever he tells you’, Jn 2:5. Then Jesus orders the servants to fill the stone jars with water, and the water becomes wine, better than the wine which has previously been served to the wedding guests.

“What deep understanding existed between Jesus and his mother? How can we probe the mystery of their intimate spiritual union? But the fact speaks for itself. It is certain that that event already quite clearly outlines the new dimension, the new meaning of Mary’s motherhood. Her motherhood has a significance which is not exclusively contained in the words of Jesus, and in the various episodes reported by the Synoptics. See Lk 8:19-20; 11:27-28; Mt 12:46-50; Km 3:31-35. In these texts Jesus means above all to contrast the motherhood resulting from the fact of birth with what this ‘motherhood’ is to be in the dimension of the Kingdom of God, in the salvific radius of God’s fatherhood. In John’s text, on the other hand, the description of the Cana event outlines what is actually manifested as a new kind of motherhood according to the spirit, and not just according to the flesh. It is Mary’s solicitude for human beings, her coming to them in the wide variety of their wants and needs. At Cana in Galilee, there is only one concrete aspect of human need (no wine). But it has a symbolic value. Coming to the aid of human needs means bringing their needs into the radius of Christ’s messianic mission and salvific power. This is mediation. Mary places herself between her Son and mankind in their real wants, needs, and sufferings. She puts herself ‘in the middle’, as mediatrix, not as outsider. . . .she acts as mother. She knows that as such she can point out to her Son the needs of mankind. In fact, she ‘has the right’ to do so. Her mediation is thus in the nature of intercession. Mary ‘intercedes’ for mankind. And that is not all. As a mother, she also wishes the messianic power of her Son to be manifested. That salvific power is meant to help man in his misfortunes, to free him from the evil which in various forms and degrees weigh heavily upon his life. Precisely as the Prophet Isaiah foretold about the Messiah: . . . ‘To preach good news to the poor. . . to proclaim release to the captives, and sight to the blind. . .’. See Lk 4:18.

“An essential element of Mary’s maternal task is in: ‘Do whatever he tells you’. The Mother of Christ is the spokeswoman of her Son’s will, pointing out those things which must be done, to manifest the salvific power of the Messiah. At Cana, thanks to Mary’s intercession and the servants’ obedience, Jesus begins ‘his hour’. At Cana Mary believes in Jesus. Her faith evokes his first ‘sign’, and helps kindle the disciples’ faith.” *Redemptoris Mater* Part One, 21

Comment Mary includes Jesus and His new followers in a marriage feast because this is the most loving thing to do. The married couple was poor, as their lack of wine showed, but delighted by the large crowd. The number of guests would highlight their lives as fond memories of their glorious wedding day. But running out of wine was more than an embarrassment. It was a disaster. So Mary prevented that. She asked Jesus to provide wine for these poor people. The English translation of their short dialog does not convey the honor that each showed the other. Mary merely alerted Christ to the need. She knew that He would fix the problem. When He addressed her as “woman”, He echoed the Garden of Eden honorific title for Eve. As the new Eve, Mary deserved that title. She restored humankind to its obedience, and therefore its acceptance of the salvation that Jesus will provide. Though the hour for His first miracle has not yet arrived, Christ advances the schedule because He loves Mary. Advancing the schedule also expresses His love for these poor people and their many guests. This love-dimension is divine, expressing in Jesus the infinite Love Which God is.

This divine dimension elevates all human relations. Help itself advances from mutual assistance to unlimited assistance, even if the helper will not get anything in return. Motherhood expands from limited to unlimited love, the dynamic of God’s kingdom. Mary enables both Christ’s birth, and the birth of His public ministry. This ministry manifests His divinity by a series of miracles which express God’s love in daily life.

As John Paul notes, Mary mothers both Jesus and His ministry. God brought Mary into the radius of His Love, and expands that radius to the rest of us by Christ’s ministry. Throughout the Hebrew Scripture, wine stands for more than fermented grape juice. It refers to wisdom, covenant, celebration, union, and joy, among others. “They have no wine” stands for both the beverage and the divine relation that Jesus brings to us. Mary is the middle-woman, mediating the gift of wine, representing both the beverage and the grace of divine life. She intercedes for us. God combines many advantages into one event. Mary also intercedes for Christ to make Himself known. His miracle initiates His ministry, manifesting Him to the world. Jesus serves everyone at once. He serves God, the Trinity, above all. But He serves all mankind, inviting everyone to enjoy the wine of redemption. Mary gives birth to this Servant, Who outgrows her.

Mary tells us how to interact with her Son: “Do whatever He tells you”. Mary was the first to love so entirely that she obeyed perfectly. She urges us to receive God’s love through Jesus, let it grow in our hearts, and exercise it by serving others. We want to serve God. But He is invisible. So we serve Him by serving His beloved people. Mary gives us the best example. She points to Christ, God incarnate. He is Love in flesh. He brilliantly radiates Love. We serve God by following Jesus. We do what He tells us to do, and we imitate what He did. His actions outshine his commands. He poured out infinite Love by His life, and proved it by His death. Mary exists to facilitate His entry into life itself, and, at Cana, to facilitate His entry into ministry. May we gradually advance into her loving service, with her gentle help, to imitate Christ.

Mary’s Maternal Care

Each step that Jesus takes to make Mary our mother unfolds multiple benefits. Each step reveals more clearly how Mary and Christ are united. To love one is to love the other, because they are one in Love. John Paul outlines more details of these steps in the following section. **Text** “We can therefore say that in this passage of John’s Gospel (Cana wedding feast) we find a first manifestation of the truth concerning Mary’s maternal care. This truth is expressed by Vatican II. It is important to note how the Council illustrates Mary’s maternal role in terms of Christ’s mediation. ‘Mary’s maternal function towards mankind in no way obscures, or diminishes, the unique mediation of Christ. Rather it shows its efficacy because “there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus”, 1 Tim 2:5.’ This maternal role of Mary flows, according to God’s good pleasure, ‘from the superabundance of the merits of Christ. It is founded on his mediation, absolutely depends on it, and draws its entire efficacy from it’, *Lumen Gentium*, 60.

“John’s text identifies Mary’s maternal mediation. So the Council proclaims that Mary became ‘a mother to us in the order of grace’. This motherhood in the order of grace flows from her divine motherhood. Because she was, by the design of divine Providence, the mother who nourished the divine Redeemer, Mary became ‘an associate of unique nobility, and the Lord’s humble handmaid’, who ‘cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope, and burning charity, in the Savior’s work of restoring supernatural life to souls’, *Lumen Gentium*, 61. ‘This maternity of Mary in the order of grace. . . will last without interruption until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect’, *Lumen Gentium*, 62.” *Redemptoris Mater* Part One, 22.

Comment Jesus and Mary took every important step together. They are so one in Love that they support each other in every act. We who follow, learn each step as we encounter it in the Gospels. Vatican II helps us follow by illustrating the patterns which God wove by the steps Jesus and Mary took together. Christ leads the dance. Though He is her son by human flesh, He is her creator by divine nature. Mary follows. She complements His initiative. She receives His creation, incarnation, and redemption. So Vatican II affirms that her reception in no way detracts from Jesus uniting God and man. This incarnation makes Him the proper mediator, the only one. His redemptive merits, and only His infinite merits, cure sin. That’s His great work. Mary mediates maternally. Christ’s successful salvation provides all the impetus for Mary’s successful mediation. Jesus introduces the divine dimension, the kingdom of God, the order of grace.

This dimension restores divine life to humans who lost it in Adam and Eve’s rebellion. The order of grace restores the natural order by repairing disobedience. Mary repaired Eve’s disobedience. Jesus repaired Adam’s disobedience. Both Eve and Adam disordered the universe by disobeying; obeying repaired it. United in Love, Mary complements Christ’s divine love and obedience by loving entirely, to obey completely at the human level. So she is the secondary mediator between man and God. The divinity of Jesus did not need faith, but His humanity did. So He exercised faith. Mary, the human, needed faith, and exercised it perfectly. She accepted the gift of knowledge that was natural to God’s Son. Both persons lived Love so much that they attained the Kingdom of God, and enjoyed the divine dimension, the order of grace.

John Paul sees this accomplishment as full preparation for the final step. At the ultimate salvific step, Jesus completes His gift of Mary to be our mother. **Text** “John’s description of Cana presents Mary’s caring motherhood at the beginning of Christ’s messianic activity. John’s description of Calvary presents Mary’s motherhood in the salvific economy of grace at the crowning moment of Christ’s messianic activity. Then He accomplishes His Paschal Mystery. John’s description is concise. ‘Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved, standing near, he said to his mother: “Woman behold your son!” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold your mother!” And from that hour, the disciple took her to his own home’, Jn 19:25. And so this ‘new motherhood of Mary’, generated by faith, is the fruit of the ‘new’ love which came to definitive maturity in her at the foot of the Cross, through sharing in the redemptive love of her Son.

“Thus we find ourselves at the very center of the fulfillment of the promise contained in the Proto-gospel: the ‘seed of the woman. . . will crush the head of the serpent’, Gen 3:15. By his redemptive death, Jesus Christ conquers the evil of sin and death at its very roots. It is significant that, as he speaks to his mother from the Cross, he calls her ‘woman’. He says to her ‘Woman, behold your son!’ Moreover, he addressed her by the same term at Cana (Jn 2:4). How can one doubt that, especially now, on Golgotha, this expression goes to the very heart of the mystery of Mary. It indicates the unique place which she occupies in the entire economy of salvation. As Vatican II teaches: in Mary ‘the exalted Daughter of Sion, after a long expectation of the promise, the time was at length fulfilled, and the new dispensation established. All this occurred when the Son of God took a human nature from her, that he might, in the mysteries of his flesh, free man from sin.’ *Lumen Gentium*, 55.

“The words uttered by Jesus from the Cross signify that the motherhood of her who bore Christ finds a ‘new’ continuation in the Church, and through the Church, symbolized and represented by John. Thus, she who was ‘full of grace’ came into the mystery of Christ, in order to be his Mother, and thus the Holy Mother of God. Through the Church, she remains in that mystery as ‘the woman’ spoken of by Genesis 3:15, at the beginning, and by the Apocalypse 12:1, at the end of salvation history. In the eternal plan of Providence, Mary’s divine motherhood pours out upon the Church. Tradition affirms that Mary’s motherhood of the Church reflects and extends her motherhood of the Son of God.

“According to Vatican II, the very moment of the Church’s birth and full manifestation enables us to glimpse this continuity of Mary’s motherhood. ‘Since it pleased God not to manifest solemnly the mystery of the salvation of the human race until he poured forth the Spirit promised by Christ, we see the Apostles before the day of Pentecost continuing with one mind in prayer with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren’, Acts 1:14. We see Mary prayerfully imploring the gift of the Spirit, who had already overshadowed her in the Annunciation’, *Lumen Gentium*, 59.

“In the redemptive economy of grace, through the action of the Holy Spirit, there is a unique correspondence between the moment of the Incarnation of the Word and the moment of the birth of the Church. Mary links these two moments, at Nazareth and at Jerusalem. Her discreet yet essential presence at both shows the path of ‘birth from the Holy Spirit’. Thus she who is present in the mystery of Christ as Mother, becomes, by the will of the Son, and the power of the Holy Spirit, present in the mystery of the Church. In the Church she continues to be a maternal presence, as shown by the words spoken from the Cross: ‘Woman, behold your son! Behold, your mother.’” *Redemptoris Mater* Part One, 23-24.

Comment John Paul spotlights Mary’s essential acceptance of God’s will at the start of redemption and at its crown. Mary is on each side of salvation history. She enables Christ’s inception in her womb. She mediates His completion of redemption. The Gospel description of each event, Annunciation and Crucifixion, is very simple. But the events themselves are profound. Each event moves the world off its previous downward course. God so loves Mary’s freedom that He invites Her to be His mother. She freely accepts, and God incarnates. This event reverses the downward plunge that Adam and Eve initiated. Mary’s obedience to God’s invitation changed the world. God then became man. Thereby He restarts human history toward God. He relies upon Mary to raise Him from helpless infancy into vigorous adulthood.

His incarnation enables His infinitely perfect redemption from sin. Mary’s free obedience initiates the momentum which Jesus completes by His obedience unto death. He accomplishes salvation on Calvary. To correct Eve and Adam’s cooperation in Original Sin, Jesus invites Mary to cooperate in suffering with Him. Thus she cooperates with His redemption. God perfectly balances, and reorders, everything. He does His work infinitely well. Mary accepts both invitations to obey. At Nazareth her feeling is joy. At Calvary her feeling is pain. But the pain pays off sin’s debt!

This culminating cooperation establishes Mary as mother of all. Jesus ratifies that establishment by his words: “Woman, behold your son”, and to John “Behold your mother”. The parallel is perfectly worded, since the Spirit inspired the word “woman” in both books, Genesis and John. With these words, Christ expressed profound respect, and total solicitude, for Mary. In the new divine dimension He initiated, these words stand, not only for Mary and John, but for Mary and every person. Jesus breaks loose from physical bonds into God’s infinity. This burst of divine power establishes everything contained in the Paschal Mystery, salvation history, and the Church. Christ’s Mystical Body extends to every person. At the center of these swirling mysteries, Mary cares for all of us. Her tender love which sustained the baby Jesus now sustains His Mystical Body. We do not comprehend these mysteries, but we thrive by living in them.

John Paul conveys profound meaning in these simple words: “Mary’s motherhood of the human race has already been outlined. Now it is clearly stated and established”. The steps are complete, the mystery revealed. It shines before us, though we grasp it not. Its brilliance enlightens and encourages us, just as her gentle presence supports us. Nothing can adequately express this support. But we do not need the expression because we have the reality. The Church Fathers at Vatican II pointed out this mystery in memorable ways. John Paul amplifies this teaching by identifying the source of Mary’s motherhood. It is faith in the new love, the divine life that Jesus brings. God initiated it when He incarnated, and crowned it when He died on the cross, to save us from sin. Because God does more than we can comprehend, we accept His gift of faith. Faith provides a peek into divine action. Faith is a share in God’s life. By faith we see part of His vision.

Mary was the first to accept God’s supernatural gift of faith. God loves to give this gift to all of us. With Mary’s help, we can accept faith, grow in it, and participate more fully in God’s very life. He gives us this gift to draw us ever closer to Him. When we forsake the limited vision of creatures, and accept God’s vision of Himself, we begin to see be-

hind the created veil, into God’s revelations, which lead to Him. His mysteries enliven us to accept His other gifts of hope and charity. Mary nurtures all these divine gifts in us, helping us see what God sees, hope for what God has, and love as God loves. Exercising these gifts, Mary united with Jesus so intimately that they became one forever.

John Paul shows how this unity expands across reality, from the beginning, described in Genesis, to the ultimate end, described in Apocalypse. In between, Mary is the “very center of the fulfillment of the promise” from Genesis 3:15: the “seed of the woman...will crush the head of the serpent”. Jesus crushes Satan by His death on the cross, freeing all people from devilry. At the center, Christ calls his mother “woman” to evoke the central connection, the axis around which history turns. This axis runs through the center of the individuals on Golgotha: Mary, Jesus, and John. Divine love extends this axis through our centers also. God invites everyone to feast on mystery. God’s infinite love spreads everywhere. When Christ shed the last drop of His blood, His death perfectly fulfilled divine justice and mercy. Death, the wage of sin was now paid in full, freeing all of us from Satan’s domination. The “economy of salvation” is debt paid in the currency of love, poured forth as blood. Mary’s loving obedience opened her heart to the Holy Spirit, Who delivered the Son to her womb, so that this ultimate divine sacrifice could redeem mankind. Jesus saves!

Jesus formalizes Mary’s universal motherhood by giving Mary to be John’s mother, and giving John to be her son. In his Gospel, John specializes in symbol. He represents all of us. He gratefully accepts Mary as his mother. By these observable words, Christ extends the divine dimension that He established beyond all limits. He radiates throughout the Church to everyone who accepts His living Love. Jesus brought Mary into His mystery, so that she would become God’s mother. The brilliance of that miracle illumines the universe, extending Mary’s motherhood to everyone. Pentecost is the visible pouring out of the Spirit promised by Christ. It is the wider manifestation of God that He began by incarnating His Son in Mary. Look again at these two events, and we see the continuity that Vatican II recommended to us. “We see Mary prayerfully imploring the gift of the Spirit, who had already overshadowed her in the Annunciation”, *Lumen Gentium*, 59.

When we look, at first we see only the sensory surface of the event. So we ask God to enliven our faith, to see beyond sensation, into His life flowing through these events. When we exercise God’s gift of faith, we learn to focus on His action, the living spirit which sustains the entire event, including its sensory surface. When we apply faith to these events, we catch a glimpse of God. If we do not apply faith, then all we see are shimmering sensations which flit by endlessly, leaving us in the dark. God’s work is so spiritual that we need His gift of faith to rise from the swamp of material muck. Mary is the first to apply her faith to God as He lives through visible events. God becomes visible in Mary’s womb, appearing for the world to see when He is born. Thereafter, for thirty-three years, people could sense Him. But faith alone reveals His reality. Because He gives faith to all who receive it, we can accept His life, and live it along with Him.

Then we can live into our personal version of Pentecost, when we accept the Spirit. He will enliven us more fully, invigorating us to serve His people. Mary is the link between Christ’s incarnation, the birth of the church, redemption on the cross, and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. Mary links us to the center: Jesus. She loves to bring Christ to us, and us to Jesus. Her loving linking is the heartbeat of the Mystical Body. John Paul lived that mystery, prayed it, and delivered a description of it to us in this encyclical. Thank God for this gift from a great saint. Pope Benedict XVI echoes this gift.

Text “We must become a longing for God. The Fathers of the Church say that prayer is nothing other than becoming a longing for God. In Mary this petition was granted. She is the open vessel of longing, in which life becomes prayer, and prayer becomes life. St. John wonderfully conveys this process by never mentioning Mary’s name in his Gospel. She no longer has any name except ‘the Mother of Jesus’. It is as if she had handed over her personal dimension in order to be solely at His disposal. Thereby she became a person. [Western men reject this submission. They emphasize dominance. So they] “separate Christ from his Mother, without grasping that Mary’s motherhood might have some significance for theology and faith. ... We need to abandon this one-sided Western activist outlook, lest we degrade the Church to a product we design and create. The Church is not a manufactured item. She is the living seed of God that must be allowed to grow and ripen. This is why the Church needs the Marian mystery. This is why the Church herself is a Marian mystery.” *Benedictus*, 146. May we absorb the messages from these saintly popes, and let Mary nourish us fully.

Mary at the Center of the Pilgrim Church

John Paul highlights Mary’s heartbeat in the Church going to God. **Text** “The Church ‘like a pilgrim in a foreign land, presses forward amid the persecution of the world and the consolations of God’. (St. Augustine; *Civitate Dei*, 18, 51) The Church announces the Cross and Death of the Lord until He comes (1 Cor 11:26). ‘Israel according to the flesh wan-

dered as an exile in the desert, and was already called the Church of God (See ESD 13:1; Num 20:4; Dt 23:1) Likewise the new Israel is also called the Church of Christ (Mt 16:18). He bought it for himself by his blood (Acts 20:28). He filled it with his Spirit, and provided it with those means which benefit it as a visible and social unity. God gathered together as one all those who in faith look upon Jesus as the author of salvation, and the source of unity and peace. He has established them as Church, that for each and all she may be the visible sacrament of this saving unity,' *Lumen Gentium*, 9.

“Vatican II speaks of the pilgrim Church, like the Israel of the Old Covenant, journeying through the desert. The journey also has an external character, visible in the time and space in which it historically takes place. For the Church ‘is destined to extend to all regions of the earth, and so to enter into the history of mankind...she transcends all limits of time and of space’, *Lumen Gentium*, 9. And yet the essential character of her pilgrimage is interior. It is a pilgrimage through faith, by ‘the power of the Risen Lord’, *Lumen Gentium*, 8. It is a pilgrimage in the Holy Spirit, given to the Church as the invisible Comforter (Jn 14:26; 15:26; 16:7). ‘Moving forward through trial and tribulation, the Church is strengthened by the power of God’s grace promised to her by the Lord, so that...moved by the Holy Spirit, she may never cease to renew herself, until through the Cross she arrives at the light which knows no setting’, *Lumen Gentium*, 9.

“It is precisely in this ecclesial journey or pilgrimage through space and time, and even more through the history of souls, that Mary is present, as the one who is ‘blessed because she believed’. She advanced on the pilgrimage of faith, sharing unlike any other creature in the mystery of Christ. The Council further says that ‘Mary figured profoundly in the history of salvation, and unites and mirrors within herself the central truths of the faith’, *Lumen Gentium*, 65. She is like a ‘mirror’ reflecting in the most profound and limpid way ‘the mighty works of God’, Acts 2:11.” *Redemptoris Mater*, 25.

Comment John Paul reminds us that we are on the way to God. Life is a journey through trials toward rewards, ultimately to the Reward Himself. Each of us embarks on this journey. Together in the Church, we are all pilgrims in a foreign land. John Paul considers the Church itself, as it contains all of us. The Church advances to God amid persecutions and consolations. It announces the life, death, resurrection, and eventual return of the Lord. As such, the Church resembles the ancient nation of Israel, wandering in the desert. In short, the Church is a pilgrim. A pilgrim leaves his familiar home, faces troubles on the way, to attain holy ground. The ground is holy because of God’s presence. At this sacred place, God is more present than at the pilgrim’s home. The Church travels through time on the way to heaven.

A pilgrimage requires hard traveling over rough terrain. Pilgrims pass corpses fallen by the way. Challenges abound. But Jesus led the way. His last steps were bloody, ending in death on the cross. That death paid sin’s wage, purchasing us with His blood. So the Church is His. He is the greatest pilgrim. He knows every hard step of the way. He consoles the weary Church by pouring out His Spirit. The visible church effects in spirit what it signifies in the flesh. It is the sacrament of God’s salvation. Just as Jesus was simultaneously the invisible God and the visible sign of God, so the Church is simultaneously the united souls and their visible sign. Christ came to save us all, so the Church is the visible sacrament of this salvation. Jesus came to unite us all, so the Church is the visible sacrament of this unification. We look with faith at visible signs, to see more. Faith expands into what John Paul explains. We expand by reading it with faith.

Faith reveals the unity of Israel with Christ, exemplified in the Church. To help us advance, God acts through visible beings. Faith penetrates the visibility to learn the spirituality. This is how spirited-flesh beings know spiritual regularity behind material change. As John Paul says, we see through the visible to the spiritual. This transition from historical events to eternal events is the pilgrimage from earth to heaven. The church is on that journey. The risen Lord empowers that trip. Mary is “blessed because she believed”, so she helps us expand our belief. She “reflects in the most profound and limpid way ‘the mighty works of God’.” If we gaze at her, we see this reflection. Her maternal care, helps us see this faithful reflection. St. John Paul expands Mary’s nearby help to her spouse, the Holy Spirit.

Text “Built by Christ upon the Apostles, the Church became fully aware of these mighty works of God on the day of Pentecost. Those gathered together in the Upper Room ‘were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance’, Acts 2:4. From that moment begins the journey of faith, the Church’s pilgrimage through the history of individuals and peoples. We know that at the beginning of this journey, Mary is present. We see her in the midst of the Apostles in the Upper Room, ‘prayerfully imploring the gift of the Spirit’, *Lumen Gentium*, 59.

“Her faith journey is longer. The Holy Spirit had already come down upon her, and she became his faithful spouse at the Annunciation. Then she welcomed the Word of the true God, offering ‘full submission of intellect and will...freely assenting to the truth revealed by him’. She abandoned herself totally to God through ‘the obedience of faith’, *Dei Ver-*

bum, 5. So she replied to the angel: ‘Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word’. Mary’s journey of faith is thus longer than that of the others gathered there. Mary ‘goes before them, leads the way’ for them, *Lumen Gentium*, 63. The Annunciation in Nazareth, and the Cross, prepared for Pentecost. Mary’s faith-journey meets the journey of the Church.

“Among those devoting themselves to prayer in the Upper Room, preparing to go ‘to the whole world’ after receiving the Spirit, some had followed Jesus from the beginning of his mission in Israel. Eleven of them were Apostles. To them Jesus passed on the mission he himself had received from the Father. ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you’, Jn 20:21... Forty days later, he added: ‘when the Holy Spirit comes upon you...you shall be my witnesses...to the end of the earth’, Acts 1:8. This apostolic mission began when they left the Upper Room. The Church is born, then grows through the testimony that Peter and the Apostles bear of the Crucified and Risen Christ (Acts 2:31-34; 3:15-18; 4:10-12; 5:30-32)

“Mary did not directly receive this apostolic mission. Jesus did not send her ‘to the whole world to teach all nations’, Mt 28:19. But she was there when the Apostles were preparing to express the Spirit of Truth. ... In their midst Mary was ‘devoted to prayer’ as the ‘mother of Jesus’, Acts 1:13-14. That first group looked in faith ‘upon Jesus, the author of salvation’, *Lumen Gentium*, 9. They knew that Jesus was the Son of Mary. As his mother, she was from the moment of his conception a unique witness to the mystery of Jesus. He disclosed that mystery, and confirmed it, in the Cross and Resurrection. From the very first moment, the Church ‘looked at’ Mary through Jesus, just as she looked at Jesus through Mary. The Church at that time considered Mary to be the singular witness to Jesus, when she ‘kept all these things, pondering them in her heart’, Lk 2:19.

“Above all, in the Church of that time, Mary was the one who is ‘blessed because she believed’. Then, and ever since, the Church revered Mary, because she was the first to believe. From the Annunciation through to Pentecost, Mary followed Jesus step by step in her maternal pilgrimage of faith... Above all, she followed him to Golgotha. In the Upper Room, at the dawn of the Church, her faith found confirmation. As the angel said her son ‘will be great... he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; of his kingdom there will be no end’. Calvary shrouded that promise in darkness. But Mary’s faith did not fail. Like Abraham, she remained ‘in hope believing against hope’, Rom 4:18. After the resurrection, hope showed its true face, and the promise began to be transformed into reality. Jesus said to the Apostles: ‘Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations...I am with you always’, Mt 28:19-20. Christ had revealed himself by his resurrection as the conqueror of death, the one who possessed the kingdom without end.” *Redemptoris Mater*, Part Two, 26.

Comment John Paul shows Mary’s central role. She believed in bleakest times, against all odds, until Jesus proved His divinity by rising from death. During the fearful times when the first Church hid in the Upper Room, Mary encouraged them, and prayed for her spouse, the Holy Spirit, to inspire them. When the Spirit descended, the Church overcame fear, and went forth to preach the Gospel full of power. Mary embarked on her faith journey before all the others. She was present from the start, when Jesus became man in her. So she went before the Church, leading the way for it. She was old friends with the Holy Spirit. He loved her more than any human spouse loved his bride. They were married more perfectly than any other marriage. Mary abandoned herself totally to the Spirit in loving obedience by faith. All her life, from her Immaculate Conception, Mary prepared for Pentecost. From the Annunciation especially, Mary prepared for Pentecost. In her, salvation history came alive, first as Jesus her son, then as the Holy Spirit launched the Church.

Her work was unique. It was more important than preaching the Gospel. Because she birthed Jesus, she birthed the Gospel. She was the hinge on which this history turned. God’s life in her provided the eye of faith to see through the sensory veil to the reality beneath. She was the first witness, activated by the Holy Spirit, to bring forth Christ the Lord. Apostles merely passed on their witness to the Jesus that she bore and raised. The Church is the Mystical Body of Jesus. As the mother of Jesus, Mary is of the mother of the Church. Christ connects God and man by being the perfect blend of both. He is God Incarnate. He is the God-man. As Christ’s mother, Mary is the mother of God. When we look at these facts with God’s gift of faith, we see through the outside observation into the mystery of God. Perfecting this faith vision is our destiny. Seeing with faith on earth leads to direct presence in God. While it is true that we cannot comprehend God, there is no other home for us. We delight in coming home. Mary was the first to arrive in God’s mystery by her faith. She can help us come home more often, and eventually stay home in God’s mystery. There is no better place for us to be.

As the first to believe, and “blessed because she believed”, she lived in closer contact with God than we can imagine. But we can imagine how she loved to gaze upon Jesus, fixing her spirit upon His. Imagine how He loved to gaze

upon her, fixing His spirit upon hers. Then we imagine how united they were. This divine union is God's gift to all of us. But Mary was the first to accept this gift of unity with divine life. She leads the way. By Pentecost, the Apostles and the disciples followed Mary into deeper unity, and into preaching the Gospel to spread that divine unity throughout the world.

John Paul lifts the veil to let us gaze at Mary leading the way to these wonders. He alerts us to the confirmation of Mary's faith at Pentecost. Her spouse, the Holy Spirit, extends His infinite love to all the followers of Christ gathered to receive Him in the Upper Room. Bursting forth from mystery, the Spirit sets all the praying souls aflame with God's life. This was God's plan from the creation of the world. He selected Mary to be the first believer, the hinge which God turned to redeem the world. God launches His kingdom, which will never end. Jesus, the God-man, turns the hinge for the Father and the Spirit, expressing the Son's obedience. This redemption is so perfect an act that we can contemplate it forever without exhausting its infinite truth, good, and beauty. When we exhaust ourselves in this mystery, we can collapse into Mary, our mother because she was Christ's mother. She loves to nurture us, restoring our vigor, to contemplate again.

John Paul returns to God's mystery, invigorated by Mary. **Text** "Now, at the first dawn of the church, at the beginning of the long journey through faith which began at Pentecost in Jerusalem, Mary was with the seed of the 'new Israel'. She was there as an exceptional witness to the mystery of Christ. The Church prayed assiduously with her. They 'contemplated her in the light of the Word made man'. It was always to be so. When the Church 'enters more intimately into the supreme mystery of the Incarnation' she thinks of the Mother of Christ with profound reverence and devotion, *Lumen Gentium*, 65. Mary belongs indissolubly to the mystery of Christ. She belongs also to the mystery of the Church from the beginning, from the day of the Church's birth. At the basis of what the Church has been, from the beginning, and to her development from generation to generation... we find Mary 'who believed that there would be fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord', Lk 1:45. It is precisely Mary's faith which marks the beginning of the new and eternal Covenant of God with man in Jesus Christ. This heroic faith 'precedes' the apostolic witness of the Church. It ever remains in the Church's heart, hidden like a heritage of God's revelation. All those who from generation to generation accept the apostolic witness of the Church, share in that mysterious inheritance, and therefore share Mary's faith.

"Elizabeth's words: 'Blessed is she who believed' continue into Pentecost. They accompany Mary from age to age, wherever knowledge of Christ's salvific mystery spreads, through the Church's apostolic witness and service. Thus is fulfilled the Magnificat's prophecy: 'All generations will call me blessed. He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name', Lk 1:48-49. The mystery of Christ leads us to bless his mother. We offer unique veneration for the Theotokos (Mother of God). This blessing always includes a blessing of her faith. ... all turn with veneration to Mary, and confidently ask her for help as His mother. They also seek in her faith, support for their own. It is precisely this lively sharing in Mary's faith that determines her unique place in the Church's pilgrimage as the new People of God throughout the earth." *Redemptoris Mater*, Part Two, 27.

Comment John Paul sees, by faith, into the Pilgrim Church which starts its pilgrimage in the Upper Room. He shares his vision with us. This group of about 120 people is the seed of the "new Israel", the redeemed of Abraham's seed. From these apostles and disciples, the Church expanded throughout the Roman Empire within a century. Under threat of extinction, this 'seed' grew to about a million people during that first century. Christians revered Christ's mother, and imitated her faith. This indissoluble bond sustained the Church during its exponential growth. Because the Church "enters more intimately into the supreme mystery of the Incarnation", it grows rapidly. Mary's faith is so rich that she can distribute portions of faith to all her children who request them. All Church-members share Mary's faith. Her faith supports ours, as we struggle to complete our pilgrimage. We, the new People of God are on our way to complete union with Jesus, and thereby with God. Mary nurtures this unifying process by sharing her preeminent faith with those who request it. St. John Paul reminds us that Mary loves our requests, and eagerly fulfills them, through Christ Our Lord.

Mary's Faith and Love Support Christ's Salvation

John Paul shows why Mary profoundly assists Jesus in salvation. **Text** "Vatican II says: 'Mary figured profoundly in the history of salvation... Hence when she is preached and venerated, she summons the faithful to her Son, to his sacrifice, and to love for the Father', *Lumen Gentium*, 65. For this reason, Mary's faith in some way continues to become the faith of the pilgrim People of God. Apostolic witness spread her faith from the outset, to individuals and communities, places and gatherings, throughout the Church. It is a faith passed on simultaneously through the mind and the heart. Prayer fosters it. Therefore 'the Church, in her apostolic work, also rightly looks to her who brought forth Christ, conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin, so that, through the Church, Christ may be born, and increase in the hearts of the

faithful also', *Lumen Gentium*, 65.

"Today, as on this pilgrimage of faith we near the end of the second Christian Millennium, the Church, through Vatican II, calls our attention to her vision of herself as the 'one People of God... among all the nations of the earth'. She reminds us of that truth according to which all the faithful, though 'scattered throughout the world, are in communion with each other in the Holy Spirit', *Lumen Gentium*, 13. Therefore in this union the mystery of Pentecost is continually being accomplished. At the same time, the Lord's apostles and disciples, in all the nations of the earth, 'devote themselves to prayer together with Mary, the mother of Jesus' (Acts 1:14). As they constitute from generation to generation the 'sign of the Kingdom' which is not of this world, they are also aware that in the midst of this world they must gather around that King to whom the nations have been given in heritage (Ps 2:8). The Father has given this King 'the throne of David his father' so that he 'will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end'.

"During this time of vigil, Mary, through the same faith which made her blessed... is present in the Church's mission, present in the Church's work of introducing into the world of the Kingdom of her Son. This presence of Mary finds many different expressions in our day, just as it did throughout Church history. It also has a wide field of action. ... the faith and piety of individual believers, traditions of Christian families (domestic churches), parish and missionary communities, religious institutes and dioceses, attraction of great shrines... help people meet the Mother of the Lord. This is the message of the Land of Palestine, the spiritual homeland of all Christians, because it was the homeland of the Savior of the world, and of his mother. This is the message of the many churches in Rome, and throughout the world, raised up by the faith of Christians. This is the message of centers like Guadalupe, Lourdes, Fatima, and... Jasna Gora, in my native land. These describe a 'geography' of faith and Marian devotion ... where people of God seek to meet the Mother of God, to find... a strengthening of their own faith. For in Mary's faith, first at the Annunciation, and then fully at the foot of the Cross, an interior space was reopened within humanity which the eternal Father can fill 'with every spiritual blessing'. It is the space 'of the new and eternal Covenant', and it exists in the Church. In Christ, the Church is 'a kind of sacrament, or sign, of intimate union with God, and of the unity of mankind', *Lumen Gentium*, 1. In the faith which Mary professed at the Annunciation, as the 'handmaid of the Lord', and in which she constantly 'precedes' the pilgrim People of God throughout the earth, the Church 'strives energetically and constantly to bring all humanity... back to Christ its Head, in the unity of his Spirit', *Lumen Gentium*, 71." *Redemptoris Mater*, Part Two, 28.

Comment Because Mary is, for the most part, silent in Scripture, we can easily overlook her. She wants to disappear into her beloved Son. But John Paul elucidates her prominence in salvation history. Mary is all love of God: loving daughter of the Father, beloved mother of the Son, and dearest spouse of the Holy Spirit. Mary dissolves in Love for each member of the Trinity. That is her great glory. She is the most successful human because she does exactly what God created her to do. That exactitude inspires us to follow her in faith, as John Paul illuminates so well. Her faith becomes our faith, if we accept it in prayer. Often we need to pray that Mary infuse her faith into us, to enlighten and strengthen us for our earthly pilgrimage. If we repeat these phrases to ourselves, they ease us into practicing them by serving our fellow pilgrims along the journey to God. In Mary's love, Christ is born and increases in faithful hearts. She opens us to Him.

Therefore the Fathers of Vatican II described Mary as the center of the Church, active everywhere to serve every follower of Jesus, just as she served Him. Her service prominently prepared for the Spirit's descent during Pentecost. She was the first to fully accept the Spirit, enabling Him to incarnate the Son in her womb. She guides the Apostles and disciples to accept the Spirit as tongues of flame. From that moment, these first followers of Christ enflamed the world, spreading the faith throughout the Roman Empire, and beyond. Even today, The Spirit's sparks inflame souls all over the world. John Paul outlines some of the vigorous work of the Spirit today. Pilgrims flock to Mary's shrines by the millions every year, increasing their faith by their devotions, and praying for more. Mary was the first to believe, and the most believing of all the original Christians. We seek to strengthen our faith by accepting more from her. She opened the "interior space" the heavenly Father can fill "with every spiritual blessing". God's divine grace exceeds words, but John Paul gives us words that work better than most to identify Mary's motherly care for us pilgrims. Just as Mary went before Jesus to birth Him, preparing the way for His ministry, and joining Him in His salvific sacrifice, so she goes before us to ease our way toward God. Her faith and love open the interior space for us to "strive energetically and constantly to being all humanity... back to Christ its Head, in the unity of His Spirit". John Paul develops some particular ways to unite in Spirit.

Text "In all Christ's disciples, the Spirit arouses the desire to be peacefully united, as Christ determines, as one flock under one shepherd', *Lumen Gentium*, 15. The journey of the Church, especially in our own time, is marked by the sign of ecumenism. Christians are seeking ways to restore that unity which Christ implored from the Father for his disci-

ples on the day before his Passion: ‘That they may all be one, even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you; that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me’, Jn 17:21. The unity of Christ’s disciples, therefore, is a great sign given in order to kindle faith in the world, while their division constitutes a scandal. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1.

“On the basis of a clearer and more widespread awareness of the urgent need to achieve the unity of all Christians, the ecumenical movement in the Catholic Church culminates in Vatican II’s expression: Christians must deepen in themselves, and each of their communities, the ‘obedience of faith’. Mary is the first and brightest example of faithful obedience. Since she ‘shines forth on earth...as a sign of sure hope and solace for the pilgrim People of God, it gives great joy and comfort to this most holy Synod that among the divided brethren there are those who live due honor to the Mother of your Lord and Savior. This is especially so among the Easterners’, *Lumen Gentium*, 68-69.

“Christians know that their unity will be truly rediscovered only if it is based on the unity of their faith. They must resolve considerable discrepancies of doctrine concerning the mystery and ministry of the church, and sometimes also concerning the role of Mary in the work of salvation. The dialogs begin by the Catholic Church with the Churches and Ecclesial Communities of the West are steadily converging upon these two inseparable aspects of the same mystery of salvation. If the mystery of the Word made flesh enables us to glimpse the mystery of the divine motherhood, and contemplation of the Mother of God brings us to a more profound understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation, then the same must be said for the mystery of the Church, and Mary’s role in the work of salvation. By a more profound study of both Mary and the Church, clarifying each by the light of the other, Christians who are eager to do what Jesus tells them...will be able to go forward together on this ‘pilgrimage of faith’. Mary is still the model of this pilgrimage. She can lead them to the unity which is willed by their one Lord, and so much desired by those who are attentively listening to what ‘the Spirit is saying to the Churches’, Rev 2:7, 11, 17.

“Meanwhile, it is a hopeful sign that these Churches and Ecclesial Communities are finding agreement with the Catholic Church on fundamental points of Christian belief, including the Virgin Mary. For they recognize her as the Mother of the Lord, and hold this as part of our faith in Christ, true God and true man. They look to her who at the foot of the Cross accepts as her son the beloved disciple, the one who in his turn accepts her as his mother. Therefore, why should we not all together look to her as our common Mother, who prays for the unity of God’s family, and who ‘precedes’ us all at the head of the long line of witnesses of faith in the one Lord, the Son of God, who was conceived in her virginal womb by the power of the Holy Spirit?” *Redemptoris Mater*, Part Two, 29-30.

Comment When the Spirit descended upon the contentious Apostles, they cooperated like never before. Even their speech was so unified that people of many different languages heard them as one, Acts 2:8-9. They united, “in one mind and one heart”, Acts 4:32. This extraordinary unity could not be achieved by humans. But we have seen that humans can destroy it. No doubt, the Spirit “arouses the desire to be peacefully united”. Jesus wanted us to be one as He and the Father are one, Jn 17:21. So His Spirit wants us to unite. As we seek “ways to restore that unity”, we call Mary to help us solve our squabbles, and be one family in Christ. Healing our differences is hard work, but well worth the effort. John Paul lists some of the ecumenical efforts that characterize our time. Above all, we gaze at the mystery of Christ’s church, and strive to improve our ministry in His name. Nothing superficial will suffice to unite our divided communities. Instead, we abandon ourselves to the mystery of the Word made flesh in Mary. The two reciprocal divine actions of Incarnation and divine motherhood are so intertwined as to fuse. In a minor key, mothers resolve disputes between their children. So in the major key, Mary will resolve our disputes. She provides the best advice “do whatever He says”, Jn 2:5. With her help, we can continue our pilgrimage of faith, striving to be as faithful as Mary was, and continues to be. She was ever “attentive to what ‘the Spirit is saying to the Churches’, Rev 2:7”. Her maternal comfort and encouragement sustain us.

In sections 31 through 34, John Paul lists some of the complex history of relations between Roman and Eastern Christians. We share an “incomparable abundance of feasts and hymns for Mary”. Common devotion to the Mother of God can help us achieve unity. John Paul describes a possible approach.

Text “At the present stage of her journey, the Church seeks to rediscover the unity of all who profess their faith in Christ, in order to show obedience to her Lord, who prayed for this unity before his Passion. ‘Like a pilgrim in a foreign land, the Church presses forward amid the persecutions of the world, and the consolations of God, announcing the Cross and Death of the Lord until he comes’, *Lumen Gentium*, 8. ‘Moving forward through trial and tribulation, the Church is strengthened by the power of God’s grace promised to her by the Lord, so that in the weakness of the flesh she may not waver from perfect fidelity, but remain a bride worthy of her Lord. Moved by the Holy Spirit, may she never cease to

renew herself, until through the Cross, she arrives at the light which known no setting’, *Lumen Gentium*, 9.

“The Virgin Mother is constantly present on this journey of faith...towards the light. The canticle of the ‘Magnificat’ shows this uniquely. It welled up from the depths of Mary’s faith at the Visitation. But it ceaselessly re-echoes in the heart of the Church down the centuries. The faithful recite it daily in the Vespers liturgy, and often in personal and communal devotion. ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on his servant in her lowliness. Behold, henceforth, all generations will call me blessed. He who is might has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is from age to age on those who fear him. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud-hearted. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity forever.’ Lk 1:46-55.

“When Elizabeth greeted her young kinswoman coming from Nazareth, Mary replied with the Magnificat. Elizabeth first called Mary ‘blesses’ because of the ‘fruit of her womb’. Then she called her ‘blessed’ because of her faith. These two blessings referred directly to the Annunciation. Now, at the Visitation, when Elizabeth’s greeting bears witness to the culminating moment, Mary’s faith gains new consciousness, and new expression. That which remained hidden in the depths of the ‘obedience of faith’ at the Annunciation, can now be said to spring forth like a clear and life-giving flame of the spirit. Mary’s words on the threshold of Elizabeth’s house are an inspired profession of her faith. They express her response to the revealed word. Her whole being responds with religious and poetical exultation towards God. These sublime words are simultaneously very simple and wholly inspired by the sacred texts of the people of Israel. Mary’s personal experience, the ecstasy of her heart, shines forth. In them shines a ray of the mystery of God, the glory of his ineffable holiness, the eternal love which, as an irrevocable gift, enters into human history.

“Mary is the first to share in this new revelation of God, and in this new ‘self-giving of God. Therefore she proclaims: ‘For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name’. Her words reflect a joy of spirit which is difficult to express: ‘My spirit rejoices in God my Savior’. Indeed, ‘the deepest truth about God, and the salvation of man, is made clear to us in Christ, who is at the same time the mediator and the fullness of all revelation’, *Dei Verbum*, 2. In her exultation Mary confesses that she finds herself in the very heart of this fullness of Christ. She is conscious that the promise made to the fathers, first of all ‘to Abraham and to his posterity forever’, is being fulfilled in herself. She is thus aware that concentrated within herself as the mother of Christ is the whole salvific economy. The God of the Covenant is manifested in her because he ‘remembers his mercy from age to age’. The church models her earthly journey on Mary, so constantly repeats her Magnificat. From the depth of the Virgin’s faith at the Annunciation and the Visitation, the Church derives the truth about the God of the Covenant, who is Almighty and goes great things for man; holy is his name. [The great thing God does is] uproot original sin, the sin of disbelief and of ‘little faith’ in God. In contrast with the ‘suspicion’ which the ‘father of lies’ sowed in the heart of Eve, Mary...boldly proclaims the undimmed truth about God, source of all gifts, doing ‘great things’ in her, and in the whole universe. In the act of creation, God gives existence to all that is. In creating man, God gives him the dignity of the image and likeness of himself, above all earthly creatures. Moreover, in his desire to give, God gives existence to all that is. In creating man, God gives himself in the Son. ‘He so loved the world that he gave his only Son’, Jn 3:16. Mary is the first witness of this marvelous truth. It would be fully accomplished through ‘the works and words’ (Acts 1:1) of her Son, and definitively through his Cross and Resurrection.

“The church, even ‘amid trials and tribulations’, does not cease repeating with Mary the words of the Magnificat. The power of God’s truth is proclaimed there with extraordinary simplicity. By means of this truth about God, the Church desires to shed light upon the difficult and sometimes tangled paths of man’s earthly existence. The church’s journey, near the end of the second Christian Millennium, involves a renewed commitment to her mission. Following him who said of himself: (God) has anointed me to preach good news to the poor’, Lk 4:18, the church seeks from generation to generation...to accomplish that same mission.

“The Church’s preference for the poor is wonderfully inscribed in Mary’s Magnificat. The God of the Covenant... ‘has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly,...filled the hungry with good things, sent the rich away empty,...scattered the proud-hearted...’ Mary is deeply imbued with the spirit of the ‘poor of Yahweh’, awaiting salvation from God, placing all their trust in him. See Pss 25; 31; 35; 55. Mary truly proclaims the coming of the ‘Messiah of the poor’. See Is 11:4; 61:1. Drawing from Mary’s heart, from the depth of her faith expressed in the words of the Magnificat, the Church renews ever more effectively in herself the awareness that the truth about God who saves, the truth about God who is the source of every gift, can’t be separated from the manifestation of his love of preference for the poor. Mary

celebrates that love in the Magnificat. Jesus later expressed that love in his words and works.

“The Church [emphasizes] these two elements of the Magnificat, and their unity. The poor and favoring them are intimately connected with the Christian meaning of freedom and liberation. ‘Mary is totally dependent upon God, and completely directed towards him. At the side of her Son, she is the most perfect image of freedom, and liberation of persons and the universe. The Church looks to her, Mother and Model, to understand completely the meaning of Church mission.’ *Redemptoris Mater*, Part Two, 35-37

Comment John Paul overflows with Mary’s love, flowing from God into her at the Incarnation, and from her Son to us ever after. This love, incarnate from Love Himself, can heal all divisions between churches. If we believe in Christ, and listen to His prayer, we will “press forward” to obey him. He commanded us to announce his Cross and Resurrection, to tell the Good News. Unity in Jesus is God’s plan, and Mary’s dearest wish. The Holy Spirit ever renews the Church to approach God. Mary shows her part in this progress by singing God’s praises in the Magnificat. God incarnates first in her to express Himself in the flesh. After the Holy Spirit inaugurates the Church at Pentecost, incarnate Christ lives in His Mystical Body, the Church. This is one facet of the diamond of God’s achievement. Mary sings many facets of God’s awesome works. The Magnificat recounts many of the miracles God works. Hence the Church sings it often.

Mary’s soul is like a magnifying glass for God’s ray of light. She magnified that light into the baby Jesus. Her savior-God is the source of her joy. He loved Mary in her lowliness, and blessed her with His life. His life flows as faith, hope, and charity. The Father created her, and loves His magnificent daughter. The Son birthed through her, and loves His marvelous mother. The Spirit married her, and loves His maternal virgin. Because of His work in her, each Trinitarian Person unites with Mary so closely that the unity dazzles us. Yet the hints God gave us of this Incarnation miracle/mystery entice us to gaze in wonder at His work. The more we gaze, the more we realize how Mary magnified the Lord. Elizabeth intuited this through inspiration from the Holy Spirit. All at once, Elizabeth knew that Mary’s child was God. Her heart rose to meet Him, and her child leapt with outside joy. Elizabeth recognized Mary’s destiny to be God’s mother, and the faith required to accept God’s invitation. So Mary is blessed. Her entire being exults towards God. Cooperating with God, Mary rises in His hand. Her God-given height makes her blessed for all generations.

God is the source and the goal of Mary’s Magnificat. He does all the lifting. Her lowliness, freely admitted, enabled Almighty God to do great things for her. He is so entirely holy that “holy is his name”. His mercy melds with His holiness and His power to show the strength of His arm to Incarnate. Jesus, the God-man will take upon His innocence all man’s sins, and pay off their infinite debt. This is the strength of God’s arm. He can achieve what is impossible for creatures to do. The mysteries that Mary thanks God for are the Incarnation, already achieved, and the Redemption, soon to come. The Incarnation is the first flaming-forth of the Spirit upon the world. The Spirit makes these simple words sublime above all others. No wonder they send Mary into ecstasy. God Himself shines through her, as light through a lens, to magnify Himself throughout the world. Mary exults to freely allow His passage.

Elizabeth recognizes that Mary is the first through whom God flows so intimately as to be magnify. God shines through Mary because she is the first to offer her entire being in loving obedience to Him. He responds by incarnating in her, and magnifying through her to the entire world. His “ineffable holiness, irrevocable gift of eternal love, enters human history”. God tenderly asked Mary’s permission to magnify through her, to give Himself through her. Divine self-giving is God’s greatest achievement with creatures. Therefore Mary’s spirit rejoices in Him. Christ makes clear “the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man”. He is revelation in the flesh. There is no clearer manifestation of God. Mary is in the very heart of this fullness of Christ. Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise made to the fathers, from Abraham on down, and to his posterity forever. “Concentrated within herself, as Christ’s mother, is the whole salvific economy”. God’s mercy took flesh in her womb. That’s how Mary magnifies the Lord.

Instead of accusing God of cheating her out of perfection, as Eve did in Eden, Mary magnifies the Lord for perfecting her to be God’s mother. Mary’s blessed faith rights the upset of Eve’s cursed doubt. God desires to give Himself. He eagerly awaits our agreement to accept His gift. When we accept, He showers us with Himself, above our capacity. But our capacity grows in God’s giving. Mary is the prime example of magnifying God’s gift. God is the source of all good, so He is the source of magnifying His gift. But He created us to be intelligent and free. He will not contradict Himself by denying our intelligence and freedom. Instead, He patiently waits for us to figure out and to choose. When we decide to accept, God comes rushing in. Mary leads the way to acceptance. She is the first witness to the truth that “He so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son”, Jn 3:16.

Mary proclaims God’s truth in her Magnificat. Her proclamation sheds light upon our painful earthly existence. Repeating her words clarifies our difficult tangle of desires and efforts. Many of our efforts contradict themselves, and most of them conflict with our neighbor’s efforts. Into this tangle, Mary’s words shine consolation and encouragement. That’s why we repeat her Magnificat so often. It echoes throughout the faithful, down the ages, through millennia.

Perhaps our most challenging problem is poverty. Mary announces God’s preference for the poor. God Himself, by Christ’s lips said of Himself: “He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor”, Lk 4:18. While Christ’s lips were forming in her womb, Mary glorified God’s love for the poor. She gives prime examples. Scattering the proud-hearted means that God destroys their pretensions, their images of power like kingdoms, armies, factories, and corporations. God casts princes down from their thrones means that power-abusers fall from the heights. In their place God exalts the lowly means that people who attend to reality ascend to be with God. God reverses the appearances to reward virtue. Therefore he fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away hungry. This coming to Israel’s help expresses God’s mercy in the face of merciless tyrants who abound all around us. We desperately need this message because violent injustice abounds. But God promised our ancestors, from Abraham on down that He would care for us forever.

Mary’s Magnificat bursts forth from everyday oppression into God’s glorious love. She is the first to escape our depression into the light of Christ. Her loving faith opened the way for God’s loving mercy. The more we repeat her Magnificat, the more it shines into our minds and hearts, enlightening and warming us with God’s gifts flowing from Mary, His mother. After exulting in God’s infinite power, Mary offers practical help to oppressed paupers. In that help, we learn to prefer the poor, and assist them generously. Thus Mary unifies Old Covenant psalms and Isaiah with the upcoming New Covenant love for poor people. Her good example helps the Church keep reforming, to keep proclaiming the God who saves, and prefers the poor. John Paul ends this section with a quote from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*, 97. It summarizes all that Mary is. She totally depends on God. She directs herself totally to Him. As her Son’s side, she is the most perfect image of freedom and liberation that exists. We look to her, as mother and model of the Church, to see what the Church should do.

If all this overwhelms us, we should rest in Mary. Then we should look forward to her overwhelming presence when we are rested. Gradually her presence expands us. In this way we imitate Mary, who let God expand her by accepting Him into her womb. God patiently brings us along. He waits for us to restate the words of the Magnificat again and again, seeking ever more meaning and value in them. That’s why the Magnificat rings through the ages and every place where the faithful live. Its load of blessings extends indefinitely. Because God blesses Mary with His grace, we will never exhaust her supply. In God’s mercy, He loves our every effort. So we should never worry that our expression falls short of Mary’s Magnificat. Instead, we should rejoice that God gives us Mary’s exulting song of divine praise. Repeating it like children helps us grow up in Christ.

If all this Mary-talk seems rather bold, remember how bold God was to give Himself to Mary. Remember that we encounter God’s infinite love, giving infinitely because He gives Himself. This is the Marian mystery: God’s self-gift. As Benedict XVI says so eloquently, God chose Mary, so we must pay attention. **Text** “Mary’s motherhood becomes theologically significant as the ultimate personal concretization of the church. At the moment when she pronounces her “yes”, Mary is Israel in person. She is the church in person, and as a person. She is the personal concretization of the Church because her *fiat* makes her the bodily Mother of the Lord. This biological fact is a theological reality because it realizes the deepest spiritual content of the covenant that God intended to make with Israel. Luke suggests this beautifully in harmonizing ‘blessed is she who believed’ with ‘blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it’ (Lk 1:45 and 11:28). We can therefore say that the affirmation of Mary’s motherhood and the affirmation of her representation of the Church are related as the fact and the mystery of the fact. That is: as the fact and the sense that gives the fact its meaning. The two things are inseparable. The fact without its sense would be blind. The sense without the fact would be empty. Mariology cannot be developed from the naked fact, but only from the fact as it is understood in the interpretation of faith. In consequence, Mariology can never be purely mariological. Instead, it stands within the totality of the basic Christ-Church structure. It is the most concrete expression of its inner coherence.” *Benedictus*, 147

Comment When someone prays intensely, and for many years, as Pope Benedict did, he understands much more than we do about Mary. Even so, we know our mother rather well. So we recognize her in Benedict’s words. Some of them speak directly to our hearts. Perhaps we get most of what Benedict says here. Sometimes, if we restate puzzling words, we see still more of what advanced thinkers say. So I will highlight Benedict’s prayerful thinking by restating his words. Mary expresses the church concretely, in her very flesh, because she accepts Jesus. She protects and nour-

ishes Christ in her body for nine months. This concrete biological process represents Church spiritual activity. We see the Church protecting and nourishing Christ-life in us. The church urges our parents to baptize us, raise us as Mary and Joseph raised Jesus, and care for us, so that we can arrive in heaven. Those are concrete examples. Mary's motherhood is the ultimate personal concretizing because Mary the person welcomes Christ the person. God gently invites Mary to commit personally. When she agrees, her "yes" allows God to impregnate her with Israel's Messiah. Mary is thereby Israel, welcoming the Messiah. The church exists to welcome Jesus, so Mary is the concrete Church, accepting Our Savior. She is the bodily Mother of the Lord. This biological condition alerts us to the theological significance that God becomes man to save man from sin. This fulfills the covenant God made with Israel. It initiates the New Covenant of Christ's sacrifice eliminating sin's debt. This profound spiritual depth is infinitely significant.

Luke harmonized Mary's blessing with the blessings for all who believe. Words fail us, but point beyond language to the fact. The fact points beyond itself to the meaning of the fact. Benedict reminds us to look behind the words to the facts, then poke behind the facts for their meaning and value. That meaning and value are inseparable from the concrete fact. Together they express reality. Separate they become unreal. The fact alone is meaningless, disposable, boring. It sinks down the hole into oblivion. The meaning without the fact is mere theory, empty, and also sinks into oblivion. If we keep the fact together with its meaning and value, their unity surpasses our comprehension and love. But we love to learn and love more of the mystery. God built us to live in His mystery. So we practice with every mystery we contemplate, to learn how to contemplate God. We have all eternity to learn. Since God is infinite, we never run out of fresh truth and goodness to know and love. That's why Benedict recommends the totality of reality. Pregnant Mary is concretely the union of God with man in Jesus, and with saved humans in Mary. One way to express this is as structure, one part fitting with another in ways we experience. For example, God gives Himself to man, pouring Himself out as Jesus Christ. But Jesus goes through all the human development stages. Remember, He is concrete fact. So He skips nothing. He requires a mother, Mary, who carries him, births Him and cares for Him. All these observable facts fit into a structure that enables God to live as a man. Then he dies as a man to pay sins wages. Thus he saves man from sin. These facts fit into the structure of salvation/redemption. But Christ organizes His disciples to help each other as a society, the Church. The structure called Christ-Church is an organic totality. So Benedict warns us to see this whole whole-ly. Mary helps us live the facts.

How Does Mary Mediate?

John Paul orients us directly to Jesus. **Text** "The church knows, and teaches with St. Paul, that there is only one mediator. 'For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all', 1 Tim 2:5-6. 'Mary's maternal role towards people in no way obscures or diminishes the unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power; *Lumen Gentium*, 60. Mary's role is mediation in Christ.

"The church knows and teaches that 'all the saving influences of the Blessed Virgin on mankind originate... from the divine pleasure. They flow forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rest on his mediation, depend entirely on it, and draw all their power from it. In no way do they impede the immediate union of the faithful with Christ. Rather they foster this union, *Lumen Gentium*, 60. This saving influence is sustained by the Holy Spirit, who, just as he overshadowed the Virgin Mary when he began in her the divine motherhood, constantly sustains her solicitude for the brothers and sisters of her Son.

"In effect, Mary's mediation is intimately linked with her motherhood. It possesses a specifically maternal character, which distinguishes it from the mediation of the other creatures who in various, and always subordinate, ways share in the one mediation of Christ. [He] shares it with Mary. In fact, while it is true that 'no creature could ever be classed with the Incarnate Word and Redeemer', still 'the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude, but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation, which is a sharing in this unique source'. Thus 'the one goodness of God is in reality communicated diversely to his creatures', *Lumen Gentium*, 62.

"Vatican II teaching presents the truth of Mary's mediation as 'a sharing in the one unique source: the mediation of Christ himself'. Thus we read: 'The church does not hesitate to profess this subordinate role of Mary. She experiences it continuously, and commends it to the hearts of the faithful. Encouraged by this maternal help, they may more closely adhere to the Mediator and Redeemer, *Lumen Gentium*, 62. This role is unique and extraordinary. It flows from her divine motherhood, and can be understood and lived in faith only on the basis of the full truth of this motherhood. Since by virtue of divine election, Mary is the earthly Mother of the Father's consubstantial Son, and his 'generous companion' in the work of redemption, she is our mother in the order of grace, *Lumen Gentium*, 62. This role constitutes a real dimension of

her presence in the saving mystery of Christ and the Church.

"[This mediation flows from] the Incarnation at the moment of the Annunciation. It is significant that Mary, recognizing the will of the Most High in the angel's words, submits to his power. 'Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; do to me according to your word', Lk 1:38. The first moment of submission to the one mediation 'between God and men'... is Mary's acceptance of motherhood. Mary consents to God's choice. She becomes, through the Holy Spirit, the Mother of the Son of God. This consent to motherhood is, above all, a result of her total self-giving to God in virginity. Mary accepted her election as Mother of the Son of God, guided by spousal love. This love totally 'consecrates' a human being to God. By virtue of this love, Mary wished to be always 'given to God', living in virginity. The words 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord' express the fact that she accepted and understood her own motherhood as a total gift of self. She gave herself to the service of the saving plans of the Most High. To the very end, she lived her entire maternal sharing in the life of Jesus Christ, her Son, in a way that matches her vocation to virginity.

"Mary's motherhood, completely pervaded by her spousal attitude as the 'handmaid of the Lord', constitutes the first and fundamental dimension of that mediation which the Church confesses and proclaims about her. So the Church continually commends her to the hearts of the faithful... It must be recognized that, before anyone else, God himself entrusted himself to Mary. He came to her in the mystery of the Incarnation. Her election to the supreme office and dignity of Mother of the Son of God means the union of the two natures in the person of the Word. This basic fact of being the Mother of the Son of God is a complete openness to the person of Christ, and to his whole mission. Mary's words: 'I am the handmaid of the Lord' testify to her spiritual openness. I herself, she perfectly unites the love proper to virginity and characteristic of motherhood. They are fused together.

"For this reason, Mary became not only the 'nursing mother' of the Son of Man, but also the 'associate of unique nobility' of the Messiah and Redeemer. She advanced in her pilgrimage of faith to the foot of the Cross. There she accomplished her maternal cooperation with the Savior's whole mission. Her actions and suffering joined with his. This collaboration with her Son's work transformed her motherhood into every more 'burning charity'. It sought to achieve, in union with Christ, the restoration of 'supernatural life to souls', *Lumen Gentium*, 61. Mary entered, in her unique way, into the mediation 'between God and men' of Jesus. At the Annunciation, she was the first to experience within herself the supernatural result of Christ's mediation. Her cooperation is precisely this mediation, subordinated to Christ's.

"Mary's unique, exceptional, mediation flows from her 'fullness of grace', expressed in her complete agreement with God, to be his handmaid. The Synoptic Gospels state, at least indirectly, that Mary's devotion to God mediates. See Lk 11:28; 2:20-21; Mk 2:23-35; Mt 12:47-50. John's Gospel is even clearer in 2:1-12, and 19:25-27. Jesus is most eloquent on the Cross, giving Mary and John to each other as mother and son." *Redemptoris Mater*, Part Three, 38-39.

Comment St. John Paul establishes clearly that Jesus is the one and only mediator. St. Paul is explicit: "one mediator between God and men: Christ", 1 Tim 2:5-6. But Jesus invites others to mediate at lesser levels. From all the invitations that God sends, it's clear that He loves to mediate as Christ, and loves to involve other humans in mediation. Of all other humans, Mary is most intimate with God, and the prize selection for co-mediation. Without a doubt, her mediation takes nothing away from her Son's. Instead, it shows that Jesus radiates his mediation with great power.

When we focus on Christ's power to radiate mediation, we recognize that His first, and most powerful, radiation is to His mother. He and she are one in love. Naturally, they would be one in many other things: mercy, intercession, and mediation. God is the ultimate source of mediation, focused precisely on Jesus. He is the primary mediator. He unites infinite divinity with finite humanity in His own Person. Thus He brings divine life to Christ. The power of this gift radiates forth eternally. So it is no problem to purify Mary, making her immaculate, and fit to receive Him later. Sharing mediation is a lesser miracle than incarnating or making Mary immaculate. When we consider these other mysteries, we see that cooperating in mediation fits. The more we contemplate these three mysteries together, the more we see that they mutually reinforce each other. While how God accomplished these mysteries is too simple for us to understand, we catch glimpses of His glory. They merge into reciprocal reinforcement. They satisfy our search for God so well that we sleep soundly, eager to find more of God's surprises tomorrow.

Chief among these surprises is the silent work of the Spirit. He romances Mary to devote herself entirely to Him. She becomes the virginal spouse who becomes the virgin-mother. The entirety of the Spirit's love evokes the entirety of Mary's love. Out of this supernal love, the first step of God's mediation occurs: the conception of Jesus Christ. Her Holy

Spirit spouse impregnates Mary, the immaculate virgin, so that a virgin can give birth to Purity Himself. It all fits, though we do not comprehend it. It surpasses natural interactions. It should, because it is supernatural. All this originates “from the divine pleasure. . .the superabundance of Christ’s merits”. The Trinity invite Mary to do her part in mediating between God and man. Her Son’s mediating power is glorified in Mary, who accepts it as “handmaid of the Lord”.

Far from impeding unity of Christ and the faithful, Mary’s union encourages the followers of Jesus. We gratefully accept Mary’s devoted care. Her solicitude sustains us through life’s struggles. Mary’s maternal devotion to us distinguishes her mediation from Christ’s. Her feminine care complements Christ’s masculine care. God fits creatures together so well that we strive to catch up with His artistry. Though His artworks may baffle us at first, and continue to escape our full comprehension, we love to probe them, to gaze at them, and to enjoy them. It is thus with Mary’s mediation. As John Paul reminds us “no creature can ever be classed with the Incarnate Word and Redeemer”. But it is precisely this Incarnate Word who invites His mother to assist him mediate. Thus the unique “goodness of God” spreads through His creatures. Christ exemplifies that spread by spreading from Mary’s womb into His mediation.

Because God’s artistry is beyond words, we offer several sets of words to describe His mediation mystery. Each set features a different aspect of mediation. When we consider the unity of these sets, we approach more of the mystery, and learn more from each approach. Each light enlightens the other, so that our continued contemplation increases illumination. Contemplation is our destiny. Eternal contemplation of God’s love is our way to say that we activate all our abilities to worship God. We receive His love, and reciprocate. We learn more of His Truth, and rejoice. We discover more of His Good, and relax in it. We accept more of His beauty, and relish it. We encounter His mercy, and rely on it. Because God is infinite, with unending qualities, we never run out of His surprises, and become ever more one with Him. This eternal enjoyment of God is the end-product of Christ’s mediation, which Mary shares secondarily.

This secondary position follows naturally because she accepted Incarnate God, mothered Him, and did as He desired throughout His life, death, resurrection, and sending His Spirit. First the Spirit came to impregnate Mary, then to enflame the world. In every step, Mary seconded Christ’s motion. John Paul identifies an aspect of her seconding which may have escaped us until he mentioned it. Virginal self-giving makes Mary as sacred as the God she gives herself to. The word consecrate comes from the Latin *con* = with, and *sacris* = sacred. Behind the word is the idea of the real unity that follows total consecration = self-giving to God. His sacredness cannot be restrained, so Mary’s gift enters His sacred condition. This consideration opens us to sustained contemplation of Mary’s consecration into Sacred God. All this, and more, flows with Mary’s simple words “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord”. They reward contemplation.

Because God invited Mary to be His mother, He invited her to fulfill the feminine dimension of mediation. If God entrusts Himself to Mary, we do well to trust her entirely. Secondarily, God entrusted mediation to Mary, in union with the main mediator, her son Jesus. This too flows from “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord”. Similarly, Mary’s unity with Christ unites her virginity with her motherhood. Everything unfolding around the Incarnation resembles God, who is One. He is Unity Himself, so He weaves unity even into separate creatures. His artistry with creatures rises to perfection in the Incarnation. In Jesus, God and man become one. His mother is one with her virginity. His mother is one with Him in love. Love Himself unifies all features of His creatures, without obliterating any of their created goodness.

Throughout this synthesizing, Mary remains human, God remains God, but integration unifies them by sharing in the Love which God is. Love is the ultimate action, the complete perfection of activity, the sharing in God. By accepting God at the Annunciation, Mary’s mother “underwent a singular transformation, becoming ever more imbued with ‘burning charity’” for all. Under this divine influence, nothing could stop Mary from doing her share to mediate. Thus she “entered into the one mediation ‘between God and men’ which is the mediation of the man Christ Jesus. When we look past details, into God’s love poured forth upon Mary to fill her with Jesus, we see His burning charity ignite her. Burning with God’s own love, she goes up in the same flame as Jesus. Mary is not the source, but she becomes the flame.

To taste Mary’s divine love, let’s pray with Fr. Gabriel, OCD. **Text** “O Mary, I love to contemplate you as you adore, in profound recollection, the great mystery which is taking place within you. You are the first temple of the Blessed Trinity, the first adorer of the Incarnate Word, the first tabernacle of His sacred humanity.

“O Mary, temple of the Trinity! Mary, you bore the divine fire. Mother of mercy, from you has blossomed forth the fruit of life: Jesus! O Mother, you are that new plant from which we have the fragrant flower, the Word, the only-be-gotten Son of God, because in you, fertile land, was sown this Word. O Mary, fiery chariot, you bore a hidden fire

which was concealed beneath the ashes of your humanity. If I look at you, O Mary, I see that the hand of the Holy Spirit has inscribed the Trinity in you, by forming within you the Incarnate Word, the only Son of God. O Mary, I see this Word given to you, within you’. (St. Catherine of Siena).

“O Mary, nearer than all to Jesus Christ, although at a distance that is infinite, you are the great ‘praise of glory’ of the Blessed Trinity. You were always holy, unspotted, blameless in the sight of the thrice-holy God. Your soul is so simple, its movements are so deeply hidden, that we cannot detect them. Your whole life may be summed up in these words from the Gospel: ‘His Mother kept all these words in her heart’. You lived within your heart. So deeply did you enter into it that human eyes cannot follow you. When I read in the Gospel that you ‘went into the hill country with haste into a city of Juda’ to perform an act of charity for your cousin, Elizabeth, I picture you to myself as you pass by: beautiful, serene, majestic, absorbed in communion with the Word of God within you. Like Him, your prayer was always: ‘Behold, here I am’. Who? The handmaid of the Lord; the least of His creatures, you, His Mother! Your humility was so genuine because you were always forgetful, and disregarding of self, free from self. Therefore, you could sing: ‘Behold from henceforth all generations will call me blessed. Because He who is mighty has done great things for me’.

“O my Mother, teach me the secret of your interior life. Teach me to live recollected with God, present in my soul. Teach me your silence. Communicate to me your spirit of adoration. Close to you, in your school, I too wish to be the little temple of the Trinity. Help me to detach myself from creatures, and to live in silent, loving adoration of the Trinity in the innermost depths of my soul.” *Divine Intimacy*, 42-43.

Comment Fr. Gabriel pours his passionate Italian soul out for his mother. She loves with the flame of the Trinity because she adores the Trinity with all the love she can return to the Triune God. God first loves us, flooding us with His infinite love. He comes to us as Love Himself. If we accept His divine Gift, then Love lives in us. Mary is our model for accepting, as she was the very first to accept Incarnate Love. Accepting Love, we naturally live Love, as Mary did.

Mary the Spirit’s Spouse Spreads the Spirit’s Flame

St. John Paul considers Mary’s prayer at Pentecost, to show her mediation. **Text** “After the events of the Resurrection and Ascension, Mary entered the Upper Room together with the Apostles to await Pentecost. She was present as the Mother of the glorified Lord. She was the one who ‘advanced in her pilgrimage of faith’. She loyally persevered in her union with her Son ‘unto the Cross’. But she was also the ‘handmaid of the Lord’, left by her Son as Mother in the midst of the infant Church. [Jesus put it to St. John plainly]: ‘Behold your mother’. Thus there developed a unique bond between this Mother and the Church. The infant church was the fruit of the Cross and Resurrection of her Son. Mary from the beginning had given herself without reserve to the person and work of her Son. So she poured out upon the Church her maternal self-giving. After her Son’s departure, her motherhood remains in the Church as maternal mediation. She interceded for all her children, the Mother cooperating in the saving work of her Son, the Redeemer of the world. In fact, Vatican II teaches that the ‘motherhood of Mary in the order of grace. . .will last without interruption until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect’, *Lumen Gentium*, 62. With the redeeming death of her Son, the maternal mediation of the handmaid of the Lord took on a universal dimension, for the work of redemption embraces the whole of humanity. Thus there is manifested in a singular way the efficacy of the one and universal mediation of Christ ‘between God and men’. Mary’s cooperation shares, in its subordinate character, in the universality of the mediation of the Redeemer, the one Mediator. This is clearly indicated by Vatican II in the words quoted above.

“The text continues: ‘taken up to heaven, she did not lay aside this saving role. By her manifold acts of intercession, she continues to win for us gifts of eternal salvation’, *Lumen Gentium*, 62. This intercession, first manifested at Cana in Galilee, continues in the history of the Church and the world. We read that Mary ‘by her maternal charity, cares for the brethren of her Son who still journey on earth, surrounded by dangers and difficulties, until they are led to their happy homeland’, *Lumen Gentium*, 62. In this way, Mary’s motherhood continues unceasingly in the Church as the mediation which intercedes. The church expresses her faith in this truth by invoking Mary ‘under the titles of Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Adjutrix, and Mediatrix’, *Lumen Gentium*, 62.

“Through her mediation, subordinate to that of the Redeemer, Mary contributes in a unique way to the union of the pilgrim Church on earth with the heavenly reality of the Communion of Saints, since she has already been ‘assumed into heaven’, *Lumen Gentium*, 62. The truth of the Assumption, defined by Pius XII, is reaffirmed by Vatican Councili, expressing the Church’s faith: ‘Preserved free from all guilt of original sin, the Immaculate Virgin was taken up, body

and soul, into heavenly glory upon the completion of her earthly sojourn. She was exalted by the Lord as Queen of the Universe, in order that she might be the more thoroughly conformed to her Son, the Lord of lords and conqueror of sin and death (Rev 19:16), *Lumen Gentium*, 59. This teaching of Pius XII continues the Tradition, expressed in many different ways in the history of the Church, both East and West. The mystery of the Assumption into heaven definitively accomplished in Mary all the effects of the one mediation of Christ the Redeemer, and Risen Lord. ‘In Christ shall all be made alive, each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then, at his coming, those who belong to Christ’, I Cor 15:22-23. The mystery of the Assumption expresses the faith of the Church that Mary is ‘united by a close and indissoluble bond’ to Christ. If as Virgin and Mother, she was singularly united with him in his first coming, then, by her continued collaboration with him, she will also be united with him in expectation of the second. She is ‘redeemed in an especially sublime manner by reason of the merits of her Son’, *Lumen Gentium*, 53. Therefore she has that specifically maternal role of mediatrix of mercy at his final coming. Then all those who belong to Christ ‘shall be made alive’ when ‘the last enemy to be destroyed is death’, I Cor 15:26.

“Connected with this exaltation of the noble Daughter of Sion through her Assumption into heaven is the mystery of her eternal glory. For the Mother of Christ is glorified as ‘Queen of the Universe’. At the Annunciation, she called herself the ‘handmaid of the Lord’. Throughout her earthly life, she was faithful to that service. Thus she confirmed that she was a true ‘disciple’ of Christ, the Servant. ‘The son of Man came, not to be served, but to give his life as a ransom for many’, Mt 20:28. Mary became the first of those who, ‘serving Christ in others, with humility and patience, lead their brothers and sisters to that King whom to serve is to reign’, *Lumen Gentium*, 36. Therefore she fully obtained that ‘state of royal freedom’ proper to Christ’s disciples. To serve means to reign!

“Christ obeyed, even at the cost of death, and was therefore raised up by the Father (Phil 2:8-9). Thus he entered into the glory of his kingdom. To him all things are made subject, until he subjects himself and all created things to the Father, that God may be all in all (1 Cor 15:27-28). Mary, the handmaid of the Lord, has a share in this Kingdom of the Son. The glory of serving does not cease to be her royal exaltation. Assumed into heaven, she does not cease her saving service. It continues to express her maternal mediation ‘until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect’, *Lumen Gentium*, 62. Thus, she who here on earth ‘loyally preserved in her union with her Son unto the Cross’, continues to remain united with him while ‘all things are subjected to him, until he subjects to the Father himself and all things’. Thus in her Assumption into heaven, Mary is clothed by the whole reality of the Communion of Saints, and her very union with the Son in glory is wholly oriented towards the definitive fullness of the Kingdom, when ‘God will be all in all’. In her assumed phase, Mary’s maternal mediation does not cease to be subordinate to him who is the one Mediator, until the final realization of ‘the fullness of time’, when ‘all things are united in Christ’ (Eph 1:10).” *Redemptoris Mater*, Part Three, 40-41.

Comment Mary’s many achievements solidify her mediation. But her accomplishments swirl upon us, and can sweep us away. Considering each part will increase clarity, and enhance impact. For example, Resurrection and Ascension are massive events. Jesus rose from the dead to perfectly express His victory over death. Never before had anyone actually died, and risen to life again. Christ did it. He demonstrated His achievement by interacting with many people. Eyewitnesses testified, and spread the Good News throughout the Roman Empire. Subsequent witnesses testify to interior experiences of His resurrected being. Of them Jesus says: “Blessed are those who do not see, yet believe”, Jn 20:29. Christ’s Resurrection confirmed Apostles and disciples in their belief. More confirming still was Christ’s Ascension, when many followers watched Him go home into the heavens. These events shook the first followers so hard that they were stunned. When Apostles and disciples brought their astonishment to Mary, she helped them identify the importance of their experience. Then the Holy Spirit inspired them at Pentecost. We can reawaken that inspiration by prayer.

Mary showed us the way. She prayed to her Spouse, the Spirit, to descend upon the first community as only He could. Her glorified Son fulfilled her own faith in His mission. The valley of death, suffering with her Son, as only a mother can, tried her faith. By exercise, her faith became so strong that she sustained the Apostles and disciples as they awaited the Holy Spirit. Her acceptance of the Spirit at the Annunciation, and throughout her life, paved the way for His descent upon the Apostles. Mary mothered the Church, first in Christ, then in the Spirit at Pentecost. She mediated both.

After her assumption into heaven, she mediates more effectively. Her union with Jesus makes her one with Him. If He mediates, so does she. She united entirely when she accepted the Father’s invitation to bear the Son by the Holy Spirit. In heaven, God perfects her union. Christ’s main work of salvation is the reason for His Incarnation. So Mary’s acceptance of the Incarnation simultaneously accepts Christ’s work. Therefore her mediation continues in heaven. She “wins for us gifts of eternal salvation”, as Vatican II affirms. The faithful gave her appropriate titles for these gifts. Victory

at Lepanto is a fine example. Outnumbered and outgunned, Christians prayed to Mary to defeat Muslims, and won.

From the Annunciation to Pentecost, Mary seconded Christ’s salvation. Jesus earned the right to rule the universe by reversing Original Sin. Quite naturally, He wants His mother to be Queen Mother of the universe. Christ is the main mediator by taking sin upon His innocent self to pay its debt. He redeemed His mother in a singularly sublime way, antedating her conception, so that she was conceived immaculately. No one less pure could be God’s mother. We remind ourselves again and again of these central mysteries because they reward reconsideration with fresh insights and inspirations. Vatican II restates Mary’s service memorably. Mary became the first of those who “serving Christ also in others, with humility and patience, lead their brothers and sisters to the King whom to serve is to reign”.

How marvelous the “state of royal freedom” is. Jesus taught us that “to serve means to reign”. His most effective teaching is His grand example. He became the Servant that Isaiah describes so eloquently. His mediation unites God with man, so that the God-man can pay sin’s wages: death. Reminding us of His service, Christ also gave us golden words to express it. “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many”, Mat 20:25-28. Mark 10:42-45 repeats that message. Both by deed and by word, Jesus shows that to serve is to reign. When we gaze at Mary, we see that her deeds of service warranted her reign as Queen of the universe.

She also uttered words to express her service: “Do what he tells you”, Jn 2:5. Her words illustrate her devotion to Christ. She disappears into Him, except for moments when He displays her maternal care. God came to be our witness to life, death, and resurrection. He incarnated in His mother Mary, and united with her as only a divine Son can. He displays her complete dedication as a secondary example to us, witnessing His life, death, and resurrection. When someone says it this way, as John Paul did masterfully, we begin to see more of the mystery. The more we see, the more we love. Therefore we want to see and love more. Like a flame among thorns, God’s love ignites us. May we become a conflagration of contemplation, gazing ever more intently at God’s mysteries. This is the only joy worth having.

Another way to say this superlative joy is “glory”. St. Paul uses that word to express the original divine joy of Trinitarian life. Jesus left this glory behind to become man. After repaying all sin’s debt, His Father raised Him up to glory again. This is the glory of His kingdom which has come in heaven. May it come on earth! St. John Paul quotes St. Paul directly: “Christ obeyed even unto death, and was therefore raised up by the Father”, Phil 2:8-9. Ultimate glory, as St. Paul tells us in 1 Cor 15:27-28, is God being “all in all”. What could this mean? St. Paul reminds us throughout his epistles that God’s love urged Him to create the universe so He could unite with free beings freely. This unity is all in all. It is creatures being in God. Angels and humans unite with God. Images and likenesses of God come to rest in God. They rest in God when they know that God is Truth, Good, and Beauty, and agree to know and love Him as He is. They then become one with God. Eastern Orthodox thinkers found a fine way to say this. God divinizes us. St. Irenaeus says it in a striking way: “God became man so that man could become God”, *Against Heresy*, 5, Pref. Charles Williams used another helpful phrase: God initiates an “in-Godding”. We seldom think this, but we always want to achieve “in-Godding”.

Jesus was the first, and the best “in-Godding”. He is the one and only God-man. Mary was the second, because she mothered “in-Godding” in her Son. Many inspiring thoughts flow from these facts. For example, God so loves being God that He wants to share His natural “Godding” with non-God beings. He finds a way, in His infinite wisdom, to unify man with God in the most perfect of all divine acts. Incarnate God is a mysterious miracle so brilliant that we can’t comprehend it. But we delight in contemplating it. Flowing from that unity miracle, Jesus extends unity to other men. We who are far from God can accept adoption into God’s family. St. John records Jesus in His Holy Thursday discourse at the Last Supper. There, in several chapters, St. John recounts Christ’s words that describe “in-Godding”. When we contemplate the vine and the branches, we consider how God’s life flows through Jesus to us. God wants our complete unity with Him. He gives Himself utterly to us. He awaits our free acceptance of His Gift. We will never finish appreciating His Gift, but we will thrill to every aspect of His Gift, if we allow God to bring us in to Him. Let “in-Godding” flow!

This Gift is God’s will. Jesus taught us to pray “thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”, Mt 6:10. God’s will is plain in Christ’s deeds and words. God’s kingdom will come when His will is done. Then God will be “all in all”. Jesus came to accomplish this unification. He relied upon Mary to start it, nourish it, and see it through to salvation on the Cross. Then Jesus rose to the glory that He earned. Trinitarian glory was His by right, by nature, by His divinity. But He forsook that glory to become man, to suffer and die, and save mankind. Then He rose from the dead, to show us the way

to glory. Once he ascended to heaven, he sent his beloved Spirit to jump-start the Church at Pentecost. He involved His mother in each of these divine accomplishments. She is the receptive cooperator. Her coordination answers His invitation to add her life to His. His generosity in sharing this glory extends from Mary to us all. That's why He gave Mary to us to be our heavenly mother. When you gaze upon what Jesus did and said, these connections emerge more clearly.

No wonder that Mary, who "loyally preserved her union with her Son unto the Cross, remains united with Him in heaven". From there, she "continues her saving service, her maternal mediation, until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect". Until "all is all", until all creatures rest in their Creator, Mary mothers all struggling people. She will keep mothering us until "all things are united in Christ", Eph 1:10. Whichever way we say it, God's invitation to unite with Him keeps echoing through the ages. God doesn't change. From the moment of the Big Bang, until all things are united in Christ, God gives Himself. His Gift is beyond material limitation. We rejoice in this superabundance, because we have tried material creatures, and found them wanting. They do not satisfy. Spiritual creatures satisfy more. That momentum toward increased spirituality proves that we're bound for ultimate Spirit. As the spiritual sings: "We're bound for glory". God tries to convince us that we're bound for His glory, for Him. He wants us to be one with Him, to enjoy Him in a way very close to His way of enjoying Himself. God invites us into His Trinitarian family. Mary helps us go home to God.

Mary Mothers the Church and Every Person

St. John Paul helped the Fathers of Vatican II clarify and express the mystery of the Church. Probably, he wrote a lot of *Lumen Gentium*. So he understands exactly how the Church improved its view of itself during the Council. He expresses Mary's mothering role in this encyclical. The people of God need this clarification because unexamined changes after Vatican II obscured devotion to Mary, and hid the motherhood of the Church. John Paul proposes readjustment.

Text "Linking itself with Tradition, Vatican II shed new light on the role of the Mother of Christ in the life of the church. 'Through the gift...of divine motherhood, Mary is united with her Son, the Redeemer, and with his singular graces and offices. By these, the Blessed Virgin is also intimately united with the Church. The Mother of God is a figure of the Church's faith, charity, and perfect union with Christ', *Lumen Gentium*, 63. ...from the beginning, Mary remains with the Apostles in expectation of Pentecost. Mary is present as 'the blessed one who believed' in the midst of the pilgrim Church from generation to generation through faith, and as the model of the hope which does not disappoint. (See Rom 5:5).

"Mary believed in the fulfillment of what the Lord said to her. As Virgin, she believed that she would conceive and bear a son: the Holy One, Son of God, Jesus. [*Jesus* is Hebrew for "God who saves"] As handmaid of the Lord, she remained perfectly faithful to the person and mission of this Son. As Mother, 'believing and obeying...she brought forth on earth the Father's Son. This she did, knowing not man, but overshadowed by the Holy Spirit', *Lumen Gentium*, 63.

"For these reasons, Mary is honored in the Church 'with special reverence. Indeed, from the most ancient times the Blessed Virgin Mary has been venerated under the title "God-bearer". In all perils and needs, the faithful have fled prayerfully to her protection', *Lumen Gentium*, 62. This cult is altogether unique. It expresses what it carries: the profound link between Christ's Mother and the Church. Mary, our Virgin-Mother is a 'permanent model' for the Church. Mary is present in the mystery of Christ, so she remains constantly present in the mystery of the Church. The Church is also mother and virgin. These names have profound biblical and theological justification, *Lumen Gentium*, 63.

"The Church 'becomes a mother by accepting God's word with fidelity', *Lumen Gentium*, 64. [The church imitates Mary in two ways.] Mary first believed by accepting the word of God revealed to her at the Annunciation. [Secondly, she] remained faithful to that word in all her trials, even unto the Cross. So too the Church becomes a mother when, accepting with fidelity the word of God, 'by her preaching and by baptism, she brings forth to a new and immortal life, children who are conceived of the Holy Spirit, and born of God', *Lumen Gentium*, 64. This maternal function of the Church was expressed vividly by St. Paul: 'My little children, with whom I am again in travail (birth pains) until Christ be formed in you!' Gal 4:19. In its first years, the Church was aware of its motherhood, in apostolic service of mankind. This awareness enabled, and still enables, the Church to see the mystery of her life and mission, modelled on the example of the Mother of the Son, Jesus. Christ is 'the first-born among many brethren', Rom 8:29.

"From Mary the Church learns her own motherhood. She recognized the maternal dimension of her vocation. The Church is sacramental [a sign that achieves what it signifies]. The church contemplates Mary's mysterious sanctity, imitates her charity, and faithfully fulfills the Father's will, *Lumen Gentium*, 64. The Church is the sign and instrument of intimate union with God because of her motherhood. Receiving life from the Spirit, she 'generates' sons and daughters

of the human race to a new life in Christ. Just as Mary is at the service of the mystery of the Incarnation, so the Church is always at the service of the mystery of adoption to sonship through grace.

"Likewise, following the example of Mary, the Church remains the virgin faithful to her spouse. The church herself is a virgin who keeps whole and pure the fidelity she has pledged to her Spouse. The Church is the spouse of Christ as St. Paul says in Eph 5:21-33, and 2 Cor 11:2. St. John affirms this virgin 'bride of the Lamb', Rev 21:9. As spouse, the Church 'keeps the fidelity she has pledged to Christ'. St. Paul teaches, in Ephesians 5, that this fidelity is an image of marriage. Fidelity is also a model of total self-giving to God in celibacy 'for the kingdom of heaven'. See Mt 19:11-12; 2 Cor 11:2, for praise of virginity consecrated to God. Precisely such virginity, after the example of the Virgin of Nazareth, is the source of a unique spiritual fruitfulness. It is the source of motherhood in the Holy Spirit.

"In addition, the Church also preserves the faith Christ gave it. Following the example of Mary, who kept and pondered in her heart everything relating to her divine Son (Lk 2:19; 51), the Church commits itself to preserve the word of God, and to investigate its riches with discernment and prudence, in order to bear faithful witness to it before all mankind in every age." *Redemptoris Mater*, Part Three, 42-43.

Comment Some people don't appreciate Holy Mother Church. Her motherhood was often ignored in the hustle of change since 1965. St. John Paul refocuses us on the mothering Church. Because Mary gave Jesus to us, and Jesus formed the Church, Mary gives us the Church. Mary is the shining example of what the Church should be. John Paul emphasizes that the Church imitates Mary by accepting the Holy Spirit. Mary's acceptance at the Annunciation allows the Spirit to shine through her into the world. Church leaders strive to open themselves to the Spirit. Spirit-inspiration shines through as integral faith, firm hope, and sincere charity. Integral faith accepts everything Jesus revealed. Instead of cafeteria-style selecting, integral faith enjoys the full banquet of Christ's revelation. Integral faith grows with Church experience to expand our understanding of revelation. An ancient example of this expansion is expressing that Mary is the Theotokos, the Mother of God. Similarly, firm hope sustains Church life, even during persecution. Hope is the supernatural gift that supports faith during attack. Many attacking powers pass away because of their abuse. Sincere charity crowns all Church activity. Perhaps its clearest sign is thousands of religious who vow chastity for love of God, and service of His people.

Listing those qualities immediately calls to mind that Mary exemplified them. Spouse of the Spirit, she gave herself totally to Him, so that He could implant the Self-giving Son in her womb. Birthing Jesus means birthing His Church. So Mary is the model and figure of the Church which births children by Baptism. Mary presents the feminine genius of receiving, nourishing, and fostering life. Mary performs these functions for the Church. Christ adopted everyone who accepts His invitation to join in love. They all fit under the umbrella of Mary's love. They expand the testament of Jesus as He hung dying on the Cross: "behold your mother". Clearly, the organization of these children is not biological. That limited order would severely restrict the number of children. Instead, God's gift organizes, or orders, these children to their mother. In the order of grace, Mary's motherhood surpasses biological limits. Again, John Paul directs us beyond sensory restrictions, into God's infinite life. The order of grace is our true home. If we enter, we find Love's true home.

Mary believed what the Lord said to her, even though she could not grasp God's simplicity. She believed that she would conceive and bear a son. Perhaps we learn that the English equivalent of "Jesus" is "God who saves". Appropriately, Jesus, the saving God, is named "God saving". If we try to wrap our minds around this fact, we begin to see how God connects creatures in loving relations. Mary shows the way: first believe, then find the truth that God implants in His creatures. If we do, we participate in God's miraculous mysteries. Because Mary believed and obeyed, the Church honors her, and strives to imitate her. In God's simplicity, the mystery of Christ is the mystery of the Church. Our small minds take one mystery at a time, and struggle with it. But each struggle ends in a better view of mystery. Gradually, we come home to each mystery, and begin to see how they merge in God. He is the ultimate mystery. Mary is present in God in the most loving way. If we gaze at Mary, we see God's love. His love establishes the Church, so we see the Church in Mary.

Perhaps we gaze better if we focus on Mary's motherhood. We see that the Church is also a mother. Each bears children, cares for them, and helps them mature. Each believes that these children will grow when nourished and exercised. Each runs to aid stricken children. Each supports children during their terrible trials. Each strives to assist children toward eternal life in God. Each agonizes to bring forth children, as St. Paul so vividly describes (Gal 4:19). Similar parallels abound. But these few make the point. Mary and the Church identify as mothers. But how is the Church a sacrament?

We seldom consider sacraments, so we may have forgotten that our initiating sacrament, Baptism, has a surface

and a depth. The surface pouring of water signifies cleansing. The depth of Baptism is cleansing of our souls from inherited rebellion (Original Sin), and personal sins. The water signifies Christ's blood, poured forth to wash sin away. So Baptism signifies what actually happens. The great sacrament is Jesus. He is the surface human whose depth is God. He is the sacrament of God because God acts through His visible surface body. In a similar way, the Church is the sacrament of Jesus. The surface of the Church is a visible set of people. But Church depth is Christ living in each person. Both the Spirit and the Father live with the Son. So we could say that the Trinity lives in the invisible depths, behind the visible surface of the Church. This description illustrates how the Church is the sacrament of Christ, Who is the sacrament of God.

Mary's example inspires the Church to remain a virgin faithful to her spouse. In spite of unfaithful Church members on the surface, the depth of the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ. This depth is the faithful, pure, spotless bride of the Spirit, eager to fulfill the Father's will. Just as Mary was virgin mother, so the Church is virgin mother. Nothing less is suitable for the Son of God, as He existed in Mary, and as He exists in the Church. Each is supremely productive. This productivity is a direct result of God blending what creatures can't blend. God is Unity, so He unites.

Above all, the pilgrim Church imitates Mary's profound faith. Jesus gifts each follower with faith. Faith provides God's view of creation. Creation itself shimmers in ever-changing sensations. These surface appearances lead nowhere. They replace each other in baffling succession. Beneath them are regular patterns, regularities, behind the shiftless changes. These patterns satisfy us more than mere sensations. But these patterns fall short of ultimate meaning. If we accept God's gift of faith, we look with His eye upon His creation. Therefore we penetrate misleading shifts to find God's gifts. Mary excelled at using God's gift of faith to see His gift of creation. She saw through superficial distractions, to Love revealing Himself, even in suffering and death. By faith, Mary saw the full value of the Cross. Behind its horror, Christ's love expiated man's sin. Grace opened the fullness of the event to Mary, so she could enter the entirety of God's gift of salvation through suffering. Faith enabled Mary to experience the entire event. The pilgrim Church strives to believe as Mary believed, and thereby enter each event entirely. With that in mind, we can follow St. John Paul's next section.

Text "...the Church is close to Mary, and seeks to become like her. 'Imitating the Mother of her Lord, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, she [Church] preserves, with virginal purity, an integral faith, a firm hope, and a sincere charity' *Lumen Gentium*, 64. Mary is thus present in the mystery of the Church as a model. The Church...also generates people to a new and immortal life. This is her motherhood in the Holy Spirit. Here Mary is model and figure of the Church... With maternal love, she cooperates in the birth and development of the sons and daughters of Mother Church. ...Mary also cooperates...by maternal mediation, [just as]...she cooperated [at Pentecost]. She cooperated with maternal love, [deepening our understanding] of the words spoken by Jesus to his Mother at the hour of the Cross: 'Woman behold your son'. To the disciple He said: 'Behold your mother', Jn 19:36-27. These words determine Mary's place in the life of Christ's disciples. They express the new motherhood of the Mother of the Redeemer. This spiritual motherhood is born from the heart of the Paschal Mystery of the Redeemer of the world. It is...in the order of grace. [This motherhood] implores the gift of the Spirit [to] raise up new children of God, redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ.

"Mary's mother is particularly noted and experienced by the Christian people at the Sacred Banquet, the liturgical celebration of the mystery of the Redemption. Christ's true body, born of the Virgin Mary, becomes present. The piety of the Christian people has always very rightly sensed a profound link between devotion to the Blessed Virgin, and worship of the Eucharist. This fact can be seen in: the liturgy of both the West and the East, the traditions of the Religious Families [Orders], modern spirituality movements, including those for youth, and in pastoral practices at Marian Shrines. Mary guides the faithful to the Eucharist." *Redemptoris Mater*, Part Three, 44.

Comment Mary's faith enables her to watch what happens with God's own eye. When God gives her the same vision that He has, she accepts it gratefully, and uses it eagerly. No one else can match her faithfulness. So she is the prime model for the Church, and all its members. From Mary's faith foundation God prompts her to accept His gift of hope. Hope fixes on heavenly results from earthly acts. Hope sees supernatural goals behind natural events. Hope is God's life yearning for completion in heaven. No one else can match her hopefulness. Again, she is the prime model for the Church, and for us. Similarly, God gave Mary exemplary charity, which is a direct share in His Love. No one else can match Mary's charity = love. So she is the Church's prime model. The deepest mystery of God's gift is His Self-giving. He is too simple for us to grasp. So we grasp glints of His glory that we can capture. Faith, hope, and charity are graspable glints of God's gift of His very life. From her first awareness, Mary exercised God's life in her. She exercised God's life more completely when impregnated with God Himself. Thereafter, she fosters God's life everywhere and every-time. The Church is her great love because it is Christ's extension of His Mystical Body to all who will accept God's gift.

When Mary cares for the Church, she cares for Her beloved son Jesus. Her caring soars beyond our expectations and explanations. So we launch into her ascent as best we can, from as many foundations as we can find. Perhaps John Paul introduces you to a new launch pad: the Holy Eucharist. From the first breaking of the bread on Holy Thursday, Jesus makes Himself present under the appearances of bread and wine. Christ presents Himself, body and blood, soul and divinity, entire in resurrected perfection. Mary loved to accept His Incarnation, now glorified in His resurrected flesh. So she directs us, as always, to her Son, present at the consecration of every Mass. Thereafter, He awaits our visit in the consecrated host. Holy Communion is the most intimate presence of Jesus. Each time we launch from a Eucharistic foundation, we discover something new about Christ. That's the mark of mystery: it provides ever more for us to discover. Full as each mystery is, we yearn to connect mystery to mystery. Each mystery leads us, with Mary's help, to her Son, God.

The Essence of Mary's Motherhood

Text "The essence of motherhood is the person. Motherhood always establishes a unique and unrepeatable relationship between two people...Even when the same woman is the mother of many children, her personal relationship with each one of them is...unique and unrepeatable. This is true for both mother and child. Each child is surrounded...by that maternal love...which...[supports] development to maturity...[Mary does in the order of grace what a good mother does in the order of nature.] [What was true of] John, who stood at the foot of the Cross with Mary, is also true of every disciple of Christ... The Redeemer entrusts his mother to the disciple, and at the same time, he gives her to him as his mother. Mary's motherhood, which becomes man's inheritance, is a gift. This gift Christ himself makes personally to every individual. The Redeemer entrusts Mary to John because he entrusts John to Mary. At the foot of the Cross begins that special entrusting of humanity to the Mother of Christ. It has been expressed in different ways. The same Apostle and Evangelist, after reporting the words addressed by Jesus on the Cross to his Mother and to himself, adds: 'and from that our the disciple took her to his own home', Jn 19:27. [Jesus entrusted them to each other.] such entrusting is the response to a person's love, and in particular to the love of a mother.

"...Entrusting himself to Mary in a filial manner, the Christian, like the Apostle John, 'welcomes' the Mother of Christ 'into his own home', *Lumen Gentium*, 62. He brings her into everything that makes us his inner life, his human and Christian 'I'. thus the Christian seeks to be taken into that 'maternal charity' with which the Redeemer's Mother 'cares for the brethren of her Son', *Lumen Gentium*, 62, in whose birth and development she cooperates, according to the gift proper to each one through the power of Christ's Spirit. Mary this exercises her motherhood in the Spirit which was her role at the foot of the Cross, and in the Upper Room." *Redemptoris Mater*, Part Three, 45.

Comment We find here a marvelous insight into motherhood. John Paul points out that the mother's genius is to personalize her love. She fits it to the person of her child. She loves each child according to its personal needs. Each mother intuitively the person, and adjusts her love to be best for that person. This unique, unrepeatable relationship is such a wonder that it surpasses words. It is reciprocal, working both ways to provide profound satisfaction to each person. Nothing calms a child like his mother, and nothing warms a mother's heart like her child. Attempts to analyze this personal interaction fall short of its full activity. But we know from personal experience that it is magnificent. Even defective relationships are lovable. Mother-child love resembles God's love for us. When we advance from people suffering from Original Sin to Mary, defects disappear. She, our heavenly mother loves us in a heavenly way that is super-personal.

The Trinitarian Persons created us to relate personally with them. Divine persons set the tone for created persons to interact. Jesus, the God-man is the perfect personal lover. Mary is the next best person to give and receive love. When Christ gave her to us, to establish personal care, He provided a gift beyond compare. John Paul lavishes his insight upon us, sharing the surprises that he learned by contemplating Jesus establishing this personal love between Mary and John. Love illustrates God's creative power by its individuality and unrepeatability. No two persons are alike. No two relationships between people are alike. Moreover, interactions develop, always improving in God's infinite love.

Another fruit of John Paul's contemplation is the "entrusting" that Christ initiates. Person-to-person love expands trust without limit. This image and likeness of God's "entrusting" life to His creatures illuminates loving personal relationships. A child totally trusts his mother. She trusts her child to remain innocent during his early years. Each mother lives up to her trust by caring devoutly for her child. Her child lives up to his trust by obeying his mother. Each person does this with limits and defects, among us who live in the Original Rebellion. So we lift our eyes to Mary, who is free of this rebellion, free to obey God entirely. She is eminently trustworthy. Our hearts melt with trust in her.

Therefore we bring her into our spiritual house, our inner life. We allow her to enter where no one else can go. We admit her into our inner "I". We entrust our hearts to her maternal care. She is the totally trustworthy mother from whom we hide no secrets. If we have not brought her into our spiritual house to that extent, we can advance toward that goal. Giving ourselves to her enables her to give herself to us. That trade of silver for gold is total profit. With Mary come her Son, Who is inseparable from her, her Spouse, and her Father. Every divine Person loves Mary beyond expression. Wherever she is welcome, they enter. Taking Mary into our spiritual house admits a crowd. Each of these divine Persons brings gifts that surpass anything created. Mary is the only creature among them, and she is the best of all creatures. Inviting Mary into our hearts enriches our hearts as much as can be, this side of heaven. We thank St. John Paul for sharing his contemplation of our mother Mary, and look forward to his next set of insights, about Mary's unity with her Son, Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Mary directs us to Jesus.

Text "This filial relationship, this self-entrusting of a child to its mother, not only begins in Christ, but is directed definitively toward him. Mary continues to say what she said at Cana: 'Do whatever he tells you'. Christ is the one mediator between God and mankind. He is 'the way, the truth, and the life', Jn 14:6. The Father gave the world to him, so that man 'should not perish, but have eternal life', Jn 3:16. Mary is the first 'witness' of this saving love of the Father. She wishes to remain its humble handmaid, always and everywhere. For every Christian, for every human being, Mary is the one who first believed. Precisely with her faith as Spouse and Mother, she wishes to care for all those who entrust themselves to her as her children. It is well known that the more her children persevere and progress in this attitude, the nearer Mary leads them to the 'unsearchable riches of Christ', Eph 3:8. To the same degree, they recognize more and more clearly the dignity of man in all its fullness, and the definitive meaning of his vocation, because 'Christ... fully reveals man to man himself', *Lumen Gentium*, 63.

"This Marian dimension of Christian life takes on special importance in relation to women and their status. Femininity is uniquely related to Mary. This relationship is better studied elsewhere. Here I simply note that Mary sheds light on womanhood as such, by the very fact that God, in the sublime event of the Incarnation of his Son, entrusted himself to the ministry, the free and active ministry, of a woman. Looking to Mary, women find in her the secret of living their femininity with dignity, and of achieving their own true advancement. In the light of Mary, the Church sees in the face of women the reflection of a beauty which mirrors the loftiest sentiments of which the human heart is capable. [Mary shows us]: the self-offering totality of love; the strength to bear the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity, and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement." *Redemptoris Mater*, 46.

Comment Mary, as John Paul emphasizes, exists for Jesus. She always reminds us that He is the sole mediator between God and man. He is the way, the truth, and the life. He accomplishes our salvation by taking all our sins upon Himself, and erasing them. His infinite innocence makes up for our infinite offense. That's how we avoid perishing in our sins. That's how Christ opened heaven to our eternal life. Mary accepted God's invitation to cooperate, but Jesus did the heavy lifting. This fact is clearest to Our Lady. She was present every step of the way. So she points to Christ in every way possible. The reason that the Father entrusted His Son to Mary was for His Son to save humanity. Mary maintains proper perspective, and proclaims the truth of her service, seconding her Son. Everything begins in Jesus, and completes the circle back to Him. Matter is not as flexible as spirit, so it can't follow the path of salvation.

But Mary follows God in this spiritual rounding, and shows the way for us. She is the first human to believe, and starts an avalanche of belief which has spread to some two billion people today. She is our guide to 'the unsearchable riches of Christ'. She introduces us to the miraculous mysteries that Jesus reveals. Christ shows us how to be human. By baptism, He frees us from sin's shackles. No longer need we wallow in despair. We can thrive on God's life, through Jesus. Because Mary helped Christ take His first steps, she is the ideal aid for us to step along toward Jesus. People who advance, give credit to Mary. St. John Paul is an excellent example. His encyclical is a hymn of praise to Mary. He attributed much of his spiritual progress to her. With her help, we struggle on toward her Son.

Mary shows women how to be women. Her life illustrates how to excel at being a woman. She exemplifies the 'loftiest sentiments of which the human heart is capable'. John Paul lists a representative sample of these sentiments. They all flow from the totality of love, of self-giving, echoing the Son's self-giving when he became man. Love is the central power of all Mary's achievements. Love was her strength against the greatest sorrows. Love fueled her fidelity. Love fired her every effort to work. Love illumined her penetrating intuition. Love ignited her support and encouragement. Her femininity is pure love. Women who follow Mary's lead will glow with God's love as she did. The other feminine virtues follow the love. God's personal love enables women to attend so well to persons. Mary shows the way.

John Paul concludes his encyclical on Mary with a short account of Pope Paul VI's proclamation that Mary is the Mother of the Church, a description of the Marian Year, and summary of Mary's impact on the Church. We will review the proclamation, skip the Marian Year, because it is past, and read St. John Paul's summary, to round out his work.

Text "At the Vatican II Council, Paul VI solemnly proclaimed that Mary is the Mother of the Church, i.e. 'Mother of the entire Christian people, both faithful and pastors'. Later, in 1968, in the 'Credo of the People of God', he restated this truth in an even more forceful way. 'We believe that the Most Holy Mother of God, the new Eve, the Mother of the Church, carries on in heaven her maternal role for the members of Christ, cooperating in the birth and development of divine life in the souls of the redeemed.'

"...Thanks to the special bond linking the Mother of Christ with the Church, we see more clearly the mystery of that woman who from the first chapters of the Book of Genesis, until the Book of revelation, accompanies the revelation of God's salvific plan for humanity. Mary, mother of the Redeemer, takes part as mother in that monumental struggle against the powers of darkness, continuing throughout human history. By her ecclesial identification as the 'woman clothed with the sun', Rev 12:1, it can be said that 'in the Most Holy Virgin, the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she exists without spot or wrinkle'. As Christians raise their eyes with faith to Mary in the course of their earthly pilgrimage, they 'strive to increase in holiness', *Lumen Gentium*, 65. Mary the exalted Daughter of Sion, helps all her children, wherever they may be, and whatever their condition, to find in Christ the path to the Father's house. The church maintains with the Mother of God a link which embraces in the saving mystery: the past, the present, and the future, and venerates her as the spiritual mother of humanity, and the advocate of grace." *Redemptoris Mater*, Part Three, 47

Comment This statement was very bold, because during the 1960's many members of the Church turned away from familiar devotions, especially to Our Lady. Pope Paul VI tried to lead people back to our center, Christ, through His beloved Mother. Pope John Paul II deeply appreciated Paul VI's efforts, and amplified them by this encyclical and the Marian Year of 1987. Mary is the "woman" mentioned in Genesis, the Gospels, and Revelation. She struggles against the devil, represented by the snake. Finally, she crushes his head with her heel. Then she is the woman clothed in the sun, with the moon at her feet. This royal description encouraged Christians who suffered under Nero, and thereafter for three centuries under Roman oppression. In every age, Christians struggle, and need encouragement from Our Lady. She covers all of salvation history, past, present, and future, proclaiming her Son the God-man who redeems us, her children.

Text Conclusion "The invocations addressed to Mary by the Church include: 'Loving Mother of the Redeemer, gate of heaven, star of the sea, assist your people who have fallen, yet strive to rise again. To the wonderment of nature, you bore your Creator!' these words: 'To the wonderment of nature' expresses the wonderment of faith at the mystery of Mary's divine motherhood. In a sense, it does so in the heart of the whole of creation, and directly in the heart of the whole People of God, in the heart of the Church. How wonderfully far God has gone! The Creator and Lord of all things, reveals himself to man. How clearly he has bridged all the spaces of that infinite distance which separates the Creator from the creature! In himself he remains ineffable and unsearchable. But still more ineffable and unsearchable is he in the reality of the Incarnation of the Word, who became man through Mary.

"He has eternally willed to call man to share in the divine nature (2 Pt 1:4). He has matched the divinization of man to humanity's historical conditions, so that, even after sin, he is ready to restore, at a great price, the eternal plan of his love through the humanization of his Son, who is of the same being as himself. The whole of creation, and more directly man himself, cannot fail to be amazed at this gift in which he shares, in the Holy Spirit. 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son', Jn 3:16. At the center of this mystery, in the midst of this wonderment of faith, stands Mary. As the loving Mother of the Redeemer, she was the first to experience the wonderment of bearing her Creator.

"The words of this antiphon express the truth of the 'great transformation' which the mystery of the Incarnation establishes for man. This transformation changes history, from beginning to end... [God's people strive to accept transformation, and pray:] Assist your people who have fallen, yet strive to rise again! ... I hope with all my heart that the reflections in this Encyclical will help renew this vision in the hearts of all believers." *Redemptoris Mater* Part Three, 51-52.

Comment The wonderment of nature means that every creature is rapt in awe that God became man. How far has God gone! Incarnation is a stroke of divine genius. We observe Mary accepting Jesus. From that fact, we delve into infinite invisible mystery. Among the many related factors so simply synthesized, God's unfathomable love moves everything. The Incarnation expresses God's infinite love. Everything we see expresses that same love. The center of the

visible events is Mary. She is the key. To gaze at her is to wonder about all the mysteries. The vortex of her love sweeps us into the mysteries that simultaneously stress and satisfy us. God's love pulls us toward Him, stretching us into stress, but satisfying us because He is our destiny. Throughout this process, Mary leads the way. Her efforts smooth the path for us to follow. If we walk in her steps, we approach the "beating heart of love" at the center of each mystery. God is there for us.