

MARIAN DEVOTION

The devotion to Mary is deeply rooted in the Catholic Church, both in her official liturgy and in the personal life of the believers.

-We believe in God's sovereign love and his exclusive power to create and save.

-We believe in the dignity of his creature, formed after his likeness, and in our freedom to respond to God's word and love.

-A symbol of this freedom, which has been assumed into God's saving designs, is Mary. She has become the typos of the Church. The Church contemplates in her the encounter and involvement of human freedom with God's invitation through the ages.

-It has become clear that Mary's intercession for us, implored by millions of struggling pilgrims, grows from the Christian consciousness that God's kingdom means solidarity, community before all institutional structures, which binds all believers together in the one body of Christ.

The Image of Mary

In the encyclical "Marialis Cultus" on Marian devotion (1974), Pope Paul VI stresses the need to present to Christians, and to the world at large an image of Mary that is inspiring. "The picture of the Blessed Virgin presented in a certain type of devotional literature cannot easily be reconciled with today's life style, especially the way women live today...Women find it difficult to take as an example Mary of Nazareth because the horizon of her life seems rather restricted in comparison with the vast spheres of activities open to mankind today."

THREE PERSPECTIVES MUST BE KEPT IN MIND.

First, we are fully aware of the completely different socio-cultural backgrounds of Palestine and the modern world. We are not called to imitate a life style of ancient times, but to perceive the spirit of Jesus and his mother and realize it in our own world.

Second, the devotional image of Mary, often presented, does not correspond to the Gospel accounts: she is God's handmaid, obedient to his call, ready to fulfill her mission in spite of opposition. She is presented as a woman of amazing strength and independence. According to the accepted standards of the Jewish world, she belonged to Joseph after her engagement. But she makes her decisions in full independence and faces the misunderstanding which follow. Mary is the strong woman who is able to face suffering, exile, persecution. Mary grows from the concern for her child to the community of the believers on the eve of Pentecost.

Third, in the firmness and silent strength of her person, Mary remains totally a woman and reveals the features which seem decisive also for the contribution of women in modern society and in the Church.

-In his encyclical "Marialis Cultus" Paul VI speaks in particular of the spiritual image of the woman as Virgin, Spouse and Mother.

In the biblical image of Mary, the meaning of **Virginity** is revealed: it means the dignity of the human person in God's presence. Her dependence and reliance on God makes her totally independent of the social limitations of a young woman; she stands before God alone, receives his message, decides in personal freedom and faces the implications of human misunderstandings. The Christian understanding of virginity is not based on asceticism, but consists in the deep awareness that each human life belongs to God and has dignity and strength from him.

Mary is **Spouse**: her virginity does not mean aloofness, sterile pride. Mary's whole being becomes openness, listening, surrender, love, learning, service. She learns not from instruction, but from life and love. She does not understand but ponders; she keeps the seeds of God's mystery in her heart and allows them to grow in darkness, pain, wonder, in silent waiting for the light.

Mary is **Mother**. This is her whole life and work. The work of a mother has no parallel in the activities of a man. It means giving life. She bears the life created by God in her womb. It becomes her own; God's Son becomes her child. She gives him the body, the human existence. Her whole being is devoted to make him live and grow. Her work is not reaching out to something, someone, but gives him life from her own life, a body from her body. When the child is born and nourished, she accompanies him through his life and mission. She has done nothing else but to be his mother. It is the first, intimate task of every Christian life. Paul tells the Galatians: "I suffer birth pains for you till Christ is formed in you" (Gal 4:19).

Prayer to Mary

Prayer to Mary is summed up in the "Ave Maria". It is made up of two parts: The greeting of Mary in the words of the angelic salutation, connected with the welcome offered to her by Elizabeth, and the prayer for Mary's intercession. The beginning of the prayer reaches back to the **6th century**. Elizabeth's greeting was added in the **7th century** with the further addition: "Blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus". The invocation for Mary's intercession is found only in the **16th century**. In its present form, it is finalized by Pius V in the liturgical reform in 1568. In this balanced structure, the prayer expresses the two-fold relation to Mary: we turn to her in praise for the unique place God has granted her in his

work of salvation. In the second part, Mary turns towards us with Jesus her Son: she gave the Savior to the sinful world, and she is with us through her intercession in our life, till its end and fulfillment.

-From ancient times, the Hail Mary was used in connection with other forms of devotion. Two of them are most widespread: the "Angelus" and the "Rosary".

-Already in the 13th century, we find the evening Angelus. IN its present form with the ringing of bells morning, noon and evening we find it in the 17th century in many countries.

-The most popular form in which the Hail Mary is prayed today is the Rosary. While the monks recited the Divine Office, which mainly consisted of the 150 psalms, the lay people who wished to join them in this prayer recited 150 times the "Our Father". As they did not know Latin, they substituted the recitation of the psalms with the familiar prayer of the Lord. In the 12th century, the "Our Father" is replaced by the "Hail Mary"; thus the first "Hail Mary" rosaries appear, consisting of the "Hail Mary recited 150 times, interrupted by the Our Father after each decade. The decades were connected with the mysteries of salvation. The devotion was spread mostly by the Dominicans.

Apparitions of the Blessed Virgin

Devotions to Mary have often been linked with apparitions. A –The first and apparently decisive question concerning all reported apparitions of Mary is the **authenticity**. Authentic is understood as caused directly by God; non-authentic would mean either conscious fraud or self-deception of the visionaries who interpret experiences arising from the subconscious as revelations coming from above.

*Before discussion the criteria of discernment it may be important to get rid of the frequent, naive interpretation of apparitions as the coming of Mary from heaven into our world. Mary does not come, she does not need to come. For those who share in God's glory, communication does no longer consist in local movements; the risen body is free from local limitations. Jesus is with us according to his promise: I shall be with you always. Without moving from place to place, we all live in his presence and receive life from him. In the same way, we are also linked with the saints through Jesus: we live in their communion and share in their intercession. So we are also related to Mary and her presence. This is deeply significant for every Christian life.

-We live this communion in faith. It can break into our consciousness in various ways.

-In an apparition, it impresses itself in full awareness on the consciousness of the visionary so that Mary is seen with human eyes and her message is heard in our

language. Such an experience can be granted by God. It takes place in the consciousness of the visionary, not in the outside world.

-Once we understand apparitions as experiences impressed by God on the minds of the visionaries to see Mary invisible shape and to hear her voice, we may ask the question of authenticity more precisely. Is this experience imprinted in the senses and minds of the visionaries God's own work or can it be explained as psychological processes which appear as real vision?

-The ultimate criterion on which this question has always been decided by Church authorities has been the revelation in Jesus Christ. Does the message correspond to it? Is its communication in tune with the spirit of Jesus?

-Even if a supernatural experience is caused directly by God, influences of the good and evil spirits must be watched not only in their origin but also "in the middle and end of the course" (St. Ignatius).

Pastoral Orientation

Exhortation of Pope Paul VI regarding the proper pastoral approach to the doctrine and veneration of Mary:

"We consider it opportune to draw attention to certain attitudes of piety that are incorrect. The second Vatican Council has already denounced both the exaggeration of content and form which even falsifies doctrine, and likewise the small mindedness which obscures the figure and mission of Mary. The Council has also denounced certain devotional deviations such as vain credulity which substitutes reliance on merely external practices for serious commitment. Another deviation is sterile and ephemeral sentimentality so alien to the spirit of the Gospel that demands persevering and practical action. WE re-affirm the Council's disapproval of such attitudes and practices. They are not in harmony with the Catholic faith, and therefore they must have no place in catholic worship."