The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 11 September 2013

Video

The Church is our mother

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today we resume our catecheses on the Church in this Year of Faith. Among the images that the Second Vatican Council chose to help us understand the nature of the Church better, there is that of "mother": the Church is our mother in faith, in supernatural life (cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, nn. 6,14,15,41,42). It is one of the images most used by the Fathers of the Church in the first centuries and I think it could be useful for us too. For me it is one of the most beautiful images of the Church: Mother Church! In what sense and in what way is the Church mother? We start with the human reality of motherhood: what makes a mother?

1. First of all a mother generates life, she carries her child in her womb for 9 months and then delivers him to life, giving birth to him. The Church is like this: she bears us in the faith, through the work of the Holy Spirit who makes her fertile, like the Virgin Mary. The Church and the Virgin Mary are mothers, both of them; what is said of the Church can be said also of Our Lady and what is said of Our Lady can also be said of the Church! Certainly faith is a personal act: "I believe", I personally respond to God who makes himself known and wants to enter into friendship with me (cf. *Lumen Fidei*, n. 39). But the faith I receive from others, within a family, within a community that teaches me to say "I believe", "we believe". A Christian is not an island! We do not become Christians in a laboratory, we do not become Christians alone and by our own effort, since the

faith is a gift, it is a gift from God given to us in the Church and through the Church. And the Church gives us the life of faith in Baptism: that is the moment in which she gives birth to us as children of God, the moment she gives us the life of God, she engenders us as a mother would. If you go to the Baptistery of St John Lateran, beside the Pope's Cathedral, inside it there is an inscription in Latin which reads more or less: “Here is born a people of divine lineage, generated by the Holy Spirit who makes these waters life-giving; Mother Church gives birth to her children within these waves”. This makes us understand something important: our taking part in the Church is not an exterior or formal fact, it is not filling out a form they give us; it is an interior and vital act; one does not belong to the Church as one belongs to a society, to a party or to any other organization. The bond is vital, like the bond you have with your mother, because, as St Augustine says, “The Church is truly the mother of Christians” (*De moribus Ecclesiae*, I, 30, 62-63: PL 32, 1336). Let us ask ourselves: how do I see the Church? As I am grateful to my parents for giving me life, am I grateful to the Church for generating me in the faith through Baptism? How many Christians remember the date of their Baptism? I would like to ask you here, but each of you respond in you heart: how many of you remember the date of your Baptism? A few people raise their hands, but many others do not remember! But the date of your Baptism is the day of our birth in the Church, the date on which our mother Church gave us life! And now I leave you with some homework. When you go home today, go and find out what the date of your Baptism is, and then celebrate it, thank the Lord for this gift. Are you going to do it? Do we love the Church as we love our mothers, also taking into account her defects? All mothers have defects, we all have defects, but when we speak of our mother's defects we gloss over them, we love her as she is. And the Church also has her defects: but we love her just as a mother. Do we help her to be more beautiful, more authentic, more in harmony with the Lord? I leave you with these questions, but don't forget your homework: go find the date of your Baptism, carry it in your heart and celebrate it.

2. A mother does not stop at just giving life; with great care she helps her children grow, gives them milk, feeds them, teaches them the way of life, accompanies them always with her care, with her affection, with her love, even when they are grown up. And in this she also knows to correct them, to forgive them and understand them. She knows how to be close to them in sickness and in suffering. In a word, a good mother helps her children to come of themselves, and not to remain comfortably under her motherly wings, like a brood of chicks under the wings of the broody hen. The Church like a good mother does the same thing: she accompanies our development by transmitting to us the Word of God, which is a light that directs the path of Christian life; she administers the Sacraments. She nourishes us with the Eucharist, she brings us the forgiveness of God through the Sacrament of Penance, she helps us in moments of sickness with the Anointing of the sick. The Church accompanies us throughout our entire life of faith, throughout the whole of our Christian life. We can then ask ourselves other questions: what is my relationship with the Church? Do I feel like she is my mother who helps me grow as a Christian? Do I participate in the life of the Church, do I feel part of it? Is my relationship a formal or a vital relationship?

3. A third brief thought. In the first centuries of the Church, one thing was very clear: the Church,

while being the mother of Christians, while “making” Christians, is also “made” by them. The Church is not distinct from us, but should be seen as the totality of believers, as the “we” of Christians: I, you, we all are part of the Church. St Jerome wrote: “The Church of Christ is nothing other than the souls of those who believe in Christ” (Tract. Ps 86: PL 26,1084). Thus the motherhood of the Church is lived by us all, pastors and faithful. At times I feel: “I believe in God but not in the Church... I have heard that the Church says... priests say..”. Priests are one thing but the church is not formed solely by priests, the Church is all of us! And if you say that you believe in god and you don't believe in the Church, you are saying that you don't believe in yourself; and this is a contradiction. The Church is all of us: from the baby just baptized to the Bishop, the Pope; we are all the Church and we are all equal in the eyes of God! We are all called to collaborate for the birth of new Christians in the faith, we are all called to be educators in the faith, to proclaim the Gospel. Each of us should ask ourself: what do I do so that others might share in Christian life? Am I generous in my faith or am I closed? When I repeat that I love a Church that is not closed in herself, but capable of coming out, of moving, even with risks, to bring Christ to all people, I am thinking of everyone, of me, of you, of every Christian! We all take part in the motherhood of the church, so that the light of Christ may reach the far confines of the earth. Long live Holy Mother Church!

To special groups

I offer an affectionate greeting to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today’s Audience, including those from England, Scotland, Wales, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Germany, Malta, Kenya and the United States. May your stay in the Eternal City increase your love for the Church, his Church, our Mother. May God bless you!

Lastly, an affection thought to the young, the sick and the newlyweds. Tomorrow we commemorate the Holy Name of Mary. Call upon her, dear *young people,* to feel the sweetness of the love of the Mother of God; pray to her, dear *sick people*, above all at the moment of the cross and suffering; look to her, dear *newlyweds*, as the star of your marital journey of dedication and fidelity.

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