



# The Holy See

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POPE JOHN PAUL II

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday, 15 October 1997*

## ***Mary has always been specially venerated***

1. "When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman" (Gal 4:4). Marian devotion is based on the wondrous divine decision, as the Apostle Paul recalls, to link forever the Son of God's human identity with a woman, Mary of Nazareth.

The mystery of the divine motherhood and of Mary's co-operation in the work of Redemption has filled believers in every age with an attitude of praise, both for the Saviour and for her who gave birth to him in time, thus co-operating in Redemption.

A further reason for grateful love for the Blessed Virgin is offered by her universal motherhood. By choosing her as Mother of all humanity, the heavenly Father has wished to reveal the motherly dimension, so to speak, of his divine tenderness and concern for all people in every era.

On Calvary, with the words: "Behold, your son!", "Behold, your mother!" (Jn 19:26-27), Jesus gave Mary in advance to all who would receive the Good News of salvation, and was thus laying the foundation of their filial affection for her. Following John, the faithful would prolong Christ's love for his Mother with their own devotion, by accepting her into their own lives.

2. The Gospel texts attest to the presence of Marian devotion from the Church's origins.

The first two chapters of St Luke's Gospel seem to relate the particular attention to Jesus' Mother on the part of Jewish Christians, who expressed their appreciation of her and jealously guarded their memories of her.

Moreover, in the infancy narratives we can discern the initial expressions of and reasons for Marian devotion, summarized in Elizabeth's exclamations: "Blessed are you among women.... And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Lk 1:42, 45).

Traces of a veneration already widespread among the first Christian community are present in the *Magnificat* canticle: "All generations will call me blessed" (Lk 1:48). By putting these words on Mary's lips, Christians recognized her unique greatness, which would be proclaimed until the end of time.

In addition, the Gospel accounts (cf. Lk 1:24-35; Mt 1:23 and Jn 1:13), the first formulas of faith and a passage by St Ignatius of Antioch (cf. *Smyrn.* 1, 2: SC 10, 155) attest to the first communities' special admiration for Mary's virginity, closely linked to the mystery of the Incarnation.

John's Gospel, by noting Mary's presence at the beginning and at the end of her Son's public life, suggests that the first Christians were keenly aware of Mary's role in the work of Redemption, in full loving dependence on Christ.

3. The Second Vatican Council, in stressing the particular character of Marian devotion, says: "Mary has by grace been exalted above all angels and men to a place second only to her Son, as the most holy Mother of God who was involved in the mysteries of Christ: she is rightly honoured by a special cult in the Church" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 66).

Then, alluding to the third-century Marian prayer, "Sub tuum praesidium" — "We fly to thy patronage" — it adds that this characteristic emerges from the very beginning: "From the earliest times the Blessed Virgin is honoured under the title of Mother of God in whose protection the faithful take refuge together in prayer in all their perils and needs" (*ibid.*).

4. This assertion has been confirmed in iconography and in the teaching of the Fathers of the Church since the second century.

In Rome, in the catacombs of Priscilla, it is possible to admire the first depiction of the Madonna and Child, while at the same time, St Justin and St Irenaeus speak of Mary as the new Eve who by her faith and obedience makes amends for the disbelief and disobedience of the first woman. According to the Bishop of Lyons, it was not enough for Adam to be redeemed in Christ, but "it was right and necessary that Eve be restored in Mary" (*Demonstratio apostolica*, 33). In this way he stresses the importance of woman in the work of salvation and lays the foundation for the inseparability of Marian devotion from that shown to Jesus, which will endure down the Christian centuries.

5. Marian devotion is first expressed in the invocation of Mary as "*Theotókos*", a title which was authoritatively confirmed, after the Nestorian crisis, by the Council of Ephesus in 431.

The same popular reaction to the ambiguous and wavering position of Nestorius, who went so far as to deny Mary's divine motherhood, and the subsequent joyful acceptance of the Ephesian Synod's decisions, confirm how deeply rooted among Christians was devotion to the Blessed Virgin. However "following the Council of Ephesus, there was a remarkable growth in the devotion of the People of God towards Mary, in veneration and love, in invocation and imitation" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 66). It was expressed especially in the liturgical feasts, among which, from the beginning of the fifth century, "the day of Mary *Theotókos*" acquired particular importance. It was celebrated on 15 August in Jerusalem and later became the feast of the Dormition or the Assumption.

Under the influence of the "Proto-Evangelium of James", the feasts of the Nativity, the Conception and the Presentation were also introduced, and notably contributed to highlighting some important aspects of the mystery of Mary.

6. We can certainly say that Marian devotion has developed down to our day in wonderful continuity, alternating between flourishing periods and critical ones that, nonetheless, often had the merit of fostering its renewal even more.

Since the Second Vatican Council, Marian devotion seems destined to develop in harmony with a deeper understanding of the mystery of the Church and in dialogue with contemporary cultures, to be ever more firmly rooted in the faith and life of God's pilgrim people on earth.

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To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims, especially those from England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Australia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Korea, Japan and the United States, I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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