



The Holy See

POPE JOHN PAUL II **GENERAL AUDIENCE** Wednesday, 29 October 1997

Church urges faithful to venerate Mary

1. After giving doctrinal justification to veneration of the Blessed Virgin, the Second Vatican Council exhorts all the faithful to promote it: "The Sacred Synod teaches this Catholic doctrine advisedly and at the same time admonishes all the sons of the Church that the cult, especially the liturgical cult, of the Blessed Virgin, be generously fostered, and that the practices and exercises of devotion towards her, recommended by the teaching authority of the Church in the course of centuries, be highly esteemed" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 67).

With this last statement the Council Fathers, without going into particulars, intended to reaffirm the validity of certain prayers such as the Rosary and the *Angelus*, dear to the tradition of the Christian people and frequently encouraged by the Supreme Pontiffs as an effective means of nourishing the life of faith and devotion to the Blessed Virgin.

2. The conciliar text goes on to ask believers "that those decrees, which were given in the early days regarding the veneration of images of Christ, the Blessed Virgin and the saints, be religiously observed" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 67).

Thus it repropose the decisions of the Second Council of Nicaea, held in 787, which confirmed the legitimacy of the veneration of sacred images in opposition to those who wished to destroy them, since they considered them inadequate for representing the divinity (cf. *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 33). "We define", said the Fathers of that Council, "with full precision and care that, like the representation of the precious life-giving Cross, so the venerated and holy images either painted or mosaic or made of any other suitable material, should be exposed in holy churches of God on sacred furnishings and vestments, on walls and panels in homes and streets, be they images of the Lord God and our Saviour Jesus Christ, or of our immaculate Lady, the Holy Mother of God, of the holy angels, or of all the saints and the just" (DS 600).

By recalling this definition, *Lumen gentium* intended to stress the legitimacy and validity of sacred

images, in contrast to certain tendencies to remove them from churches and shrines in order to focus full attention on Christ.

3. The Second Council of Nicaea does not only affirm the legitimacy of images, but seeks to describe their usefulness for Christian piety: "Indeed, the more often these images are contemplated, the more those who look at them are brought to remember and desire the original models and, in kissing them, to show them respect and veneration" (DS 601).

These directives apply in a particular way to the veneration of the Blessed Virgin. Images, icons and statues of Our Lady, present in houses, public places and countless churches and chapels, help the faithful to invoke her constant presence and her merciful patronage in the various circumstances of life. By making the Blessed Virgin's motherly tenderness concrete and almost visible, they invite us to turn to her, to pray to her trustfully and to imitate her in generously accepting the divine will.

None of the known images is an authentic reproduction of Mary's face, as St Augustine had already acknowledged (*De Trinitate*, 8, 7); however they help us establish a more living relationship with her. Therefore the practice of exposing images of Mary in places of worship and in other buildings should be encouraged, in order to be aware of her help in moments of difficulty and as a reminder to lead a life that is ever more holy and faithful to God.

4. To encourage the proper use of sacred images, the Council of Nicaea recalls that "the honour paid to the image is really paid to the person it represents, and those who venerate the image are venerating the reality of the person it represents" (DS 601).

Hence in adoring the Person of the Incarnate Word in the image of Christ the faithful are making a genuine act of worship, which has nothing in common with idolatry.

Similarly, when he venerates images of Mary, the believer's act is ultimately intended as a tribute to the person of the Mother of Jesus.

5. Therefore, the Second Vatican Council urges theologians and preachers to refrain from both exaggerating and minimizing the special dignity of the Mother of God. It adds: "Following the study of Sacred Scripture, the Fathers, the doctors and liturgy of the Church, and under the guidance of the Church's Magisterium, let them rightly illustrate the duties and privileges of the Blessed Virgin, which always refer to Christ, the source of all truth, sanctity and devotion" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 67).

Authentic Marian doctrine is ensured by fidelity to Scripture and Tradition, as well as to the liturgical texts and the Magisterium. Its indispensable characteristic is the reference to Christ: everything in Mary derives from Christ and is directed to him.

6. Lastly, the Council offers believers several criteria for authentically living their filial relationship with Mary: "Let the faithful remember moreover that true devotion consists neither in sterile nor transitory affection, nor in a certain vain credulity, but proceeds from true faith, by which we are led to recognize the excellence of the Mother of God, and we are moved to a filial love towards our Mother and to the imitation of her virtues" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 67).

With these words, the Council Fathers put people on guard against "vain credulity" and the predominance of sentiment. They aim above all at reaffirming authentic Marian devotion, which proceeds from faith and the loving recognition of Mary's dignity, fosters filial affection for her and inspires the firm resolution to imitate her virtues.

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

I offer a special word of welcome to the visitors from Trondheim, Norway, led by the Catholic Bishop, the Lutheran Bishop and the Mayor, and including the Cathedral Boys' Choir. Dear friends, you have wished to return the visit which I made to your city eight years ago. I congratulate you and your fellow citizens on the 1,000-year celebration of Trondheim's foundation. Thank you and God bless you!

Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims, especially those from England, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, the Philippines, Canada and the United States, I invoke joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

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