

May love triumph!

THE WORD BECAME FLESH IN MARY'S WOMB BY THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

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IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME, THE VIRGIN RECEIVED THE WORD

The Blessed Mother has a precise and singular place in the plan of salvation, for “*when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman*” (Gal 4:4).

As the Servant of God John Paul II taught us in his Encyclical, *Mother of the Redeemer (Redemptoris Mater)*, “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” (no.1). In the fullness of time, Mary was definitively introduced in the Mystery of Christ and in the Mystery of the Church and the world.

This fullness of time marks the moment when God entered into human history and filled history, time, and all human realities with the power of his love and his presence. In the fullness of time, by the Incarnation of the Word of God, the human heart became the place of meeting between God and humanity. This fullness also designates the hidden beginning of the Church’s journey. In the liturgy, in the Roman Missal’s Preface for December 8, the Church salutes the Blessed Mother as “the Church’s own beginning”; for in the event of the Immaculate Conception, the Church sees herself – projected and anticipated in her most excellent and pure member. As we read in *Lumen Gentium*, the Church sees in Mary the fullness of the life of the Church (n. 64). As well, in Mary’s fiat – the fiat of the New Covenant –the Church’s identity as spouse and mother is prefigured.

Mary appears in the horizon of salvation history before Christ. It is a fact that when the “fullness of time” was definitively drawing near, She already existed on earth. Her life, Her heart, and Her Womb lived the Advent that initiated all Advents. In this time She was preparing the room, the space of her Tent, to become the living Ark of the Covenant, the human dwelling of God. She made room in her heart and in her Womb for Emmanuel, for the God-made-man, for the Savior of the World, for the Word Incarnate. She was on earth preparing her Womb to receive within herself the hope of humanity: the God of Love, the Word of Love...the definite hope of the human heart. She became, by her perfect reception of God’s Word, the Mother of the Word Incarnate. In her, the Incarnation – or “humanization” as John Paul II calls it (RM, 54) – of the Word, the hypostatic union of the Son of God with human nature, was accomplished and fulfilled.

*“The Incarnation required the consenting acceptance of the human heart chosen to be the Mother of the Word, and only in this way do Logos and Flesh really become one” (Ratzinger, *Mary: the Church at the Source*, p. 83). The Womb into which the Son comes and the “flesh” that he assumes are not just any place or thing. Rather, this flesh, this soil, is a human being, an open heart. It is the Marian heart, totally available to the will of the Father and to the action of the Holy Spirit to become a Sanctuary; a dwelling Tent; the sacred space for God-made-man; the sacred soil where the seed of God can be planted.*

THE WORD, THE SEED OF GOD, NEEDED A SOIL TO RECEIVE HIM

In the Gospel of St. Luke chapter 1, we read the account of the Annunciation. The angel announced the designs of God to Mary: "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus'.... Mary said to the angel, 'how can this be, since I have no relations with a man?' And the angel said to her in reply, 'the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you'...Mary said: 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word'" (cf. Luke 1:26-38).

The Word needed a human womb where it could be enfleshed! All the works of God need a heart, a womb, a human person to receive them, to assent to them, to say, "Let it be done *to me*." Grace needs to build upon nature, upon a human soil where it can be planted and nourished, where it can grow, develop and blossom. All graces must be received, treasured and be cared for. The Word, the seed, must be planted in a maternal soil. The seed must be received. The seed must be in a soil that is not dry, but fertile. *"The soil must be at the service of the seed; it must contain it...The grain of wheat does not remain alone; to be fruitful, it must include the maternal mystery of the soil"* (cf. Ratzinger, *Mary: the Church at its Source*, p.14).

In the Gospel of St. Mark (4:1-20), when Jesus spoke about the parable of the sower, He taught us about the importance of receiving His Word in a rich soil. He also warned us that the seed can be wasted or lost when it is not received in a good soil. When I speak of the soil, I am referring to the human heart, where the Word of God must be received, accepted and nourished so it can bear abundant fruit. Let us meditate on the different soils presented to us in this parable.

"Some seed fell on the path and some birds ate it up." This refers to a lack of attention to or reflection on the Word received, and as Jesus himself explained, in people of this type of soil, Satan comes at once and takes away the Word sown in them. Why? Because the word was not kept carefully, was not pondered upon, but was instead accepted with superficial and banal hearts. How many times in prayer does the Lord present us with a passage of Scripture, and we sense He is speaking to us, but we do not continue to pray about it, ponder it in its full meaning, or allow it to direct our lives? How easily we allow the enemy to steal works of grace!

"Other seed fell on rocky ground with not enough soil." This means that the Word did not have enough room for the root to grow and mature. It was not given sufficient space or the appropriate nourishment to grow. In this type of soil, the Word is first received with joy, and there is no primary resistance; but the heart has no solid foundation. Thus, when difficulties or tribulations come about because of the Word, it quickly falls away. This lack of solid foundation could be our lack of formation in the Catholic faith or our lack of knowledge of the totality of the Magisterium of the Church. Therefore, our soil, the womb of our hearts, is not formed enough to perceive the depth of the Word. Also, it could refer to areas of our hearts that are still made of stone, in which the Word has no space to expand.

"Some seed fell among thorns and was choked and could not produce life." This means that in our hearts there can be thorns that do not allow the Word to bear fruit – fruit that lasts. As Jesus described to us, the Word can be suffocated, distracted and choked by the worldly anxieties of our hearts, by strong desires for possession, and by the inordinate attachments to our will and plans. The thorns of fear, anxiety, pride, distraction and self-will suffocate the seed of the Word in our hearts. These thorns can be clearly manifested when we desire to control our lives and put many conditions on our responses to the Will of the Lord.

"But some seed fell on rich soil and produced fruit, it came up and grew and yielded a hundredfold." In this type of soil, the seed was rooted firmly and was able to blossom and bear a hundredfold. In the rich soil the seed multiplied and gave abundant and permanent fruit. This type of soil, this type of heart, is, according to Jesus, the one who hears the Word, accepts it, and lets it bear fruit abundantly. To whom do you think Jesus was alluding when he spoke about the rich soil that produced a hundredfold? I am sure that He was referring to His Mother's heart and womb. Mary is the perfect fertile,

rich and fruitful soil, totally receptive to and available for the seed, of whom Elizabeth said, *"Blessed is the fruit of your Womb, Jesus"* (cf. Lk. 1:42). The Heart and Womb of the Blessed Mother is the most receptive and fertile soil in the history of humanity.

In Our Blessed Mother's Heart, humanity has received, in totality, the Word of God made Flesh. In Her Womb the Love of God was enfleshed because it found a perfect reception. Some hearts have not received the seed like St. John tells us in the first chapter of his Gospel: *"He came to his own and his own did not receive him"* (cf. v.11); but in Our Mother's Heart, humanity received the seed in the perfection of love. Only love, the pure love of the human heart, is the soil in which the seed, the Word, can be conceived, guarded, made fruitful and multiplied.

A VIRGIN'S LOVE, A VIRGIN'S HEART IS THE FERTILE SOIL

The prophet Isaiah said, *"Therefore, the Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall name him Emmanuel"* (7:14).

A promise of love can only be fulfilled in love! The sign that God chose to give humanity to reveal the promise of his presence in history, as John Paul II taught us, found its full meaning in the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word (General Audience, Jan. 31, 1996). The sign was a virgin's heart, receiving with love the Heart of God who is Love. A Virgin's love will conceive, a Virgin's heart will receive the fullness of life and give birth to the Life of the World!

A Virgin, a pure and humble heart, dedicated totally to loving God, completely available and generously disposed to His designs, was the one to cooperate, with her fiat, in the fulfillment of the plan of salvation. In the Virgin's *undivided, prayerful, generous and pure* human heart a miraculous conception, a miraculous fecundity, took place. A love so pure, so total, and so unconditional became so powerfully life-giving. The pure, immaculate love of a human heart was the soil – the perfect soil – to bear the child and thus, to be the sign of the presence of God among men. This is the great sign promised by Isaiah: love – pure, unconditional love – is so powerful that it gives life. Only love creates, said St. Maximilian Kolbe, because love is the force, the powerful force, that calls forth life.

The Virgin's love conceived first in her heart and then in her womb. Saint Augustine stated this when commenting on the Gospel of the Annunciation: "The angel announces; the Virgin listens, believes and conceives. Christ is believed and conceived through faith. The Virgin Mary first conceived in her heart, and then fruitfulness came to the Mother's Womb" (cf. Sermon 293).

She conceived the Word, the promise to humanity of God's love. The Word that was revealed in so many ways through the prophets, from generation to generation, was the Word to whom Mary attentively listened and that she carefully kept. It was the Word to which she was undividedly dedicated and that was enfleshed in Her Womb.

A Virgin's love keeps all things in her heart. St. Luke tells us that the Virgin Mary *"carefully kept all these things in her heart"* (2:51). She carefully received, kept and treasured all the words, gestures, and actions of God. Only when the Word is heard, welcomed, and guarded with loving dedication can it truly bear much fruit.

There is so much we should contemplate in the Virgin Mary's Heart. We should contemplate our Mother in order to imitate her, in order to dispose ourselves to be receptive to the Word. I think this description of St. Luke about our Mother's internal disposition of heart, as one that *"carefully kept all these things,"* reveals to us the Virgin Mother's contemplative and prayerful dimension. To keep and to guard is to take care of something treasured; it is to preserve, to gather what is valued, and to set it in a secure place: the heart. To *keep*, like the soil keeps the seed, is an attitude of the heart that is born and blossoms in prayer, in internal recollection, and in mature reflection of the Word. It requires an openness to purification so the Word is not diluted or accommodated to our wills.

In order to "keep" the Word one must first hear it; to hear it one must be recollected; and to be recollected one must first have a prayerful heart – a heart with interiority, a heart that is profound and not superficial, a heart that is responsible not careless, a heart that is serene not impulsive, a heart that

is mature and not led by any wind, a heart that does not allow itself to be shaken by anything. Loving prayer was the Virgin Mary's fountain of life, the strength of her heart. In prayer she learned how to be in total communion with God, how to belong totally to Him, and how to be generously disposed to His designs.

Our Lady prayed and kept all things in her heart. In prayer she kept her heart in a constant and loving dialogue with God's Heart. In prayer she kept "all things" – *everything* that occurred. This includes even more so what She did not comprehend, what She could not see so clearly, what seemed mysterious, what required painful and generous assents, what seemed beyond her capacity or strength, what was beyond her understanding, and what she needed to more deeply perceive. All of these things she kept in her heart to immerse them in God's love and light, through prayer...the prayer of a Virgin's heart.

Oh what prayer was the Virgin's prayer! Her prayer was the prayer of a pure heart that called forth – with her human love in perfect harmony with Divine Love – the most marvelous designs of That Love. What prayer! Her prayer was the one God needed to find in a human heart in order to bring about His plan of salvation. In her Heart the Lord's desires were heard, perceived, and received with perfect docility, with full openness, and with perfect obedience. In her, the Lord's plan could be fulfilled because her heart, matured in prayer, had day after day carefully kept all the promises, words, gestures and deeds of God.

To pray like the Blessed Mother must be our life. We are to be receivers of the Word; therefore, we are to be men and women of prayer, rich and fertile soil for the seed. It is in the imitation of the Virgin's attitude of interior recollection that our identification with Mary begins. She learned to be a daughter of the Father in prayer; she preserved the fullness of her grace in prayer; she grew in her spousal dimension through prayer; she prepared the Temple of Her heart and Womb in prayer; She lived her docility to the movements of the Spirit in prayer; and in prayer, her heart was formed into a servant's heart, totally disposed to letting the Will of God be done in her.

Like our Blessed Mother, we must learn to keep all things with care and to protect our hearts, the soil where the Word must be en fleshed. We must take care of the soil through internal recollection and mature discernment. There is too much noise inside and outside of us. Too many words and too many voices speak to our hearts and suffocate the fruitfulness of the Word of God in us. Being careful is to be responsible, recognizing that the treasure is too valuable to leave it exposed for thieves. Being careful is to be wise enough to recognize that the treasure placed in our hearts is a precious pearl that cannot be exchanged for just any rock, for any thing that glitters, for any word, or for any teaching that is spoken to us. For there exist many lights, particularly in our time, that appear to be very bright; yet, they are false or temporary imitations of the only true treasure: the Word of God, revealed in its fullness, communicated in its integrity, and interpreted with the totality of its content and unity by the Marian heart and womb of the Church.

"THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT WILL COME UPON YOU AND WILL OVERSHADOW YOU"

The Incarnation required the consenting acceptance of a human heart, the rich soil (the Blessed Mother), and the power of the Spirit to bring it about. The Incarnation required the spousal openness of the Marian heart and the overshadowing, the covering, of the Holy Spirit. This unity of love and prayer between the Marian heart and the Holy Spirit is a permanent, necessary condition for all the particular manifestations of God's presence in human history. The last chapter of the last book of Sacred Scriptures ends with a loud and powerful cry: *"Come, Lord Jesus'...the Spirit and the Bride, say, 'Come'"* (Rev. 22:20,17).

His Holiness Benedict XVI has expressed many times that the great crisis facing the world and the Church today is the "crisis of the presence of God" – in other words, the "crisis of the absence of God." It is a culture that, in general terms, lives without an orientation towards God and His love, a culture that wants to exclude God from the realities of the human existence. It is a world without God – the opposite of the mystery of the Incarnation. Pope Benedict believes that the solution for the crisis of humanity today is the encounter with the God of love, the God who has a human face, the God that became man and has healed, redeemed and elevated all human realities. It seems to me that we need a particular grace of "incarnation" in our historic moment – the Marian heart in each one of the members

of the Church. We must be Marian in our prayer and receptivity; we must be open to the power of the Holy Spirit; therefore, we must call forth life; we must call forth the particular grace of the presence of God in the midst of the shadows that have afflicted and wounded our present civilization.

"What was accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit 'in the fullness of time' can only through the Spirit's power now emerge from the memory of the Church. By his power it can be made present in the new phase of man's history" (John Paul II, *Dominum et vivificantem*, 51).

I believe that at this moment we have been called by Pope Benedict XVI to place ourselves in front of God with a Marian disposition of heart – pure in its love, having a profound spirit of prayer, possessing perfect receptivity to the Word, totally availability to God's will, carefully keeping all things. Yes, we must dispose ourselves, with all this Marian availability and receptivity, to allow the Holy Spirit to overshadow the Tent of our hearts, the Tent of the Heart of the Church. Thus, the Spirit can bring about a particular grace of enfleshment of the Child – a new powerful presence of God's love, God's face, God's heart, to be manifested to a world thirsty for love, for true love: the love of God.

In His recent Apostolic Visit to the United States, Pope Benedict XVI – Peter – met with the bishops, the successors of the Apostles, in the Marian heart and womb of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Washington DC. Also in this city, in the heart of our nation, he celebrated the Mass of Pentecost at Nationals Park: *"The Spirit and the Bride, say Come!"* I think that, with this gesture, he directed the gaze of the Church to the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 2. The Holy Father directed us to the Cenacle, the sacred place in which the apostles united with Mary in prayer and waited for the grace of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And after the tongues of fire rested upon each and the wind filled the entire house, they were able to proclaim the Word with power. Pentecost was a moment of birth, a particular grace of continuation of the Incarnation. In prayer, with a Marian receptivity, they were overshadowed by the Power of the Spirit, and they were able to speak and utter the Word with power before many. They powerfully communicated and testified to the Word; they revealed the Word, and many accepted the message; and the Holy Father prayed in St. Patrick's Cathedral for this grace to be renewed: *"Let us implore from God the grace of a new Pentecost for the Church in America"* (April 19, 2008).

May our Blessed Mother – the spouse of the Holy Spirit, the rich soil where the seed of the Word was received, the home of the Word – teach us to receive him in spirit of prayer and total availability so that the Word may be enfleshed in us and so that many in our world today will see and contemplate His glory. May we be like Mary: a living gospel, a home for the Word, a rich soil that bears abundant fruit.

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