

18 MAY 1967

Your Eminence, Right Reverend Monsignor, dear Fathers,

During the month of May, in which it is traditional to honour Our Lady in a special way, our thoughts turn to her as the Mother of the Church. This is the new Church of the Council in which our ministry plays such an essential role, but which causes us so much headache and heartache. Both Pope John and Pope Paul have repeatedly advised us to do what the Apostles did and gather around Our Lady, the Mother of Jesus, to pray with her and trust in her intercession. We must learn from her the ancient and eternally new mystery of the Church. As we look at the Church and world today, we realise that more than anything else, our time demands youthful courage. Therefore we must open minds and hearts for the movement of the Holy Spirit. As the Mother and Model of the Church, Our Lady has the same task to fulfil today as in the Cenacle, for she is the first and most noble member of the Church. Hers is the apostolate of being.

In our meditation today, let us look at the picture of Our Lady as revealed in the Bible, and try to find out if her spirituality, her inner attitude, has any special significance for our priestly way of life. At the Church of the Annunciation at Nazareth, Pope Paul said that he wished he could re-learn all the truths of Christianity from Our Lady in the way she had taught Our Lord. Let us take the Magnificat and try to discover from it her attitude to God that made her the Mother and Model of the Church.

1 It is a jubilant thanksgiving for her and our vocation;

2 It is a vivid meditation on God's incomprehensible deeds; and

3 Let us see it in the framework of the history of salvation.

1 A jubilant thanksgiving

As we look back on our priestly life and vocation, we cannot but magnify the Lord for his inscrutable love and wisdom in having chosen us. 'My soul magnifies the Lord ...' All the fruitfulness and joy in our lives results from our original calling, from the events that culminated in our yes to God's call. With deep humility we repeat with Our Lady: 'He has looked upon the lowliness of his servant ...' The Annunciation shows that Our Lady always regarded herself as the simple handmaid and servant of the Lord. And yet at the same time she sees and admits that her greatness will be praised by all generations of mankind - 'all generations will call me blessed' - for the Child she bears is the Messiah, and this very fact makes her the greatest of all women. In the same way, the life of Christ we are called to bear within us and bring to life in others will make us truly great before God and man.

Our Lady is conscious of her lowliness, her nothingness before God. Before God we are all but beggars - empty, poor, in need of mercy and help. Such poor, sad and despised people were blest by Our Lord - 'Blessed are the poor

in spirit ...' (Mt 5:5). Those who know and who have experienced their own weakness and limitations, and who have also accepted their human condition, are open before God and ready to receive his message.

'The Almighty has done great things for me. Holy is his name.' The annunciation, and the conception and birth of Christ can be found again in our own calling, conversion and ordination. Our priestly life gives evidence of the great and wonderful deeds of God.

As the Exultet puts it: Nothing is impossible to God and in as far as we truly trust in him.

'Holy is his name'. God is so different to us. His greatness cannot be expressed in human terms, nor can he be understood by the human mind. He is so distant, so holy. Truly he is to be feared and respected. He cannot be made understandable in popular terms, approached in our democratic spirit, or referred to disrespectfully. A great deal of our modern atheism can be traced back to our having tailored God according to our small minds.

2 Vivid meditation on God's incomprehensible deeds

Our pastoral life daily confronts us with events that are so strange and incomprehensible that superficial talking about God, or an application of our merely earthly concepts of a father's love and care to him, prove to be unsatisfactory. Indeed, God works in very strange ways.

'He has shown the power of his arm, he has routed the proud of heart. He has pulled down princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things, the rich sent empty away.' In these words Our Lady shows her faith in God's way of thinking and acting. God's ways by far surpass all human concepts. This is the common experience of all religious people and finds expression in Anna's song for Samuel. God is more powerful than any man - he is always wiser and greater. Christ, too, demanded a faith that could move mountains, a belief that nothing is impossible with God. (Mk 11: 22f; Mt 17: 20ff). When St Paul referred to Abraham receiving a promise of a great posterity in his old age, he wrote: 'Abraham is our father in the eyes of God, in whom he put his faith and who brings the dead to life and calls into being what does not exist' (Rom 4:17). Our Lady praises God's paradoxical way of acting that humbles the mighty and exalts the lowly. God shows his power over earthly power. God protects the poor and simple, he is full of surprises - but he is always loyal to his Covenant.

In our daily meditations we should certainly dwell on these features of God and his activity in our own lives. Bitterness and resignation are inevitable unless we grow with God and into God, inspired and guided by our growing experience of the God of Life. Wherever we find a believing understanding of God's greatness, we also find an eternal and youthful openness to God.

3 Its setting in the history of salvation

Her own election and God's way of dealing with men inspires Our Lady to see her life in the framework of the history of salvation. She knows she is an Israelite, the people elected by God to be his servant. 'He has looked on Israel his servant, remembering his mercy - as he has spoken to our fathers, to Abraham and his posterity forever.' God had 'spoken' of salvation and the blessing arising from the foundation of his Covenant. Although the people had been disloyal to the covenant on many occasions, God was always ready to forgive. 'Be not afraid, because I am with you. Do not look around anxiously, because I am your God' (Is 41:10). The hope and consolation of the people of Israel is realised in Our Lady and her Child. God had fulfilled his promises.

Our Lady had made Holy Scriptures, the liturgy and popular piety so much her own, that all the words quoted from the sacred texts expressed her own attitude. Therefore, let us confidently take up the exhortation of our Holy Father and call upon her as the Mother and Model of the Church. She will teach us how to live every word of Holy Scripture, as well as the decrees and constitutions of the Council. In this way we will be true fathers of our people, not merely upholding an exterior claim to authority, but being the authors of true life - both sacramental and personal life - in all the people entrusted to us.