

MARY, MODEL AND MOTHER OF THE CHURCH
Sermon by Fr. J. Kentenich,
St. Michael's Catholic Church, Milwaukee, October 11, 1964

*In October 1964, Father Kentenich's sermons to the German-speaking Congregation at St. Michael's Parish in Milwaukee revolved around the Church. They were spoken against the background of the Second Vatican Council, now in its Third session. This sermon has become a classic summary of Fr. Kentenich's image of the Church – and an invaluable background for understanding his *Dilexit Ecclesiam*.*

Today we celebrate the feast of the Motherhood of our dear Blessed Mother. This reminds of us of the fact that the Blessed Mother is not only the mother of Jesus, the mother of God, but also our mother. Yes, more precisely said, she is at one and the same time the Mother and Model of the Church, the Church in her present form. This places a twofold petition upon our lips:

The first petition: Dear Blessed Mother, please take care that we receive a deeper understanding of your love for the Church and especially for the Church in her present form. And then:

The second petition: Enkindle our hearts, too -at least a little -with the same all-consuming love.

A. Mary and the Church are at the focus of our interest today

I want to emphasize that we are speaking here of the Church as we experience her today. We have reason enough to do so. Which of us having gone through life and having journeyed through different countries has not experienced a great many disappointments in the Church as we experience her today. Obviously this Church bears totally different features than she had during the time of our parents and grandparents. At that time we had learned from our parents and grandparents to love this Church with her former countenance. But today?

Still we must profess that we have reason enough to mention in the same breath two names, two great realities: *the Blessed Mother and the Church!* Both belong inseparably together. Both are still very strongly at the focal point of the discussion in the Church and world today. I say: both belong inseparably together just as a mother and child belong together; just as the original image (on the one hand), and the reflection and copy of this image (on the other) belong together. We have said it already in the beginning -and later on we would like to convince ourselves of this fact more and more -that the Blessed Mother is the Mother but also the Model of the Church. If she is the Mother of the Church then it is self-understood that the Church cannot be understood without the Blessed Mother. And if she is the Model of the Church then we know that she is the great original image according to which the Eternal Father God created his Church, has equipped the Church and leads, directs and guides the Church through the centuries. Therefore, both simply belong inseparably together: the Church and the Blessed Mother, the Blessed Mother and the Church.

Thus we can also understand when we say with full conviction that at present we are not only living in a Marian century but also in an ecclesiological century. What does that mean? We live in a century in which the Blessed Mother and the Church, the Catholic Church, stand very strongly at the focal

point of our common interest.

Thus you will also understand why both are being discussed today; not only the Church but also the Blessed Mother. Yes, here are two great figures which are controversial not only within but also outside of the Church.

I. The Church

Those of us who, without exception, have followed the happen- ings at the Council and what the Holy Father wrote in his first encyclical [*Ecclesiam Suam*] will have realized that today the Church is very much at the center of our interest.

a. The goal of the council

What does the Council want? It has a totally different purpose, a totally different meaning, a different task than the former councils. Here we are not concerned whatsoever with clarifying or condemning a heresy, a heresy of the mind or a heresy of life. We may rightfully and gratefully profess that even when we seem disappointed in the Church of today, she is filled with an extremely noble spirit. There is no real heresy within the Church that needs to be clarified. What, then does the Council want?

The late Holy Father spoke of it as *aggiornamento*. This means: The Church should peacefully look into the countenance of everyday life, into the development of today's life in this industrial age. The windows of the Church should be opened; everything, also the modern trends that came about in the last century or in the last centuries to which the Church closed herself -should now find entrance into the Church. The Church does not only want to be -if I want to use a scientific expression- a static block, a monolith. No, the Church should unfold her entire dynamic powers, her entire power of conquest, in this modern world, in this newly created world. She should unfold it until she again becomes the soul of the new culture, of the industrial culture, or, we may say, of the newest time.

And now we understand why we say that the Church stands today at the focal point of your interest. If I should express differently what I have just said, then I think I may and should say: The Church carries gold in her hands. However, during the last centuries she has preserved this gold and kept it for herself. Now what does she want to do? She wants to exchange this gold; she wants to put it into circulation; she wants to place the gold that she holds in her hands at the disposal of our world of today. Therefore she has to become open for the world and cannot wear blinders anymore. The air of the world should blow into the Church so that the Church can offer it her gold; then this world, plated with gold, will draw upon itself again the benevolence of the Eternal Father God.

Now we understand why we can say that: the Church stands at the foreground of our interest.

b. The first encyclical of the Holy Father

Secondly we want to emphasize: the encyclical of Pope Paul VI – I do not know whether you have read the first encyclical of the present Holy Father in office. What is the subject? We now have a

better understanding of what we mean when we say: This is the Church. The first word of the encyclical reads: *Ecclesiam Suam* – His Church. Usually the encyclicals begin with a certain code word, with a motto. *Ecclesiam Suam* – His Church, our Lord loves his Church. And this Church is now ready to begin a dialogue. It is not any longer a Church that hides in the background, a Church that is veiled and does not let people come too close to her. The Church today seeks to enter into dialogue, into discussion. This is the meaning of the encyclical. Maybe we will have the opportunity one day to read it. Yes, a discussion? Yes, what will this Church discuss and what does the Pope allow his Church to be confronted with?

-The dialogue of the Church with her own members

First of all -this is the first part of the encyclical -with her own members. The Church must once more become conscious of her original structure. She must distinguish the things that have evolved in the course of the centuries from her unchangeable essence. Then she will know what to set aside so she can clothe herself with a new garment, a garment that will be determined by the modern culture from which the Church, up to now, has hermetically closed herself off.

-The dialogue of the Church with other Christian communities

And then the second part of the encyclical motivates the Church to dialogue with the other Christian denominations. The sects, as we called them in former time, should now stand opposite each other and face each other; they should study what they could give to each other; and they should seek ways how they together can adapt themselves to the modern culture without, in some form or another, losing and denying their own essence.

-The dialogue of the Church with the world

Finally the third part: the dialogue with our world today. The Church should also confront herself with, the pagans, with Bolshevism and with everything that exists today in this world. We sense what is at stake here: Out of the tower -into the world! Away from the shore into the ocean! Naturally this is a very perilous enterprise! We can clearly sense that.

I believe that herein lies the main value of the council today. It does not consist so much in the fact that a change is made here and there -something new, for instance, in the liturgy. This may all be worthwhile. The principal concern is that the Church should be wide open, that the Church should have the courage -supported by the Holy Spirit -to confront herself with all modern trends, to be able to accept all the noble and precious values that modern time and development have brought about, and to baptize and integrate them.

We can truthfully say that the Church stands at the center, that the Church has to confront herself with our world today, with all the different denominations, and also with paganistic ones, with modern paganism.

2. The Church and the Blessed Mother

If it is true, as we mentioned before, that the Church and the Blessed Mother belong inseparably together, than it is self- understood that the Blessed Mother must also be drawn into this confrontation. It is indeed a fact- I assume that we glance here and there into the newspaper and that we listen to and watch TV -that the council is not really succeeding in explaining the image of Mary in the context of the image of the Church. Here the Church is not coming to a meeting of the minds. Last Sunday we considered the most central points on this.

Isn't it true: A child will resemble her mother! And since the Blessed Mother is, in her own way, the Mother of the Church, one can hardly come to terms with the Church without simultaneously coming to an understanding of the Mother of the Church. And since the Church is the reflection of the original image, then it must be deeply imprinted on us that the Eternal Father has created and adorned the Church according to the original image of his Mother. It is naturally true that there are many differences between the reflection and the original image, but, nevertheless, when the original image is doubted and drawn into the midst of the battle and, vice versa, when the reflection of the image is drawn into the battles the original image will share the same fate.

Herewith we have created a foundation for all our deliberations that we want to make in the course of the following Sundays. What is of special interest to us today? I have touched upon it already in the beginning of the sermon: the countenance of the Church today! Yes, she disappoints us. Therefore the concrete question that deeply penetrates into the depth of our own practical life: How is it with my love for this Church?

B. My Love for this Church

It is not a love for the Church of our grandparents, but for the Church of our time today, for the Church as she has been revealed to us now through the council and in literature.

I. A general answer

Naturally, I could first give a general answer that sounds a bit learned and yet is very understandable. My love for the Church can be measured by the degree of my love for the Blessed Mother. Do you understand that? Since the two are so intimately united with one another -just now we placed such expression pairs next to each other: Mother and child, original image and reflection of this image, Mother and Model of the Church -then it is clear that both also share the same fate not only objectively but also subjectively in our own life, love and thoughts. My love for the Blessed Mother can also essentially be used to measure my love for the Church and vice versa. One is free to measure like this. Still this may not resolve our difficulties in coming to terms with the image of the Church today.

2. A detailed answer

If we now want to go into more detail we need to divide up the whole issue into three parts. The larger question is: What does my love for the Church look like? I can distinguish:

a. What did my love for the Church look like in the past?

- b. What does it look like today?
- c. How should it look tomorrow and the day after tomorrow?

I believe that we must pose the questions and answer them at once. What did my love for the Church look like in the past? Once this love was warm. How is it today? It is very cool. How will it be tomorrow and the day after? It shall again become a firebrand of love.

- a. What did my love for the Church look like in the past?

Is it true? Was my love for the Church once warm?' I think I could say yes. But now I may critically add that my love was too narrow, too stubborn, and too rigid.

You may want to respond to my question: "What did my love look like," by saying this question is out of place! The Church that I have known from my childhood looks so different from the Church that I know now. Be that as it may, we want to remember that we once loved the Church, that we sincerely loved the Church of yesterday. Is that true? You may answer that for yourselves. We all know very well how our hearts once burned for the Church and especially for the Church because our hearts have burned for the Blessed Mother .

Now we could still go further and ask: What was the love of my parents and my grandparents like? From them we received this love; we inherited it; they shared it with us. And again here: For our parents and grandparents a warm love for the Blessed Mother was the norm for their warm love for the Church.

I believe I should not say more on this because all these thoughts are only the starting points for the deliberations to follow.

However, I should emphasize and explain a little more what I have added: This love was too narrow. What does that mean? Again I would like to use the scholarly expression that you often hear today: Within the Church I can distinguish between two perspectives the so-called static perspective and the dynamic one.

What is meant by the static perspective? This is the Church in her unshakeness. This is the Church in her glory .This is truly the Church who became for me a home, a nest, in which I feel sheltered. This is the glorious Church which has journeyed through the centuries and who radiates this glory again and again even today.

And when we listen to the well known songs that we sang in former times and which we still sing today: "Unwavering shall forever stand the covenant of my baptism; I want to listen to the Church". What does that mean? We sense that here we deal with something firm, something closed within itself. Firm, the Church is firmly closed, a building within itself that cannot be attacked from either side. "My baptismal covenant shall stand firm forever, I want to listen to the Church". Listen, to simply, blindly obey her teaching! Do we sense how static this is, how much unshakeness is here! Yes, we would almost like to say today that this is the unshakeness of a good sleep, the restfulness of possessing this image of the Church or understanding of the Church.

Moreover, we just heard the same thing expressed in the entrance song: "There stands a house in glory ." Here we have the glorious Church which has gone through the centuries, which has shown herself victorious again and again. "There stands a house in glory." Yes, what does this house do? "It looks upon the land." It's built from eternal stone, built by God's almighty hand. We again listen to this statement: "From eternal stone." Naturally we can interpret these words in different ways. "From eternal stone" -the stone can never be changed; it remains forever. "From eternal stone, built by God's almighty hand." What are we concerned with here? With a restful possession of a serene and calming jewel. "There stands a house in glory!" This is not a house where the weapons are collected. This is not a house that needs to become wide open. No, no! It is a house that I can enter in order to protect myself and to find shelter in the storms of this life today. Didn't all of this resound in our hearts at that time and doesn't it still resound today? And with this I have arrived at the second question:

b. What does my love for the Church look like today?

It has become cold. There are different reasons for it. I will quickly name some in order to dwell afterwards on what is really the deepest reason.

-Today we see too strongly the human element within the Church.

The human element has always been present within the Church. But today it is much more recognizable. There are perhaps different reasons for this. First of all, we have a much easier access to the means of communications. There are no secrets anymore today. For instance when somewhere a priest becomes drunk, this news becomes accessible everywhere the day after tomorrow, and everyone will know about it. Now you could draw up a list of sins of the clergy and nothing will remain hidden anymore.

Furthermore we remember: The human element within the Church! We have often times heard the expression: pluralistic social order. In former times the Church was an enclave, closed

off, a world by herself: one part was Catholic, one part Protestant, one paganistic. And today we live in the pluralistic society, everything flows into one another, everything is mixed up. What do we all hear at our places of work? All the garbage, all the junk that was produced somewhere, can be cheaply obtained at my workplace! But not only at the workplace of work! At once we sense that there is a new situation for the Church. We also sense: Whoever wants to be a Catholic today must be a Catholic to the core, must be interiorly mature and must be attached to the Church with his whole soul. He must defend the Church, especially with his own being. Thus we must profess: The human element within the Church today is visible everywhere.

And then secondly: Today we experience the humanity of the Church much stronger than ever before because we can obtain and hear and absorb all of this without great expense.

-The Church in the entire world is the object of hatred.

The Church is the object of enmity not only beyond the iron curtain but also everywhere I go. Just imagine

that I am sitting in a tavern. Even though I don't smoke, the smoke sticks to me. And we can now examine more thoroughly: Why is it that so many people today -also in our own circles -sooner or later fall victim to this indifference, yes even to a hatred for the Church and for God? This will not happen from today to tomorrow. Usually it develops like this: in the beginning I may become indifferent toward God and the Church; however, I still go along "as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be." I simply go along, but there is a great amount of indifference. The soul however, does not resound. At the same time I bury myself in the world that is so beautiful today, that values in a commercial way an endless variety of goods. As a result, I do

not have any time to immerse myself into the depths. My indifference toward God and the Church grew. Today I might go along with everything, tomorrow the bond is broken and the day after tomorrow -because I do not know and love the Church anymore, I howl with the wolves as they howl and yell.

For these reasons I have become cold toward the Church. But what is of even greater interest to us in this connection is the unfolding of the thought that I have just mentioned. Today we have a different image of the Church. What does this image of our Church today look like? It has changed and it must change.

-The changed image of the Church: a pilgrim, a creative, a moving, a sinful Church.

I believe that later on we will speak about John XXIII and point out his greatest act of government: He placed into the foreground the dynamism of the Church, the world-conquering urge of the Church. He opened windows and doors. He let the air stream in and stream out. Naturally we may not overlook that, humanly speaking, this is a very dangerous undertaking especially for those of us who are used to: "As it was in the beginning." Nothing should be changed within the Church! And how much has changed today! And this is exactly what we stumble over. What hasn't all been changed already! Just think of how Holy Communion is distributed today. What is all this? From childhood on we were used to a different way. Why all this newness? Then how should we go to confession -nothing seems to be written in stone anymore -why should everything become new again? Or I don't know what all else!

And we also know what all is said today about the interpretation of the Bible. Who still believes today? Maybe the Protestants were right all along. Today we seemingly run after the Protes-

tants and are not interested in how we did in former times. I remember that I recently received some news from Germany. There was a bible convention for educators. A teacher returned home and explained to the priest: "I cannot give any religion class anymore. Impossible, everything that I taught in former times is now wrong!" Today everything is new and tomorrow -it might seem- it could be women at the altar who say, "The Lord be with you". They may sit in the confessional and give the absolution. What all is in motion today! And here and there -yes, where was it: it must have been in Canada -a woman has already preached from the pulpit. Everything today is in turmoil. Who can still go along?

This is a fact and naturally nothing can be done about it. It is understandable that we, the older ones, simply say: We will not go along anymore. And when we even think of the intimacies of married life! For heaven's sake! What was condemned yesterday will surely be permitted tomorrow. Why should I

still believe, for what has been taught today, will be different tomorrow.

The results of this is the great and serious question: Yes, why is all of this happening? Where does it come from and what is it for?

Yes, where does it all come from? The Church today does not want to be looked upon anymore as an unshakable behemoth but she wants to be recognized in her dynamism. Today she is no longer the restful, sleeping Church, the Church who is in possession of the truth, withdrawn unto herself. It is the pilgrim Church, it is the creative Church, it is the moving Church. She wants to advance forward, exactly like a troop moves forward, like a machine moves forward into our world of today. She wants to inhale the new air that has been evolving in this world

for centuries, especially during the last century. John XXIII maintained that the Church had lost touch with modern culture. It was highest time to make up for it; otherwise tomorrow and the day after tomorrow -humanly speaking -the Church will only be petrified wood, only a reminder of olden times. What does the Church want, what does she say of herself? She is a sinful Church. We know that. It may sound very strange to us at times when the Pope publicly declares that we, the Church, we the Catholic Church, which has up to now always stood there as if she could not make any mistakes, have also sinned: We have also become guilty in causing the differences between us and the other denominations.

This is a new understanding of the Church. I may repeat that when we look at the Church in this way we will be frightened and exclaim: For heaven's sake! A leap into the darkness, a leap into all the newness that exists today! There John XXIII answers us: "I believe in the Holy Spirit." I believe that the Holy Spirit will help the Church so that she will maintain her essential image. The Church rests on one rock, on one firm foundation; the Church is a building. But at the same time she is a building that expands herself, a building that is perfected, a building that can be beautified, that even should and must be beautified. It is the Holy Spirit who will help the Church, the government of the Church and who will also help us so that everywhere we can make the right decisions and recognize the truth.

Again I must come to a close. Too bad! Because now we are prepared to understand better the plunge into the ambiguity of today. We want to take one thought home from the few thoughts I have said. We do not want to be so easily disturbed especially when we do not fully understand what is going on today in the house of God. We rather want to pray that the Spirit of God guides the Church.

Applied to ourselves: We pray that we may understand this and come to a more intimate union again with the Blessed Mother, for she can and will and must help us so that we can better understand her own reflection, the Church. We not only long to find a home in her, but also want to be ready to stand up for her and to sacrifice so that this Church will victoriously advance into modern culture, so that at the end of this time today, at the newest shore of our time the word, "One shepherd and one fold," can be more and more realized. Amen.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.