

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE ENCYCLICAL MOTHER OF THE REDEEMER



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Pope John Paul II, in timing the publication of his encyclical Mother of the Redeemer to coincide with the Marian Year, seems to have been motivated by two important considerations. First, the Pope has already completed three encyclicals dealing separately and individually with the Trinity: the Father (Rich in Mercy), the Son (Redeemer of the Human Race), and the Holy Spirit (Lord and Giver of Life). In accord with Catholic tradition, one would expect him now to turn his attention to the subject of Mary, Mother of God. The second reason this encyclical appears at this time stems from the Pope's acute sense of history. He has spoken often of the coming Year of Jubilee, which will be celebrated in the year 2000, and of the Marian Year as part of its preparation. Thus, an encyclical on Mary as part of the Marian Year 1988 observance would seem most appropriate at this time.

Of course, I shall not attempt here a word-by-word commentary, but merely outline some of the theological assumptions on which the encyclical is based, which might contribute to a better understanding of the encyclical and also foster the kind of Marian spirituality celebrated during the Marian Year itself.

I. History and Salvation History

History is the piecing together of events which take place in time. The writing of history relies on experience and reason. Salvation history refers to those actions produced by God in the midst of human history, such as creation, the events recorded in the Old Testament, the

teachings of Jesus Christ, His miracles and His death and resurrection. The experience of salvation and faith taken together are needed to write salvation history. The encyclical Mother of the Redeemer begins with a quote from Paul's Epistle to the Galatians: "When the time was fulfilled...." (Gal.4:4). This indicates that the whole encyclical will be written from the point of view of salvation history. For this reason the repeated mention of the year 2000 in the encyclical is not meant to focus our attention merely on the historical events which might take place then, but rather on an affirmation of the great changes in the salvific encounter between God and man which the year 2000 will occasion. One cannot deduce this from reason alone; such an affirmation comes from faith. Faith relies on the light of the Holy Spirit and the tradition of the Church to provide its own reasons.

II. The Jubilee Year in Salvation History

In the Old Testament, an act completed once and for all by God in salvation history can be re-experienced by God's people through the celebration of certain feasts. This is the principal meaning of "memorial" in the Bible. God makes use of the festival's commemoration of the original event to give once again to the commemorators the experience of salvation. In chapter 23 of the Book of Leviticus, we find listed a series of festivals during which the Israelites commemorated the saving events of their history. In addition to these, every fifty years the Israelites celebrated a Jubilee Year. This year was related to the Genesis account of the salvific act of creation and especially to the day of rest after God completed His work. During the Jubilee Year God once again distributed the favours of creation and rest (Leviticus, chapter 25). In the last days, as the Bible says, "a year of the Lord's favour will be proclaimed" (Isaiah 61:2).

According to church history, Pope Boniface VIII initiated a system of Jubilee years in the year 1300. The Jubilee, or Holy Year, was customarily held every 25 years, with additional Holy Years of Redemption taking place in 1933 and 1983. Based on a faith-consciousness, the purpose of these Holy Years was to re-affirm the salvific nature of the events of the incarnation of the Son of God or of the Saviour's death, and to profess that God's saving grace would be poured out on all humanity in a special way during this year of celebration.

Both the Jubilee Year of the Old Testament and subsequent Holy Years of church history are somewhat akin to our celebrations of gold and silver anniversaries. However, many theologians think that the Holy

Years with their consequent outpouring of grace have more basis in the faith-consciousness of the Church; the Church as spouse of Christ beseeches God the Father to send forth His graces so that human beings may become even more closely united to Jesus Christ. Because of Christ's promises, this kind of prayer has a definite objective value, and, therefore, in faith and trust the Church announces a Holy Year. At the same time one should not explain the grace of a Holy Year in a mechanical fashion. With faith, hope and charity, we must take positive steps to open our hearts to receive its graces. Therefore, a Holy Year is really different from an ordinary year. In the history of salvation, it is a year filled with graces derived from acts of communication between God and human beings.

III. The Marian Year of 1987 and the Jubilee Year of 2000

The Church celebrated the first Marian Year in 1954 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. This year marks the second time that a Marian year has taken place. Given the Blessed Mother's important role in the history of salvation, it would seem only proper that the Church establish a Holy Year to commemorate the saving events which took place in her person. However, the present Marian Year demonstrates even more clearly that it is Jesus Christ who is for Christians the centre of salvation. All other saving events have Jesus Christ as their final end, and they all originate from Him. We see this from the Holy Father's own words in the encyclical:

The circumstance which now moves me to take up this subject once more is the prospect of the year 2000, now drawing near, in which the Bimillennial Jubilee of the birth of Jesus Christ at the same time directs our gaze towards His Mother...Even though it is not possible to establish an exact date for Mary's birth, the church has constantly been aware that Mary appeared on the horizon of salvation before Christ...Her presence in the midst of Israel shone very clearly before the Eternal One, who had associated this hidden daughter of Zion with His plan of salvation for the whole of humanity. With good reason then, at the end of this millennium we Christians...feel the need to emphasize the unique presence of the Mother of Christ in history. (No. 3)

The Marian Year of 1987 then, is ordered towards the celebration of the Jubilee Year of 2000. The Marian Year is indeed, a Holy Year, and

during the Church's year-long celebration God the Father will once again bestow His saving graces on mankind, which were first bestowed on the Blessed Mother during her own life. Just as the selection of Mary was a preparatory step to the coming of Jesus Christ, likewise, the Marian Year becomes a preparation for the Jubilee Year of 2000 which commemorates the birth of Christ. We might therefore ask: What special graces will the Heavenly Father bestow on the Church during the Marian Year? And what relationship do these graces have with the Jubilee Year of 2000?

IV. Mother of the Redeemer

The encyclical Mother of the Redeemer is so rich in content and intricate in style that we must be content here to give only the briefest summary of three of its main themes.

First, Mary's role in the mystery of Christ: Mary, full of grace. All grace comes from the grace of Christ. We see that Mary's whole life was a preparation for the coming of Christ and His salvific mission. Thus the Pope's encyclical describes how Mary through the announcement of the Angel Gabriel, her visit to Elizabeth, the presentation of the Child Jesus in the Temple, and eventually, her presence at the foot of the Cross, participated in the saving mystery of Christ. She did so through her faith. Faith for Mary consisted in her complete obedience, and total acceptance of God's will, which allowed her to penetrate the darkness, in a movement towards union with God. The faith, which enabled her to participate in Christ's saving mystery, constituted Mary's faith-journey, i.e. her soul's salvation history.

Second, the Mother of God at the centre of the Pilgrim Church. Just as we find in the salvation history of the children of Israel the desert passage, so, too, the pilgrim Church passes through the desert. The Church as pilgrim in the midst of salvation history awaits the coming of Christ. At the beginning of the Church's pilgrimage, Mary was present, praying for the Holy Spirit. On its present pilgrimage the Church believes that following the steps of Jesus' Mother is making spiritual progress. As the Church proceeds on its journey towards the light, Mary is always present. Mary's Magnificat becomes the "Marching Hymn" of the Church in pilgrimage.

Third, Mary as Mediatrix. What does Mary mean for the Church? Who is she? Mary is the mediatrix between God and humanity. However, Mary's mediating role is a sharing in the one mediating role of Christ. It definitely does not constitute a diminishment of the mediatorship of

Christ the Redeemer. Concretely, Mary's mediating role is realized in her motherhood and as a model for others. In salvation history Mary helped and cared for the Church. Now in glory, in her role as mother, she continues to protect, guide and assist the Church. She is the Mother of the Church. However, she is also the Church's model. When the Church imitates Mary, it becomes the spouse of Christ and the Mother of Believers.

Although the Mariology of the encyclical reflects the theological style of Pope John Paul II, it retains the content of the basic Mariology as found in the 8th chapter of Vatican Council II's Dogmatic Constitution On the Church. It makes use of biblical references to emphasize Mary's role as mother and model; however, at the same time it inserts these into a theological interpretation of the course of human history as this history advances towards the year 2000.

V. The Blessed Mother and the Pilgrim Church as it advances towards the year 2000

The Pilgrim Church is currently preparing itself for the celebration of the year 2000. As the Church celebrates a Holy Year in honor of Mary, it entreats God the Father to make use of the saving events which He has effected in Mary's person to influence its own faith-life. The Church prays to the Father that, through Mary's presence in its pilgrimage, its faith can be deepened and integrated. Such a faith will enable the Church, situated in history, to re-experience the saving grace of Christ. And then the Church will be like Mary, living in the mystery of Christ. The Church will thus have a part in the mystery of Christ's incarnation, His propagation of the Gospel, His suffering, death and resurrection, and His ascension into heaven. In this Marian Year, the Church depends on Mary's motherly love to lead it on its faith-journey towards the year 2000. On the other hand, the Church, in imitation of Mary, will show a mother's concern for all peoples, and like a true spouse of Christ, will give itself in complete service to Him.

During the 1987 Marian Year, the Church will in a special way move more closely to the Blessed Mother and share more deeply in the mystery of Christ together with her. The Marian Year is an advent period to be used by the Church to prepare itself for the Jubilee Year of 2000, when the Church will solemnly celebrate the incarnation of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and, once more, experience in full the great graces-flowing from His incarnation.