



# The Holy See

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POPE JOHN PAUL II

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday, 12 November 1997*

***Separated brethren also honour Mary***

1. After explaining the relationship between Mary and the Church, the Second Vatican Council rejoices in observing that the Blessed Virgin is also honoured by Christians who do not belong to the Catholic community: "It gives great joy and comfort to this sacred Synod that among the separated brethren too there are those who give due honour to the Mother of our Lord and Saviour ... " (*Lumen gentium*, n. 69; cf. *Redemptoris Mater*, nn. 29-34). In view of this fact, we can say that Mary's universal motherhood, even if it makes the divisions among Christians seem all the sadder, represents a great sign of hope for the ecumenical journey.

Many Protestant communities, because of a particular conception of grace and ecclesiology, are opposed to Marian doctrine and devotion, maintaining that Mary's co-operation in the work of salvation prejudices Christ's unique mediation. In this view, devotion to Mary would compete in a way with the honour owed the Son.

2. In recent years, however, further study of the thought of the first Reformers has shed light on positions more open to Catholic doctrine. Luther's writings, for example, show love and veneration for Mary, extolled as a model of every virtue: he upholds the sublime holiness of the Mother of God and at times affirms the privilege of the Immaculate Conception, sharing with other Reformers belief in Mary's perpetual virginity.

The study of Luther and Calvin's thought, as well as the analysis of some texts of Evangelical Christians, have contributed to a renewed attention by some Protestants and Anglicans to various themes of Mariological doctrine.

Some have even arrived at positions very close to those of Catholics regarding the fundamental points of Marian doctrine, such as her divine motherhood, virginity, holiness and spiritual motherhood.

The concern for stressing the presence of women in the Church encourages the effort to recognize Mary's role in salvation history.

All these facts are so many reasons to have hope for the ecumenical journey. Catholics have a deep desire to be able to share with all their brothers and sisters in Christ the joy that comes from Mary's presence in life according to the Spirit.

3. Among the brethren who "give due honour to the Mother of our Lord and Saviour", the Council mentions Eastern Christians, "who with devout mind and fervent impulse give honour to the Mother of God, Ever-Virgin" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 69).

As we can see from their many expressions of devotion, veneration for Mary represents a significant element of communion between Catholics and Orthodox.

However, there remain some disagreements regarding the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, even if these truths were first expounded by certain Eastern theologians — one need only recall great writers like Gregory Palamas (†1359), Nicholas Cabasilas († after 1369) and George Scholarios († after 1472).

These disagreements, however, are perhaps more a question of formulation than of content and must never make us forget our common belief in Mary's divine motherhood, her perpetual virginity, her perfect holiness and her maternal intercession with her Son. As the Second Vatican Council recalled, this "fervent impulse" and "devout mind" unite Catholics and Orthodox in devotion to the Mother of God.

4. At the end of *Lumen gentium* the Council invites us to entrust the unity of Christians to Mary: "The entire body of the faithful pours forth urgent supplications to the Mother of God and of men that she, who aided the beginnings of the Church by her prayers, may now, exalted as she is above all the angels and saints, intercede before her Son in the fellowship of all the saints" (ibid.).

Just as Mary's presence in the early community fostered oneness of heart, which prayer strengthened and made visible (cf. Acts 1:14), so the most intense communion with her whom Augustine called the "Mother of unity" (*Sermo* 192, 2; *PL* 38, 1013) will be able to bring Christians to the point of enjoying the long-awaited gift of ecumenical unity.

We ceaselessly pray to the Blessed Virgin so that, just as at the beginning she supported the journey of the Christian community's oneness in prayer and the proclamation of the Gospel, so

today she may obtain through her intercession reconciliation and full communion among all believers in Christ.

Mother of men, Mary knows well the needs and aspirations of humanity. The Council particularly asks her to intercede so that "all families of people, whether they are honoured with the title of Christian or whether they still do not know the Saviour, may be happily gathered together in peace and harmony into one People of God, for the glory of the Most Holy and Undivided Trinity" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 69).

The peace, harmony and unity for which the Church and humanity hope still seem far away. Nevertheless, they are a gift of the Spirit to be constantly sought, as we learn from Mary and trust in her intercession.

5. With this petition Christians share the expectation of her who, filled with the virtue of hope, sustains the Church on her journey to the future with God.

Having personally achieved happiness because she "believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Lk 1:45), the Blessed Virgin accompanies believers —and the whole Church — so that in the world, amid the joys and sufferings of this life, they may be true prophets of the hope that never disappoints.

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

I greet all the English-speaking pilgrims, especially those from England, Canada and the United States, and invoke upon all of you peace and joy in our Lord Jesus Christ.

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