

PROCLAIMING THE GOODNESS OF THE LORD

A Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Western Montana
Advent 1994

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This is the year of the family. This Advent and Christmas bring before our hearts the image of the Holy Family and the motherhood of Mary.

In the gospel reading for the Fourth Sunday of Advent this year, we read about Mary's visit to Elizabeth. After Elizabeth's greeting, "Blessed are you among women" (Lk 1:42), Mary utters those powerful words of faith: "My soul proclaims the goodness of the Lord" (Lk 1:46).

In the introductory paragraphs of his encyclical letter *Redemptoris Mater*, Pope John Paul II points out that our annual Advent celebration acknowledges that "Mary appeared on the horizon of salvation history before Christ. It is a fact that when 'the fullness of time' was definitively drawing near — the saving advent of Emmanuel — she who was from eternity destined to be his mother already existed on earth" (No. 3).

It is with these thoughts in mind that I write my first pastoral letter to the people of God in western Montana during my first Advent among you. And it is appropriate that this Advent pastoral letter focus our attention on Mary of Nazareth, Mary the mother of God.

Already in my days among you, I know of many whose authentic devotion to Mary is an inspiration of faith, drawing all of us closer to Christ, our redeemer. At the same time I am aware that there are those whose devotion to Mary is less than authentic and who thereby may distract themselves and others from a deeper relationship with Christ the redeemer.

In this pastoral letter I want to lift up the image of Mary that we honor in the church and suggest ways we can enrich our faith life by true devotion to her.

We will look briefly at Mary of Nazareth in scripture, the Second Vatican Council, the writings of contemporary popes, and the liturgical practices of the church. We will present devotion to Mary in the authentic form consistently proclaimed by the church. Finally, we will suggest ways by which our devotion to her can be enriched.

May this letter inspire our faith journey, and lead us to a more profound celebration of the Eucharist, the **sign of faith**, the **bread of life**. It is only when we are drawn inseparably to Christ our Redeemer whom we celebrate in that Eucharist that our devotion authentically reflects the reality of Mary, the mother of God. In these days we prepare for the Incarnation, the Word made flesh, accomplished in time because Mary said "yes" to God. Our Christmas joy depends on our Advent guide — Mary of Nazareth, who leads us without hesitation to Jesus, our life and our salvation.

Scripture and Councils

"I am the handmaid of the Lord," said Mary, "let what you have said be done to me" (Lk 1:38). With these words, Mary of Nazareth accepted the call to be the mother of Jesus; with these words she accepted a special place and role in the lives of the people of God.

Two hundred bishops gathered in 431 at the Council of Ephesus to proclaim Mary as *Theotokos*, the bearer of God, the mother of God. Mary gave birth to her son, Jesus, the son of God. Mary bore the wonder of God's presence in the world, of "letting go" of her son that he might carry out his messianic mission to the world, of watching her son be crucified and die and overcome the sting of death, so that all might have eternal life. She welcomed the Spirit with the disciples in the upper room on Pentecost.

Mary of Nazareth, *Theotokos*, is the ultimate lover. She decided to love enough to be the Mother of God, a love deeply rooted in her faith. Through the power of the Holy Spirit she emptied herself of all that might stand in the way. She loved so much she could do nothing but let go, as she surrendered Jesus to his death on the Cross. She loved so much she could have been no other place than in the upper room with the disciples on Pentecost.

St. Irenaeus and other fathers of the church see Mary as one who freely cooperated in the work of our salvation through her faith and her obedience to the will of God. Mary, "being obedient, became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race" (St. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, III, 22, 4).

In light of the constant teaching of the church, it was no accident that Pope John XXIII chose the feast of Mary the Mother of God (then celebrated on Oct. 11; now on Jan. 1) as the day to begin the Second Vatican Council. On the evening prior, 300,000 people gathered in St. Peter's Square to pray with Mary for blessings on the council. As she had at Ephesus more than 1,500 years earlier, Mary of Nazareth, mother of God, once again watched over a turning point in the history of the church.

The bishops at the Second Vatican Council chose to include their primary instruction about Mary in the eighth chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution on the church, *Lumen Gentium*. Because Mary always is connected intimately with the church, the council fathers deliberately chose not to issue a separate document on the role of Mary, but rather to include Mary within their teaching about the church itself.

In *Lumen Gentium* we are reminded that Mary "conceived, brought forth, and nourished Christ, . . . presented him to the Father in the temple, shared her son's sufferings as he died on the cross. Thus, in a wholly singular way she cooperated by her obedience,

faith, hope and burning charity in the work of the Savior” (LG No. 61). The council reminds us that no creature can be equal to the Lord Jesus Christ and so the church “does not hesitate to profess this subordinate role of Mary” in such a way that the faithful are encouraged by her maternal help to be more closely aligned with Christ, the mediator and redeemer (LG No. 62).

But while in the most Blessed Virgin the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she exists without spot or wrinkle (cf. Eph 5:27), the faithful still strive to conquer sin and increase in holiness. And so they turn their eyes to Mary who shines forth to the whole community of the elect as the model of virtues. Devoutly meditating on her and contemplating her in the light of the Word made man, the Church reverently penetrates more deeply into the great mystery of the Incarnation and becomes more and more like her spouse. Having entered deeply into the history of salvation, Mary, in a way, unites in her person and re-echoes the most important doctrines of the faith: and when she is the subject of preaching and worship she prompts the faithful to come to her Son, to his sacrifice and to the love of the Father (LG No. 65).

Clearly, as the church has taught and understood throughout the ages, Mary brings the people of God to the Christ and the Eucharist and thus to the Father. Any preaching about Mary is to emphasize this point. Any authentic worship is Eucharist-centered: It is the life and death and resurrection of the Christ which we celebrate. It is in the church and according to the guidelines of the church that we worship; for the church was given the authority by the Lord to form and direct our worship, always to the greater honor and glory of God.

Lumen Gentium encourages us “to foster the cultus — especially the liturgical cultus — of the Blessed Virgin” (LG No. 67). The Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, explains the cultus of the Blessed Virgin Mary in these words: “In celebrating the annual cycle of Christ’s mysteries, the Church honors with special love Mary, the Mother of God, who is joined by an inseparable bond to the saving work of her Son. In her the Church holds up and admires the most excellent effect of the redemption and joyfully contemplates, as in a flawless image, that which the Church itself desires and hopes wholly to be” (SC No. 103).

Popes Paul VI and John Paul II

In 1974, Pope Paul VI wrote the apostolic exhortation *Marialis Cultus*, (“Mary: Mirror of our Expectations”). Authentic devotion to Mary is based on the scriptures, “the wonderful presentation of God’s plan for our salvation.” Our prayers and chants should “draw their inspiration and their wording from the Bible, and above all that devotion to the Virgin should be imbued with the great themes of the Christian message” so that the people of God will “be enlightened by the divine word, and be inspired to live their lives in accordance with the precepts of incarnate wisdom” (No. 30).

The pope reminds us that pastors must exercise pastoral sensitivity and perseverance, and the faithful “must show a willingness to accept guidelines and ideas drawn from the true nature of Christian worship; this sometimes makes it necessary to change long-standing customs wherein the real nature of this Christian worship has become somewhat obscured.” Two attitudes are to be avoided: ignoring appropriate devotions of piety, and mixing practices of piety with liturgical acts in such a way that the eucharistic sacrifice becomes the occasion for devotional practices rather than the culmination of the coming together of the Christian community (No. 31).

Pope Paul VI notes that Mary of Nazareth is an example to be imitated because of “the way in which, in her own particular life, she fully and responsibly accepted the will of God (cf. Lk 1:38), because she heard the word of God and acted on it and because charity and a spirit of service were the driving force of her actions” (No. 35). Secondly, our understanding of Mary is to come from the gospel, not from the images of popular or contemporaneous writing. Often these popular images “are not connected with the gospel image of Mary nor with the doctrinal data which have been made explicit through a slow and conscientious process of drawing from revelation.” Marian devotion is not bound to any culture or epoch or particular anthropological ideas, but is constantly renewed in every age (No. 36).

Pope Paul reminds us that the Second Vatican Council denounced the type of exaggeration which falsifies doctrine and the smallmindedness which obscures the mission of Mary. He also points out some devotional deviations: “vain credulity, which substitutes reliance on merely external practices for serious commitment;” and “sterile and ephemeral sentimentality, so alien to the spirit of the gospel that demands persevering and practical action.”

Such practices

are not in harmony with the Catholic faith and therefore they must have no place in Catholic worship. Careful defense against these errors and deviations will render devotion to the Blessed Virgin more vigorous and more authentic. It will make this devotion solidly based, with the consequence that study of the sources of revelation and attention to the documents of the magisterium will prevail over the exaggerated search for novelties or extraordinary phenomena (No. 38).

Finally, insofar as it may be necessary we would like to repeat that the ultimate purpose of devotion to the Blessed Virgin is to glorify God and to lead Christians to commit themselves to a life which is in absolute conformity with his will. When the children of the Church united their voices with the voice of the unknown woman in the gospel and glorify the mother of Jesus by saying to him: “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that you sucked” (Lk 11:27), they will be led to ponder the divine Master’s serious reply: “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” (Lk 11:28). (No. 39).

In 1987, Pope John Paul II wrote the encyclical letter *Redemptoris Mater*, *The Mother of the Redeemer*. Pope John Paul reflects at length on Mary in the mystery of Christ, on the mother of God at the center of the pilgrim church, and conducts what he calls a “maternal meditation.” The pope utilizes the wedding feast at Cana (Jn 2:1-10) to help us understand how Mary leads us to Jesus. Even though Jesus protests that “my hour has not yet come,” Mary’s response, “do whatever he tells you,” presents Mary “as the spokeswoman of her son’s will, pointing out those things which must be done so that the salvific power of the Messiah may be manifested. . . . At Cana Mary appears as believing in Jesus. Her faith evokes his first ‘sign’ and helps to kindle the faith of the disciples” (No. 21). After reviewing Mary’s presence in the life-events of her son, especially standing at the foot of the cross, Pope John Paul concludes that “she who is present in the mystery of Christ as mother becomes — by the will of the Son and the power of the Holy Spirit — present in the mystery of the Church” (No. 24).

“It is precisely in this ecclesial journey or pilgrimage through space and time [the journey of the pilgrim Church], and even more through the history of souls, that Mary is present as the one who is ‘blessed because she believed,’ as the one who advanced on the pilgrimage of faith, sharing unlike any other creature in the mystery of Christ” (No. 25). The pilgrim church begins its journey at Pentecost when the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit. For Mary, who was present with the disciples for that Pentecost, the journey began when she was filled with the Spirit when she agreed to be the Mother of the Lord (No. 26).

The Magnificat proclaims the mission of the church to preach the good news to the poor. The God of the covenant is the God who

“has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly, . . . filled the hungry with good things, sent the rich away empty, . . . scattered the proud-hearted . . . and his mercy is from age to age on those who fear him.” Mary is deeply imbued with the spirit of the “poor of Yahweh,” who in the prayer of the Psalms awaited from God their salvation, placing all their trust in him (cf. Pss. 25; 31; 35; 55). Mary truly proclaims the coming of the “Messiah of the poor” (cf. Is 11:4; 61:1). Drawing from Mary’s heart, from the depth of her faith expressed in the words of the Magnificat, the Church renews ever more effectively in herself the awareness that the truth about God who is the source of every gift cannot be separated from the manifestation of his love of preference for the poor and humble, that love which, celebrated in the Magnificat, is later expressed in the words and works of Jesus (No. 37).

It is clear, then, that authentic devotion to Mary leads one without hesitation to the worship of the church, especially the Eucharist. It is clear that authentic devotion to Mary leads one inescapably to service to the poor. It is clear that authentic devotion to Mary leads one to accept humbly and joyfully the teachings of the church made known in councils and through the teaching office of pope and bishops.

Or to put this in another perspective, in view of the fact that Mary is so intimately connected with the church, she is subject to scripture, to tradition, and to the magisterium. Being without sin, she can never act contrary to what is revealed in scripture, to what is included in the tradition of the church, to what is taught by the magisterium (the pope and bishops). Since Mary, the mother of God, is subject to the church in this way, all the more are each of us subject to scripture and tradition and the magisterium.

Mary and the Church at Prayer

Throughout the ages the church has fostered correct devotion to Mary, the mother of God. This becomes most clear in the public celebrations of the church — especially the eucharistic sacrifice and the Liturgy of Hours. It is here, in its public prayer, that devotion to Mary is formed and celebrated. It is in its public prayer that the mystery of the church-brought-to-fulfillment is celebrated in Mary.

Clearly the focus of liturgy is to celebrate the work of salvation, which is carried on through the ages, and which is accomplished by God the Father through Christ and in the Holy Spirit. This salvation was fully revealed in Jesus Christ, who took on our human nature in the womb of the Virgin Mary. This salvation comes to pass through the proclamation of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments as they occur in every age. This salvation reaches its fulfillment in the second coming of Christ.

The introduction to the *Collection of Masses in Honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary* reminds us that “when the Church celebrates the sacred mysteries, it celebrates the entire, integral work of salvation” in order to bring about the salvation of the faithful in a particular age. “Mary, who by the plan of God for the sake of Christ and the Church ‘was intimately involved in the history of salvation,’ was actively present in various wonderful ways in the mysteries of Christ’s life” (No. 5).

The introduction also reminds us that:

Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary have their meaning and purpose from her close participation in the history of salvation. Therefore when the Church commemorates the role of the Mother of the Lord in the work of redemption or honors her privileges, it is above all celebrating the events of salvation in which, by God’s salvific plan, the Blessed Virgin was involved in view of the mystery of Christ (No. 6).

In the liturgy, therefore, the Church invites the faithful to imitate the Blessed Virgin, above all for the faith and obedience with which she lovingly embraced the divine plan of salvation (No. 16).

In the celebration of Masses of the Blessed Virgin priests and all others who have pastoral responsibilities are to strive above all to teach the faithful that the Eucharistic sacrifice is the memorial of the death and resurrection of Christ and to move them to take part in it actively and fully (No. 18).

The liturgy shows clearly that our Masses in honor of the Blessed Virgin are a celebration of the events of our salvation in which we are invited to imitate the faith and obedience of Mary of Nazareth. In this way, it is clear that the eucharistic sacrifice is the center of the faith-life of the holy people of God. Since this is true for the Mass, certainly it must be true for all our devotional practices.

What is the example of Mary? It is an example which urges each of us and all of us to become like Mary so that we may be fashioned into the image and likeness of her son, Jesus, the Christ.

Her example also prompts the faithful to celebrate the mysteries of Christ with that same spirit of reverent devotion with which she took part in the birth of her Son, in his epiphanies, and in his death and resurrection. In particular, Mary's example urged the faithful: to treasure the word of God in their hearts and dwell upon it assiduously; to praise God exultantly and thank him joyously; to serve God and neighbor faithfully and offer themselves generously; to pray with perseverance and make their petitions with confidence; to act in all things with mercy and humility; to cherish the law of God and embrace it with love; to love God in everything and above everything else; to be ready to meet Christ when he comes (No. 17).

The path is clear: It leads inescapably to Christ the Lord, to the kingdom of God. The journey, inspired by the Mary of Nazareth, involves hearing the word of God, thanking and praising God, serving God through serving others, praying persistently and confidently, acting mercifully and humbly, cherishing and embracing the law of God, loving God above all things, and being ready to meet our God when He comes again.

Devotion to Mary in the Context of Visions

Today we are in danger of losing the true perspective on the role of Mary in our faith life. Each day we pick up the paper to read about another apparition, to another person and in yet another place. This has spawned the frenzy to seek after the bizarre, the strange, the unusual, consequently to drain from the life of the Church the energy that should be expended to bring others to Christ and to share His love by our service for his kingdom.

The church is, necessarily, very cautious about these claims. A false claim brings only turmoil to the people of God. What can also happen is a portrayal of Mary that does not reflect our scriptural heritage or tradition.

In some instances, for example, Mary is seen as sad, despondent, crying, angry, alienated from God's people; not the mother of the church who should appear resplendent and translucent to the power of the resurrection — one filled with joy and a sign of the hope that is the fruit of the resurrection. This leads to devotions where Mary is portrayed as one who saves us from Jesus — the judge, often portrayed as vindictive and angry, even sadistic. The power and beauty of Christmas and the victorious resurrected life of the Savior are lost, and God's redemptive love is minimized.

Some seem to see in these visions not the power of that redemptive love, but the charisma and attraction of the visionary, who then becomes a kind of Christian guru. This attraction to visionaries makes their followers vulnerable to every word spoken, and willing to believe and practice whatever they are told even if it is not focused in the life of the church. They seem far afield from the prophetic visions recorded in the scriptures that call us to peace and calm in the joy of the resurrection.

All too often the faithful are led on pilgrimages to the four corners of the world where some new sighting is claimed. Their conduct is not far removed from those who chase UFOs, looking for secrets from some distant planet. How much they have distanced themselves from Christ, who reminds us that "the kingdom of God is within you."

Some portray visions as signs of impending doom, the end-time filled with fire and destruction, the end of the millennium. They forget the words of Christ who cautioned us not to live in fear: "But of that day and hour no one knows ..." (Mk 13:32).

Some do damage to their eyes gazing into the sun. Others rupture the beauty of family life by deserting their families to pursue visions that portend some secret truth not revealed in scripture.

Some see visions as a way of avoiding commitment to service. They do not find time to expend their energy to reach out to the poor, the needy, the sick, the lonely, the outcast. The challenge of Christ that "He has come among us as one who serves," finds little space to bear fruit if we are off chasing visions.

On the other hand, authentic devotion to Mary leads us to center our very being in the Eucharist, the sign of faith and the bread of life. Authentic devotion calls us to a profound reflection on the scriptures, to discover the rich tradition of the church, and to follow the magisterial teaching of our church, as it comes to us from councils, popes and bishops. Anything less would be contrary to Mary's very being — which magnifies the Lord.

Authentic Devotions

In the midst of such multiple visions — as well as another disturbing tendency among some to minimize or even disregard Marian devotion entirely — what are we to do? How are we to recognize true and genuine devotion to Mary?

I suggest we return to the advice Mary herself gave to us: "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5). This means to follow the authentic prayer of the church and with Mary to gather with the disciples as we open our lives to the outpouring of God's spirit.

Let me suggest some preeminent ways of praying which we have in our Roman Catholic faith tradition. In them we can find all the depth of feeling and understanding that will lead to authentic devotion for Mary, the Mother of the Lord.

(1) **Eucharist.** Each time we gather as a community to celebrate Mass, we are proclaiming the death and resurrection of the Lord. Like Mary, we acknowledge that "he who is mighty has done great things for me" (Lk 1:49). The Mass is not a celebration to rush through so that we can get to some other private devotions. It is the preeminent "devotion" of the church. It is our sign of faith, our

bread of life. It proclaims that we are nourished each day with the presence and power of God's redeeming love in Christ. If, God forbid, we could not say another prayer or take part in another devotion, there would be nothing lacking in our faith life; for each Eucharist celebrates the totality of our faith from the first *fiat* of Mary to the empty tomb. Each Mass means we come to celebrate with joy and give ourselves fully to the action of the church gathered in prayer. It is not a time for private devotions. It is only thus that we can "lift up our hearts" and proclaim "blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

(2) **Prayer of the Church (the Divine Office).** A second important way to find true devotion to Mary is to pray with the church the beautiful prayer we call the Divine Office. It offers us a wide variety of reflections and prayers following the cycle of Christ's life. All too often we feel that this is a prayer for priests, or only to be prayed in monasteries. Quite the contrary, it is the prayer for each member of the church. What a treasure of devotion lies hidden when we turn elsewhere to nourish our faith life. Each day is divided into times of special prayer so that at any moment we can find a prayer to heighten our sharing with Mary in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

(3) **The Angelus.** This prayer or devotion grew out of a desire to sanctify the waking hours of each day. At 6 a.m., noon and 6 p.m. in the past, the church bells rang to call us to prayer. In this prayer we recall the role of Mary in the life of Jesus Christ. Although it is not possible in many areas to ring church bells at these times, it is possible to remind ourselves to sanctify everything we do. Our work, our efforts, our love and concern for others, our forgiveness, all become part of the prayer we offer to the Lord. They become our response to a God who calls us to respect life and the dignity of every human person. We honor Mary by this devotion because we share in her response to the call of the Lord.

(4) **The Rosary.** One of the prayers that has had a special place in the devotional life of the church is the rosary. Tracing its roots to the 12th century, it offered the unlettered faithful a part of the church's devotional life. By the 15th century the rosary began to be used universally in the church. The "mysteries" of the rosary afford opportunities to reflect on the events of our salvation. They highlight the role of Mary in the important work of our savior, Jesus Christ.

These are some of the ways we can nourish true devotion to Mary. There are many other private devotions, but in them we must always see the call to be personally involved in the work of our redemption. They are prayers that remind us that faith is not bent in on itself but opens our vision to the work of loving care for others. They are also an important part of the process of evangelization because they remind us that our lives, like Mary, "proclaim the goodness of the Lord."

Conclusion

Through the intercession of Mary of Nazareth, may our prayer be: "let it be done to me according to God's word."

Mary's special presence is to the poor. Through the intercession of Mary of Nazareth, may our prayer be: "In the way I live my life, may it be known that the Lord has lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things."

There is no better way to bring this Advent reflection on Mary to a close than to join our prayer to hers in proclaiming the goodness of the Lord:

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked on his servant in her lowliness.
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name:
And his mercy is from age to age
on those who fear him.
He has shown strength with his arm,
he has scattered the proud-hearted,
he has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his posterity forever. (Lk 1:46-55)*

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