



The Holy See

SPECIAL ASSEMBLY FOR THE MIDDLE EAST OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS

MEDITATION OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI ***DURING THE FIRST GENERAL CONGREGATION***

Synod Hall

Monday, 11 October 2010

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On 11 October 1962, 48 years ago, Pope John XXIII inaugurated Vatican Council II. At the time, on 11 October, the feast day of the Divine Motherhood of Mary was celebrated and, with this gesture, with this date, Pope John wished to entrust the whole Council into the motherly hands and maternal heart of Our Lady. We too begin on 11 October. We too wish to entrust this Synod, with all its problems, with all its challenges, with all its hopes, to the maternal heart of the Our Lady, the Mother of God.

Pius XI, introduced this feast day in 1931, 1,500 years after the Council of Ephesus, which had legitimated, for Mary, the title of *Theotókos, Dei Genitrix*. With this great word *Dei Genitrix, Theotókos*, the Council of Ephesus had summarized the entire doctrine of Christ, of Mary, the whole of the doctrine of redemption. So it would be worthwhile to reflect briefly, for a moment, on what was said during the Council of Ephesus, on what this day means.

In reality, *Theotókos* is a courageous title. A woman is the Mother of God. One could say: how is this possible? God is eternal, he is the Creator. We are creatures, we are in time: how could a human being be the Mother of God, of the Eternal One, since we are all in time, we are all creatures? Therefore one can understand that there was some strong opposition, in part, to this term. The Nestorians used to say: one can speak about *Christotókos*, yes, but *Theotókos* no: *Theós*, God, is beyond, above the events of history. But the Council decided this, and thus

enlightened the adventure of God, the greatness of what he has done for us. God did not remain in Himself: he came out of himself, He united himself so closely, so radically to this man, Jesus, that this man Jesus is God, and if we speak about Him, we can also speak always about God. Not only was a man born who had something to do with God, but in Him was born God on earth. God came from himself. But we could also say the opposite: God drew us to Himself, so that we are no longer outside of God, but we are within the intimate, the intimacy of God Himself.

Aristotelian philosophy, as we well know, tells us that between God and man there is only a non-reciprocal relationship. Man refers to God, but God, the Eternal, is in Himself, He does not change: He cannot have this relationship today and another relationship tomorrow. He is within Himself, He does not have *ad extra* relations. It is a very logical term, but it is also a word that makes us despair: so God himself has no relationship with me. With the Incarnation, with the event of the *Theotókos*, this radically changed, because God drew us into Himself and God in Himself is the relationship and allows us to participate in His interior relationship. Thus we are in His being Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we are within His being in relationship, we are in relationship with Him and He truly created a relationship with us. At that moment, God wished to be born from woman and to remain Himself always: this is the great event. And thus we can understand the depth of the act of Pope John, who entrusted the Council, the Synodal Assembly to the central mystery, to the Mother of God who is drawn by the Lord into Himself, and thus all of us with Her.

The Council began with the icon of the *Theotókos*. Upon its closure, Pope Paul VI recognized Our Lady with the title of Mater Ecclesiae. And these two icons, which begin and end the Council, are intrinsically linked, and are, in the end, a single icon because Christ was not born like any other individual. He was born to create a body for Himself: He was born as John says in Chapter 12 of his Gospel to attract all to Him and in Him. He was born as it says in the Letters to the Colossians and to the Ephesians to deliver the whole world. He was born as the firstborn of many brothers. He was born to unite the cosmos in Him, so that He is the Head of a great Body. Where Christ is born, the movement of recapitulation begins, the moment of the calling begins, of construction of his Body, of the Holy Church. The Mother of *Theós*, the Mother of God, is the Mother of the Church, because she is the Mother of the One who came to unite all in His resurrected Body.

St Luke leads us to understand this in the parallel between the first chapter of his book and the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, which repeat the same mystery on two different levels. In the first chapter of the Gospel the Holy Spirit comes upon Mary and thus she gives birth, giving us the Son of God. In the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, Mary is in the midst of Jesus' disciples who are praying together, pleading with the cloud of the Holy Spirit. And thus from the believing Church, with Mary at its heart, is born the Church, the Body of Christ. This dual birth is the only birth of the *Christus totus*, of the Christ who embraces the world and all of us.

Birth in Bethlehem, birth of the Upper Room. Birth of the Infant Jesus, birth of the Body of Christ, of the Church. These are two events or the one event. But between the two lie truly the Cross and

the Resurrection. And only through the Cross is the way towards the totality of Christ, towards His resurrected Body, towards the universalization of His being in the unity of the Church. And thus, bearing in mind that only from a grain of wheat fallen into the earth can a great harvest be reaped, from the Lord pierced on the Cross comes the universality of His disciples gathered in this His Body, dead and risen.

Keeping this connection between *Theotókos* and *Mater Ecclesiae* in mind, we turn our attention to the last book of the Holy Scripture, Revelation, where, in chapter 12, we can find this synthesis. The woman clothed with the sun, with 12 stars on her head and the moon at her feet, gives birth. And she gives birth with a cry of pain. She gives birth with great suffering. Here the Marian mystery is the mystery of Bethlehem extended to the cosmic mystery. Christ is always reborn in every generation and thus he assumes the gathering of humanity within Himself. And this cosmic birth is achieved in the cry of the Cross, in the suffering of the Passion. And the blood of the martyrs belongs to this cry of the Cross.

So, at this moment, we can look at the second Psalm of this Midday Prayer, Psalm 81, where we can see part of this process. God is among gods they are still considered as gods in Israel. In this Psalm, in a great concentration, in a prophetic vision, we can see the power taken from the gods. Those that seemed gods are not gods, lose their divine characteristics, and fall to earth. *Dii estis et moriemini sicut nomine* (cf. Ps 81: 6-7): the weakening of power, the fall of the divinities.

This process that is achieved along the path of faith of Israel, and which is summed up here in one vision, is the true process of the history of religion: the fall of the gods. And thus the transformation of the world, the knowledge of the true God, the loss of power by the forces that dominate the world, is a process of suffering. In the history of Israel we can see how this liberation from polytheism, this recognition "Only He is God" is achieved with great pain, beginning with the path of Abraham, the exile, the Maccabeans, to Christ. And this process of the loss of power, spoken in the Book of Revelation, chapter 12 continues throughout history; it mentions the fall of the angels, which are not truly angels, they are not divinities on earth. And it is achieved truly, right at the time of the rising Church, where we can see how with the blood of the martyrs comes the weakening of the divinities, starting with the divine emperor, from all these divinities. It is the blood of the martyrs, the suffering, the cry of Mother Church that brings about their fall and thus transforms the world.

This fall is not only the knowledge that they are not God; it is the process of transformation of the world, which costs blood, costs the suffering of witnesses of Christ. And, if we look closely, we can see that this process never ends. It is achieved in various periods of history in ever new ways; even today, at this moment in which Christ, the only Son of God, must be born for the world with the fall of the gods, with pain, the martyrdom of witnesses. Let us remember all the great powers of the history of today. Let us remember the anonymous capital that enslaves man which is no longer in man's possession but is an anonymous power served by men, by which men are

tormented and even killed. It is a destructive power that threatens the world. And then there is the power of terroristic ideologies. Violent acts are apparently made in the name of God, but this is not God: they are false divinities that must be unmasked; they are not God. And then drugs, this power that, like a voracious beast, extends its claws to all parts of the world and destroys it: it is a divinity, but a false divinity that must fall. Or even the way of living proclaimed by public opinion: today we must do things like this, marriage no longer counts, chastity is no longer a virtue, and so on.

These ideologies that dominate, that impose themselves forcefully, are divinities. And in the pain of the Saints, in the suffering of believers, of the Mother Church which we are a part of, these divinities must fall. What is said in the Letters to the Colossians and to the Ephesians must be done: the domination, the powers fall and become subjects of the one Lord Jesus Christ. Concerning this battle in which we find ourselves, of this taking power away from God, of this fall of false gods, that fall because they are not deities, but powers that can destroy the world, chapter 12 of Revelations mentions these, even if with a mysterious image, for which, I believe, there are many different and beautiful interpretations. It has been said that the dragon places a large river of water before the fleeing woman to overcome her. And it would seem inevitable that the woman will drown in this river. But the good earth absorbs this river and it cannot be harmful. I think that the river is easily interpreted: these are the currents that dominate all and wish to make faith in the Church disappear, the Church that seems no longer to have a place in the face of the force of these currents that impose themselves as the only rationality, as the only way to live. And the earth that absorbs these currents is the faith of the simple people, that does not allow itself to be overcome by these rivers and that saves the Mother and saves the Son. This is why the Psalm says the first psalm of the Hour the faith of the simple at heart is the true wisdom (cf. Ps 118: 130). This true wisdom of simple faith, that does not allow itself to be swamped by the waters, is the force of the Church. And we have returned to the Marian mystery.

And there is also a final word in Psalm 81, "*movebuntur omnia fundamenta terrae*" (Ps 81: 5), the foundations of the earth are shaken. We see this today, with the climatic problems, how the foundations of the earth are shaken, how they are threatened by our behavior. The external foundations are shaken because the internal foundations are shaken, the moral and religious foundations, the faith that follows the right way of living. And we know that faith is the foundation, and, undoubtedly, the foundations of the earth cannot be shaken if they remain close to the faith, to true wisdom.

Then the Psalm says: "Arise, God, judge the world" (Ps 81: 8). Thus we say to the Lord: "Arise at this moment, take the world in your hands, protect your Church, protect humanity, protect the earth". And we once again entrust ourselves to the Mother of God, Mary, and pray: "You, the great believer, you who have opened the earth to the heavens, help us, open the doors today as well, that truth may win, the will of God, which is the true good, the true salvation of the world". Amen.

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