

MARY OUR MOTHER

PASTORAL LETTER 2018

“Da Maria numquam satis” (On Mary, no one can ever say enough) St. Bernard of Clairvaux.

INTRODUCTION

JOYFUL THANKS:

1. We thank God Our Loving Father for His merciful love evident in many aspects of our pastoral life, to Him be all glory, honor and praise forever and ever. Amen.

My beloved people of God, it is with utmost gratitude that we are once again inviting you to my reflection of the year 2018: Mary, our Mother. We are grateful for the warm reception of my reflections of 2016, Blessed are the Merciful and 2017, Blessed are the Peacemakers and indeed all my past pastoral letters. We continue to pray that the contents of our pastoral letters be of some help in our journey through time to eternity in God's blessed Kingdom. That indeed is the shared aim of our Christian life which we pursue as a community of believers in the Lord, and in which we do all in our power to help one another in our journey towards that kingdom the door of which has been opened by Christ's redemptive work.

2. Our gratitude extends without doubt to all who co-operated in furthering the work of evangelization in the Archdiocese of Onitsha this past year. Such cooperation is owed to your readiness to mediate God's grace in our lives both in their secular and spiritual dimensions. I therefore thank all of you: my brother in the Episcopate, all the priests and religious, as well as the lay faithful of our diocese for your incalculable contributions to the work of evangelization and I pray that our Lord will reward you as abundantly as only He can do.

Still on a note of gratitude, we remain grateful to God for the relative peace in our country, in our region and in our State. Last year witnessed unusual agitations against the state of the nation in our region, almost leading to the brink. We thank God that the situation did not deteriorate further than it did. It is however important that as negatively as these agitations could be seen, they are pointers to the unhappiness or dissatisfaction of the people especially the youth with the condition of the country they call their own. It is thus a pointer to the necessary direction needed for all the leaders of the nation. We cannot continue to tolerate without end, a situation of continually increasing economic hardship, marginalization, and complete absence of a sense of belonging. No amount of force will ever suffice to quell the dissatisfaction engendered by such dismal conditions. The situation must therefore be honestly and squarely addressed by political leaders. Not to do so is to leave our nation in a precarious state. Again a situation where some individuals or groups can easily destroy human lives and property and go free leaves serious questions for our political leaders and security agents. We hope the present administration at the national level will do the needful to protect the lives of Nigerians.

3. It is also very significant that the gubernatorial election which took place in our State, Anambra, in November 2017 did not leave behind any story of bloodshed. It means that virtually everything

in it was done peacefully. We congratulate all who took part in the elections; the politicians, the political parties, and the entire electorate. We must continue to improve our electoral process since doing so is in accordance with the will of God. We denounce the attitude of some who still see elections as do or die. Our attitude must always be guided by Christian morality and good conscience.

MOTIVATION AND CHOICE OF TOPIC

4. Last year 2017, we joined the universal Church as she celebrated the centenary of the famous apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the village of Fatima in Portugal. The event of this celebration is a very welcome opportunity to return to the message of Fatima apparition, and in general to reflect on the pivotal role of Mary in the economy of salvation as a very special member of the mystical body of Christ, and in a preeminent way, our Mother. This reflection is thus aimed at underpinning the effects of the centenary celebration marked by prayers, by national and diocesan congresses, national and international pilgrimages as well as the re-consecration of our nation and our Archdiocese to the Blessed Virgin Mary. These events should not be seen as one of the many routine events in Christian life. They are much more significant in exerting their influence in the continued life of Christians in the temporal world, and it is such effect that our reflection intends to achieve.

5. During the centenary celebration we had the privilege of giving some reflections on the Blessed Virgin Mary at the diocesan and National celebrations. Since then there have been many sincere requests from various quarters for a more detailed pastoral letter on our blessed Mother. This reflection hereby responds to such requests. I have therefore chosen to reflect with you on the Blessed Virgin Mary who is a perfect exemplar of Christian life, for hearing the word of God and keeping it. Our theme for this year's pastoral letter is thus, "Mary, Our Mother."

CHAPTER ONE

SCRIPTURAL BASIS OF MARY'S MOTHERHOOD

6. God the Father, "wishing in His supreme goodness and wisdom to effect the redemption of the world, "when the fullness of time came, sent His son, born of a woman,... that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Gal. 4: 4-5, (Lumen Gentium, no. 52). From the evidence of the scriptures and teachings of the Church, the woman is Mary, who is endowed with the high office and dignity of being the mother of the Son of God. The Church professes in her Faith, that for us humans and for our salvation, Christ came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary (cf. The Apostles Creed).

The teaching of the Catholic Church on Mary is very strongly founded both on the scripture and tradition, also founded on *Sensus fidei*. The conviction this teaching elicits is first of all based on Faith, but also in a veritable manner supported by these hallowed sources of the Christian life and belief. Catholic belief on Mary's Motherhood is therefore strongly supported by the evidence from the Scripture.

GENESIS 3:15

7. In the book of Genesis, the fall of our first parents occasioned God's just dispensation of appropriate punishment. The Tempter and the ultimate cause of the fall was the first to be punished. Genesis 3:15 speaks of future conflict between a woman, her seed and the serpent or tempter that deceived man in the garden. The figure of the serpent does not merely represent an individual snake or even all snake but the actual Devil (cf. Rev. 20:2). Similarly, the other two figures in the passage, the woman and her seed, do not merely refer to Eve and one of her immediate children, but to specific individuals that are key to redemptive history. They refer to Mary and Christ. In a mystical way, God appeared to be substituting our natural mother Eve, with our first mother "in the order of grace". Hence, "I will make you enemies of each other: you and woman, your offspring and her offspring. It will crush your head and you will strike its heel". (Gen. 3:15). Even though there is no mention of the name Mary here, it is fair to say that the ultimate enemy of the tempting devil is represented by the Redeemer, the conqueror of sin and death (I Cor. 15:55-57). And this Redeemer is the son of Mary. Many Catholic Theologians have interpreted the woman of Genesis 3:15 as referring to the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is a common teaching of the Church that in Gen. 3:15, the complete victory of our Lady over the devil is announced. In this sense, the text receives the name Proto-evangelium. (cf. P.G. Duckers, *Mother of the Redeemer*, New York, 1960, P. 60). Since the greatest of the consequences of the sins of our first parents is both corporal and spiritual death, it is the uncontested conqueror of sin and death who is the ultimate enemy of the evil one. While Eve can be seen as truncating the plan of God by her disobedience, Mary is seen as having a role in restoring the lost glory of the children of God by her obedience and acquiescence in the plan of God. Mary was the person who agreed to become the human channel through which Christ would enter the world in order to crush the serpent head. (cf. Luke 1:38). Simeon had prophesied to her that, "a sword will pierce your own soul also" a prophecy that was fulfilled when Mary saw her son hanging on the cross, (John 19:25-27). Thus, Mary was the woman prophesied about in Genesis 3:15.

ISAIAH 7:14

8. "Therefore, the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel". (Isaiah 7: 10-14)

Through the Prophet Isaiah, God sent a message to king Ahaz to the effect that those massed against him will not succeed provided he stands by Him. "If you do not stand by me, you will not stand at all". The Prophet urged the King to trust God and not rely on the Assyrians. For a second time the Lord addressed Ahaz, encouraging him to request for a sign as assurance from God himself. Ahaz expressed reluctance to ask for a sign, refusing to put Yahweh to the test. At this point the Lord said, "the Lord himself therefore will give you a sign. It is this: the virgin is with child and will soon give birth to a son whom she will call Emmanuel". (Isaiah 7:14). The Gospel of Matthew regards the nativity of the Lord Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of the word of God through the Prophet Isaiah (Matthew 1:22-23). The Evangelist adds the meaning of the name: God-is-with-us, pointing to the divinity of the child to be born. This nature of the new born was more clearly expressed by John the Evangelist at the very beginning of his Gospel: "In the beginning was the word, the word was with God and the word was God... The word was made flesh and dwelt among us". (John 1:1,14). Thus the word which was born, which dwelt among us being Emmanuel is God. The Virgin that bore the child is from these scriptural testimonies the Mother of God. That Virgin is Mary the Mother of Jesus the Messiah.

Many biblical theologians and experts agree on the interpretation of this prophecy of Isaiah. They insist that the Emmanuel of whom the prophet speaks is the future Messiah, Jesus Christ and the Child bearing Virgin is exclusively Mary, the Virgin Mother of Jesus. This interpretation is confirmed by the teaching of the magisterium of the Church. This prophecy is also significant in our understanding of Mary's perpetual virginity, before, during and after childbirth.

Another aspect of this prophecy that is very important is the naming of the new born child. The prophet states that the mother of the messiah will herself name her son, the fruit of her virginal womb, (she shall call his name Emmanuel, Is. 7:14), even though this was contrary to the traditional practice among the Jews, whereby the father named the child. St. Luke underscores this same detail while recounting how the angel informed Mary she was to name her child, "you shall name him Jesus", (Luke 1:31). The correspondence between the prophecy and its fulfilment on this point is perfect. Finally, one can observe a clear relationship between the text of Genesis 3:15, the proto-evangelium and the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14, the roles of the "woman and her seed" and the "Virgin mother and her son". Both implicitly refer to Mary and her child Jesus.

MICAH 5:2-3

9. "But you Bethlehem Ephrathah... out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times..." Here the prophet foretells that the Messiah-liberator would be born in the tiny city of Bethlehem. His origins are "from of old, from ancient days". The expression from ancient days could mean everlasting days or eternity, such would suggest the divine origin of the Messiah. The prophet Micah, therefore, would appear to have foretold both the earthly and heavenly places of birth, both the human and divine origins of the Messiah.

It is interesting to note that in making this prediction, the prophet Micah refers to "the time when she who is in labour bears a son". This suggests that his audience were already familiar with the prophecy of Isaiah and they were waiting for the virgin who was with child. Worthy of note in these prophecies and the text of Genesis 3:15 is that the figure of the mother- the woman- is always presented with her son. The mother appears always as a virgin mother. The Virginity of the mother is the ever-present, luminous backdrop for the event of the annunciation and that of the birth of the Messiah. This virginity is an evident sign that the Messiah is truly a new creation, the new humanity, the beginning of the salvific era. The mother of the Messiah is therefore the mother of the new humanity.

MARY AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE OLD AND THE NEW TESTAMENTS

10. In the Old Testament Mary is implicitly present in many ways; as part of God's plan and his promises of human salvation, as a re-creation of the first woman, Eve, and Perfection of the faith of the patriarchs. In the New Testament her presence is manifest. She is full of grace, the handmaid of the Lord, who did the will of God in all things, through whom the Redeemer would come...

However, the depth of the Scriptural portrait of Mary is manifested in the Old Testament prophecies and New Testament passages that portray her as the link between the Old and New Covenants. Mary serves as a link between the two covenants not just through prophetic verse but

by embodying in herself the “word made flesh”, to whom all the Old Testament prophecies point. According to Ignace de la Potterie, a very important insight of Modern exegesis has brought to light that the mystery of Mary forms in some way the synthesis of all the former revelation about the people of God, and of all that God by his salvific action wishes to realize for his people. In Mary are accomplished all the important aspects of the promises of the Old Testament to the Daughter of Zion, and in her real person there is an anticipation which will be realized for the new people of God, the Church... A vision of the mystery of Mary, biblically founded, ecclesialogically integrated and structurally developed, gives then a complete image of the concrete realization of the total mystery of the covenant. (cf. Ignace de la Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*, New York: Alba House, 1992, P.262)

11. At every crucial point in the history of salvation, from the Proto-Evangelium, after the fall of our first parents, (Gen. 3:15), to the announcement of the incarnation of the Word, (Luke 1:26ff); From the beginning of the public mission of Jesus at Cana (John 2:1-11), to His redemptive sacrifice consummated on the Cross (John 19:25-27), up to the accomplishment of the very last detail in the universal salvific plan (Rev- 12:1-17), Mary is the “woman” always present with her son, never alone, to fulfil her role of “generous companion and humble handmaid of the Lord”.

Consequently, from the Old Testament Prophecies to the passages of the New Testament, Mary serves as a link and a bridge between the two covenants.

MARY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

12. In the New Testament Mary plays a vital role, because she is the mother of Christ, the redeemer. St. Paul alludes to her in his epistle to the Galatians 4:4-5, and all the four Gospels speak about her. Matthew introduces her as “Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ”. (Mt. 1:16). In this way Matthew positions Mary at the centre of Israel's history as well as the centre of human history. The fruit of Mary's womb is the expected, awaited messiah and the source of world's salvation. Matthew states that the birth of Christ is the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah, that a virgin shall bear a son and his name shall be called Emmanuel which means God is with us. (Mt.1:23).

The annunciation as recorded by Luke (Lk 1:31) is another special sign of the special place of Mary as mother of God and mother of the new people of God in God's plan. It is as though God intended to come among us, “a man like us in all things”, but needed a human instrument. He has already prepared her for this work of charity. She is full of grace. “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you” was the salutation of the Angel Gabriel to her. God wanted the free cooperation of a creature and thus from all eternity chose a Jewish woman as the Mother of his son, a virgin betrothed to Joseph (Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 488). Even though she was predestined for this Motherhood, God still wanted her to consent to his plan without compulsion.

“The Father of mercies willed that the Incarnation should be preceded by assent on the part of the predestined mother, so that just as a woman had a share in bringing about death, so also a woman should contribute to life. This is pre-eminently true of the Mother of Jesus, who gave to the world the life that renews all things, and who was enriched by God with gifts appropriate to such a role. (Lumen Gentium, no. 56).

When the Angel Gabriel announced to her that she would be the mother of God's son, Mary's only question was how this could be since she knew no man. With the assurance given by the angel and her faith in the omnipotence of God, she accepted in a glorious manner the proposal delivered by the angel. "I am the handmaid of the Lord... Let what you have said be done to me". (Luke 1:38).

13. The visitation to Elizabeth after the information on the miraculous conception of the mother of John further points to her position as the mother of our Savior. Elizabeth was inspired by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the blessedness of Mary her relation and expressed with humility the honour granted her by the visit of the mother of her Lord. "why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord? For the moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leapt for joy". (Luke 1: 43-44).

The maternal influence and union between Christ and his mother is very strongly exhibited by the miracle at the wedding feast at Cana. (John 2:1-12). Many aspects of the miracle are quite peculiar. In the first place, the host did not make any request to Mary. He may not even have noticed that his wine had elapsed. It could be someone who is not so rich as to provide enough for all the guests to drink to their fill. When the mother of Jesus noticed the shortage of wine, she also did not make any direct request. "They have no wine", was enough to make her son to act. She had absolute faith in the omnipotence of God, and thus she went on to instruct the servers, "do whatever he tells you". Mary was therefore the mediator of the first miracle of Jesus and did so in a manner that remains most eloquent about her readiness as well as her ability to be the mediatrix of all graces for the children of God.

14. With the same solicitude for the other, and as a sign of her participation in the economy of salvation, she remained at the foot of the cross during the crucifixion of her son. At the time when most of the disciples had disappeared for their own safety. She stood by her son as an inseparable participant in his supreme sacrifice. Her perseverance and courage made possible the gift that the Lord Jesus made to John and through John to the whole of the Church. "Woman behold your son... disciple, behold your mother". (John 19:26). Keith Fournier asserts that through the rich history of the Church, great theologians, mystics, popes and saints have all viewed John as representing all the Christians. Thus, "the last gift Jesus gave before giving every drop of his sacred Blood was his Mother". In this context Mary is truly mother of the Church and mother of all Christians, the adoptive brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.

15. Mary is thus pivotal in all the major events of her son's salvific mission. Recall that she conceived Jesus as a virgin by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Lk. 1:26-28); Visited Elizabeth while pregnant (Lk 1:39-56), Gave birth to Jesus in the city of Bethlehem as the prophets foretold (Mt. 1:18-25). Mary was present when the shepherds and the magi came to worship the infant king (Lk. 2:15-20; Mt. 2:11), she with Joseph ran away with the child Jesus to Egypt for safety from Herod. (Mt. 2:14). She presented Jesus in the temple. (Lk.2:22-35), she found him when he was lost. (Lk 2:41-52) and she was present when he performed his first miracle which was requested by her. (Jn. 2:1-11). Mary faithfully followed the Lord Jesus identifying with him in his ministry, hearing the word of God and doing it till Christ's supreme self sacrifice on the cross.

16. After the ascension Mary remained with the Apostles. The Acts of the Apostles named the remaining apostles and added "several women, including Mary the mother of Jesus and with his

brothers”. They were part of the group of Christians gathered around the apostles all of whom “joined in continuous prayers” (Acts 1:14). The Blessed virgin Mary was therefore continually at prayer with the other apostles and disciples before the Pentecost which shepherded the commencement of the Church.

17. With all the above one can quite easily answer the question that Christ posed to those who informed him that his Mother and brothers were outside seeking his attention: “who are my mother and my brothers... Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother. (Mark3; 34-36). Mary is thus preeminent in doing the will of God. Her cooperation and her assent to the redemptive plan of God make her the first among all creatures. Mary, the mother of Christ the son of God, therefore qualifies most eminently as the mother of God judging from the Old and New Testaments and more so qualifies as our Mother as members of the Church- and brother and sisters of her son.

CHAPTER TWO

MARY IN THE CHURCH'S TRADITION AND HISTORY

18. The Church teaches us that “the sacred tradition and sacred scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments are like a mirror in which the pilgrim Church on earth looks at God”... (Dei Verbum, no 7). The Church further explains that, there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and sacred scripture. For both of them flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend towards the same end. (Dei Verbum, no 9). Consequently, tradition is a major source of the Church's teaching on Mary.

Ignatius of Antioch who lived and died around 115 AD speaks of the Christ in such a way as to emphasize both his divinity and his humanity. For Ignatius, Christ is mysteriously both born and unborn. He is thus beholden to Mary as born and to God as unborn: Both flesh and Spirit; begotten and unbegotten; in man God, in death true life; both from Mary and from God;... Jesus Christ our Lord. (Ad Ephesians, no. 7).

In another text he became more direct about the motherhood of Mary: For Our God Jesus the Christ was carried in the womb by Mary in accordance with the plan of God, of the seed of David and of the Holy Spirit; he was born and baptized in order to purify the water by the Passion. (Ibid. no. 18).

19. Within the 2nd Century AD, Justin the Martyr who wrote books in defense of Christian beliefs and practices contrasted our first mother Eve with Mary, depicting Eve as the purveyor of negative consequences for humanity while Mary was the contrary. Eve and Mary were presented as both virgin and mother, but their legacies for humanity are very contrary.

Thus we have two women, both virgin and mother. At the beginning of the world's history, Eve is the symbol and cause of a ruinous economy for all humanity. In opposition to her, God wanted another virgin, one who opens the new economy of redemption and salvation for all human creatures. (Dialogue with Trypho, no. 100).

20. Another patristic theologian Irenaeus of Lyons followed this comparison of Eve and Mary, emphasizing their commonalities, in having husbands but being virgins, and the difference made by their acts of disobedience and obedience respectively:

Even though Eve had Adam for a husband, she was still a virgin. By disobeying, she became the cause of death for herself and for the whole human race. In the same way, Mary, though she also had a husband, was still a virgin, and obeying, she became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race.... The knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience. What Eve bound through her unbelief, Mary loosed by her faith. (*Adversus Haereses*, no. 3)

21. The 2nd Ecumenical Council, the council of Ephesus in 431 took up the issue raised by Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople about the impossibility of Mary being the Mother of God. For him, Christ was composed of two natures and could not be one person. Mary would be the Mother of Christ (*christotokos*), but not the mother of God (*theotokos*). The council decided that Mary was indeed the Mother of God (*theotokos*), and that Christ was one person. The issue resolved by the council concerned the faith of the Church about its Head. The mystery of the Incarnation would be impossible if Mary were not to be mother of God. Like many other teachings about Mary and her son Jesus, the council of Ephesus confirms that “what the Catholic faith believes about Mary is based on what it believes about Christ, and what it teaches about Mary, illumines in turn its faith in Christ.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 487).

Since the early Church, the constant and unwavering teaching of the Church has been that Mary is indeed the Mother of God. There have been some developments of several aspects of this teaching and its implications. Among the most significant of these have been the following:

22. In 1849, Pope Pius IX issued the Apostolic Letter “*Ubi primum*” to the Bishops of the Catholic Church, asking their opinion about the definition of the Dogma of Immaculate Conception. Five years later the Pope issued the Papal Bull “*Ineffabilis Deus*” which declared the dogma of Immaculate Conception. The Papal document surveyed the history of the belief, citing its root in the long-standing feast of conception of Mary in the Eastern and Western Churches. It also cited the approval of the Catholic Bishops world wide which was the result of the inquiry on the matter in 1849.

In 1904, Pope Pius X issued the Encyclical “*Ad Diem Illum*” at the fiftieth anniversary of the proclamation of the Immaculate Conception.

Following his motto: *Instaurare Omnia in Christo* (To restore all things in Christ), the Pope's Encyclical was aimed at achieving this aim in Christ, and there is no safer or surer or more direct road to this than Mary.

23. Again in 1946, Pope Pius XII issued the Apostolic letter “*Deiparae Virginis Mariae*” to all Catholic Bishops on the possibility of defining the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin as a dogma of faith (cf. T. Mc Nally, *What Every Catholic Should Know About Mary*, p. 113). Four years later, Pius XII in the Apostolic Constitution “*Munificentissimus Deus*” defined *ex-cathedra* the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is the second *ex-cathedra* infallible

statement ever made by a pope, the first since the official ruling on the Papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council (1869-1870).

24. The Encyclical of Pope John Paul II, “Redemptoris Mater of 1987 dwells on the Blessed Virgin in the life of the pilgrim Church. It discusses the specific and special place of Mary in the plan of salvation and focuses on her role in the mystical body of Christ. The Pope also confirms the title of Mary as mother of the Church as declared by Vatican Council II in 1964. Pope John Paul II also published the “Rosarium Virginis Mariae” in 2002. In this Apostolic Letter, the Pope described the Holy Rosary as a compendium of the Gospel message. For the Pope, even though the rosary has a Marian character or feature, it is at heart Christocentric. It has all the parts of the Gospel message in its entirety, of which it can be said to represent a compendium. The Rosary is indeed a very effective instrument for the mediation of God's favour: “through the Rosary, the faithful receive abundant grace, as though from the very hands of the Mother of the Redeemer”.

MARY IN THE TEACHING OF VATICAN COUNCIL II

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church “Lumen Gentium” devoted an entire chapter on the Blessed Virgin Mary. This chapter has five sections including the introduction.

25. The introduction presents the unique role and status of Mary, that redeemed by reason of the merits of her son and united to Him by a close and indissoluble tie, she is endowed with the high office and dignity of being the Mother of the Son of God, by which account she is also the beloved daughter of the Father and temple of the Holy Spirit.” (LG. no 53). In spite of her high office Mary is recognized as being one with all those who are to be saved since she also belongs to the offspring of Adam. In addition, Mary is presented as the Mother of the members of Christ.

26. The second part highlights the role of Mary in the economy of salvation. She is the woman prophetically foreshadowed in the promise of victory over the serpent which was given to our first parents after their fall into sin (cf. Gen. 3:15). She is the Virgin who shall conceive and bear a son..., She is the daughter of Zion and she is full of grace. Mary the mother of Jesus, the mediator assists in this work of mediation without reducing or competing with Jesus the only mediator between God and man.

27. The third part emphasizes our special relationship with the Blessed Virgin Mary. Since, by virtue of divine election Mary is the earthly Mother of the Father's consubstantial Son and his generous companion in the work of redemption, she is a mother to us in the order of grace. (cf Lumen Gentium no 61, JP. II Redemptoris Mater, no 38).

However, the council teaches that the maternal role of Mary does not obscure or diminish the unique mediation of Christ. The Blessed Virgin is also intimately united with the Church as mother and exemplar. Mary lives out her maternal love as in charity she takes care of the brethren of her son who still journey on earth seeking salvation. The next section discusses true devotion to Mary whom God has exalted above all angels and men.

Mary is God's Mother, next to her son. However, the Church cautions us against abuses, gross exaggerations and narrow-mindedness. The Church encourages us and calls for true devotion

which proceeds from true faith, by which we are led to know the excellence of the mother of God, and we are moved to a filial love towards our Mother and to the imitation of her virtues. (cf LG. no 67).

28. The final part presents Mary as our hope and solace. Mary the mother of Jesus and our mother inspires our hope that having been glorified, we too shall one day be glorified as she aided the beginnings of the Church, she now in her exalted position continues to intercede for us, the Church on earth on her pilgrim way to heaven.

CHAPTER THREE

MOTHER OF GOD AND MOTHER OF THE CHURCH

29. Mary's Fiat at the annunciation is a fulfilment of God's salvific plan for mankind. God's plan was not to be fulfilled by imposition. The heavenly host must have been spellbound at the message of Angel Gabriel, and must have exploded in positive response: *Ecce ancilla domini, fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum* (Behold the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word). (Matt. 1:38). The motherhood of Mary with reference to Christ is clearly seen in the words of Elizabeth, expressing her honour at the visit of the Mother of her Lord, and the joy brought by the mere presence of her to yet undelivered child. Among other factors the blessedness of Mary is rooted in her faith in God, and for believing that "the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled. (Matt. 1:45).

We have seen how both the Apostolic and post-Apostolic Fathers of the Church proclaimed Mary in their life and teaching and liturgical practices as the mother of God. Nestorius' heresy in calling her the Mother of Christ in his reading of the nature of the saviour was definitively rejected by the Council of Ephesus. Mary is indeed Mother of God (*theotokos*) not just mother of Christ (*christotokos*).

30. The Blessed Virgin Mary is therefore rightly honoured as truly being the mother of God and mother of the Redeemer. By the same token, she is the mother of all the mystical members of Christ since through her charity and obedience she has become a new Eve according to the Fathers, and has joined in begetting believers who are members of the mystical body of Christ the head.

Her role in the Church links directly to her union with her son and follows directly from it. It is a union which is clearly seen at the incarnation and continues to his death on the cross. Her prayerful communion with the apostles after the ascension assures us that this union did not disappear with the death of the Lord. The gift of her Motherhood to John the beloved apostle, and through him to all the members of Christ body is a great assurance of the continuity of this union, which remains unbroken even with the Assumption.

Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifest intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation. By her maternal charity, she cares for the brethren of her son, who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and difficulties, until they are led into the happiness of their true home. Therefore, the Blessed Virgin is invoked by the

Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix. (Lumen Gentium, no. 62).

The eminent role of Mary as mother does not diminish the singular position of Christ as the sole Mediator. Christ's mediation is unique but the role of Mary the Mother of God and the Church "shows His power". (cf. LG. no. 60). That is why Fathers of the Council, in Lumen Gentium, clearly affirm in several instances that the invocation of Mary with all her titles does not remove anything nor add to the efficacy of the one Mediator. It explains the maternal care of Mary with the simile of the priesthood of Christ shared in various ways by the ordained ministers of the Church and the lay faithful. In this way the unique mediation of Christ does not abhor but rather gives rise to cooperation which should be understood as a sharing from the same and single source.

The Church does not hesitate to profess this subordinate role of Mary, which it constantly experiences and recommends to the heartfelt attention of the faithful, so that encouraged by this maternal help they may the more closely adhere to the Mediator and Redeemer. (Lumen Gentium, no 62.)

31. The Blessed Virgin Mary is so united to the Church that She is called Mother of the Church. For St. Ambrose, this is a very special relationship since the Mother of God is "a type of the Church in order of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ". (LG. No 63).

The title Mother of the Church goes back to St Ambrose in the fourth century. It was affirmed by Pope Paul VI as an official title of the Blessed Virgin Mary at the third session of the Vatican II in 1964, taking the cue from his predecessor as the Bishop of Milan. "For the glory of the virgin and our consolation we proclaim Mary the most Holy Mother of the Church, that is, the Mother of the whole People of God, both the faithful and the pastors". The title was re-echoed by Pope John Paul II, connecting again Mary's position as the mother of Christ with her maternity of each and every one through the Church.

Pope John Paul II writes: Mary is present in the Church as the mother of Christ, and at the same time as that mother whom Christ, in the mystery of the Redemption, gave to humanity in the person of the Apostle John. Thus, in her new motherhood in the Spirit, Mary embraces each and every one in the Church, and embraces each and everyone through the Church. In this sense Mary, Mother of the Church, is also the Church's model. Indeed as Paul VI hopes and asks, the Church must draw from the virgin Mother of God the most authentic form of perfect imitation of Christ. (Redemptoris Mater, no. 47).

32. On September 17, 1997, Pope John Paul II again devoted a Wednesday general audience to the title, Mother of the Church with regard to its application to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Pope recalls that for centuries the faithful called upon Mary with such titles as Mother of God, Mother of the faithful or Our Mother. Later, due to greater attention to the mystery of the Church and Mary's relationship with her, the Blessed Virgin began more frequently to be invoked as "Mother of the Church". This title reflects the deep conviction of the Christian faithful, who see in Mary not only the Mother of the person of Christ, but also of the faithful. (cf. John Paul II, Blessed Virgin is Mother...no 2-5).

CHAPTER FOUR

MARY OUR MOTHER IN THE ORDER OF GRACE.

33. The Blessed Virgin Mary is a treasure bestowed on all the members of the mystical body. She is mother of God, mother of the Church, and thus our Mother. However, like many treasures of the Church the treasure of Mary is like a gift that must be received. There is therefore an act of faith necessary to move from viewing Mary as Mother of God to viewing her as my mother. Every baptized is incorporated in the mystical body of Christ, so that in a very deep way the life we now live is lived within his body. That is why St. Augustine and other saints of the Eastern and Western Church see the whole Church as constituted of both head and body (Eph. 5:23). In the view of Keith Fournier, everything that Jesus has He has given to his Church, that includes His Mother. She is also the mother of the mystical body, the Church and we are members of that family. This motherhood proclaimed here is owed to Mary's unique role in the economy of salvation.

Mary conceived, brought forth, and nourished Christ, she presented him to the Father in the temple, shared her son's suffering 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 in restoring supernatural life to souls. For this reason she is a mother to us in the order of grace. (Lumen Gentium, no. 61).

The Motherhood in the order of grace is evident given the relationship between Christ and all those baptised in him. The letter to the Romans reminds us that by baptism we died with Christ, and just as God raised him from the dead, we too can live a new life. (Romans, 6:4). It means that his followers are intimately sharers of his destiny. Sharing his death and resurrection entails sharing in the most significant event of his redemptive economy. It means that oneness with Christ is so deep that nothing human can fathom it. This unity with the Lord; this oneness is proclaimed everywhere in the Holy Scriptures.

34. The Gospel of John reminds us that Christ is the vine and we are the branches, and that cut off from him we can do nothing, (John 15:5). In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul used the comparison of conjugal relationship to describe how Christ is the head of his body the Church. It means that the body receives perfect care and that in fact the life each member of the body lives is no longer his own alone. Membership of the body of Christ requires complete obedience and submission as wives should be subject to their husbands. Also, husbands should love their wives as Christ loves his Church, his body constituted by the totality of the members of the communion of saints. It means that logically and theologically the mother of Christ is also our mother. St. Paul asks us, has Christ been divided or parcelled out? (1 Cor. 1:12). If Christ has not been divided, we are all his brothers (part of his mystical body) and so his mother is also our mother in the order of grace.

CHAPTER FIVE

SOME REASONS WHY I LOVE MARY

35. Some people have the wrong impression that loving Mary the mother of Jesus reduces our love for her son who is Christ our Redeemer. This idea or impression obviously contradicts what we know about family relationships. No responsible son resents respect and love for his mother from

his friends and brother. In the same way our respect for Mary does not diminish or reduce our love for her son. The servant of God, Pope Paul VI, tells us that, “the sun will never be dimmed by the light of the moon”. Jesus, as the son of God, does not feel threatened by love and devotion to his mother. On her part, Mary, because she is a creature and not the creator, will never outshine the Trinity, she will not compete but will always be a reflection of the creator. However just as people have different reasons for what they do, there could be uncountable reasons why people love the Blessed Virgin Mary. Here, I will mention only ten major reasons why I personally love the Blessed Virgin Mary.

35.1 Jesus came to us through Mary.

Saint Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians that “when the fulness of time had come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law”. (Gal.4:4). This means that a woman named Mary, the mother of the Incarnate word of God, is at the very centre of salvation history. St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us that God, in his omnipotence, could have restored human nature in many different ways, but he chose to redeem us by becoming incarnate of the Blessed Virgin Mary. If God freely chose to redeem us by being born of a woman, then it necessarily follows that this woman, Mary is central to his salvific plan. Pope Paul VI in his homily of April 24, 1970, at the Marian shrine of our Lady of Bonaria in Cagliari, Sardinia, says, “if we want to be Christian, we must also be Marian, that is, we must recognize the essential, vital, providential bond which unites Our Lady to Jesus and which opens to us the way that leads us to him”. When we remember that God could have chosen to come to earth through a multitude of means but he rather chose to come through Mary, a humble maiden of Nazareth, it implies that we can also go to God through her. Why did God choose Mary? Why did Jesus spend nine months in the womb of Mary the Virgin? Why did Jesus spend the first thirty years of his earthly life with Mary and three years with the rest of the world? Jesus calls on us to follow his example and come to him through Mary.

35.2 Mary is full of Grace.

The word translated “grace” in the New Testament comes from the Greek word “Charis” which means, “favour, blessing, or kindness”. However, when the word grace is used in connection with God and salvation, we can define it as an interior supernatural gift of God bestowed on us through the merits of Jesus Christ for our salvation. Jesus Christ is the summation of all graces and this Jesus became incarnate in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary. No wonder Mary is called the treasurer of God's graces. Grace helps us to be holy and thus attain eternal salvation. Graces are those divine impulses or spiritual energy which impel us to do good and avoid evil. Without grace we may not withstand negative inclinations and seductions of the devil. The Blessed Virgin Mary as full of grace and Treasurer of God's grace is therefore a dispenser of graces. She can always assist us to overcome evil inclinations and temptations of the devil.

35.3 Mary's Intercession never fails.

The first recorded miracle of our Lord Jesus Christ was made through the request of Mary. This was in spite of the explanation of Jesus that his time (for miracles) had not yet come. Through the miracle at the wedding feast of Cana our Lady shows herself a powerful intercessor. The couple did not request Mary for any help, they were just fortunate to have invited her and, in her

compassion, and wisdom she saved them shame and embarrassment. Closeness to Mary will certainly do the same for us.

35.4 Mary searches for us when we are lost.

The young Jesus got lost when he was twelve years old. When Jesus accompanied Mary and Joseph to Jerusalem for the festival and was no longer seen on their return journey, Mary and Joseph went back to Jerusalem in search of him. When they found him it was Mary who initiated a dialogue through her question. Francis Cardinal Arinze notes that the response of Jesus “was extraordinary and full of meaning” (Arinze, *Marian Veneration*, p. 24). Again, it was Mary who convinced Jesus about the necessity of returning home with them. The bible records that as a result of Mary's intervention, “Jesus went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them”... (LK2:51-52). Sometimes, we are lost in sin, not out of our decision but out of human weakness. At such moments, if we are true children of Mary, she will come in search of us to help us go back to our Father's house, in good relationship with God our Father.

35.5 Mary has Special relationship with the Blessed Trinity.

Mary is the most graced of all creatures. She had a unique extraordinary relationship with the Triune God. She comes across as the centre in which the Blessed Trinity and humanity encounter in an embrace that become indissoluble. In Mary we glimpse the perfect picture of the new life that is given from above. Luigi Gambero put it this way, “Mary is in the garden of the Blessed Trinity, guarded by the Father above her who loves her, by the son within her and in the neighbour, and by the Holy Spirit who forms the new people of God” (Luigi Gambero, *Mary in the Father*, Ignatius press, 1999, p. 47).

Mary is a special daughter of the Father, the Mother of the Son, and the spouse of the Holy Spirit who overshadowed her making her bear the son of the Most High.

35.6 Mary is a Woman of the Scripture.

If Ignorance of the scriptures is ignorance of Christ then by implication knowledge of the scriptures could be regarded as nearness to or knowledge of God. In the Magnificat, Mary proves that she is familiar with the scripture and religion of her people. She was convinced that God had made a promise to her Fathers, to Abraham and his sons forever. (cf. LK. 1:55). In the depth of her heart, Mary realizes that God was fulfilling that promise through her. Hence, She exclaimed, “my soul glorifies the Lord and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior”. A good study of the Magnificat reveals that Mary must have spent a lot of time studying the scripture and tradition of her people. The words of the Magnificat could be traced directly to the psalms and texts of the Old Testament indicating knowledge of and familiarity with the word of God. We can learn from Mary to love the word of God.

35.7 Mary is the Mother of Peace.

Mary is universally venerated as Mother and Queen of peace. Through this title we invoke Mary's intercession to the Prince of Peace who is her son. St Paul calls Jesus, “Our Peace” (Eph. 2:14).

However, it is Mary who carried this “peace” in her womb, gave birth to “peace” and nurtured “peace” to maturity. Hence, she is rightly called the mother of peace. Mary gave birth to Christ who is the prince of peace and peace incarnate therefore she is the mother of peace. Also Mary is called Queen of peace because of her role in reconciling humanity with God. Moreover, in the Catholic Tradition peace means to live according to the will of God. Mary lived doing the will of God through out her life. We shall have peace if we follow her footsteps.

35.8.1 Mary is the Mother of the Cross and Mother of Mercy.

In this life there are many experiences of joy but sometimes bitter experiences of pain and sorrow. The Blessed Virgin Mary passed through many of such experiences of sorrow. It needs a woman with courage to identify with a son denounced and condemned by all including religious leaders. Mary was such a mother. She accompanied her son all through his journey to the cross. One can only imagine how she must have felt seeing her son crucified. In the journey of life, there are moments when our expectations are not met, when we are faced with our worst nightmares. Mary teaches us how to carry our cross patiently because without the cross, there may be no crown.

35.8.2 But Mary is Also Mother of Mercy.

The mystery of Mary's election is a profound manifestation of God's mercy. Many see Mary's election as pure grace, completely undeserved, a sovereign act of God's mercy. (cf. Cardinal Christoph Schonborn, *we have found mercy*, p. 123)

In addition to receiving mercy from God, the Holy and mighty One who has done great things for her, Mary is also the Mother of mercy incarnate, Our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. No wonder for many centuries Christians all over the world have invoked her under the title “Mother of Mercy”. The Scripture presents Mary to us as a concrete expression of divine mercy. Consequently, we need to go closer to her who has found favour with God, she will obtain divine mercy for us.

35.9 Mary is a Woman of Gratitude.

The Magnificat of Mary is one of the three major hymns in the infancy narrative (the others are known as the Nunc Dimittis, LK 2:28-32 and the Benedictus, LK 1:67-79). Mary's hymn expresses praise to God for his goodness to her, but then extends her praise to God for his faithful love and goodness to the righteous throughout the ages in the past and how he will vindicate them fully in the future. Mary appreciates God's goodness. She speaks for herself, for her community and the entire people of God throughout time.

Mary's humility leads her to understand God's goodness. God owes the human person nothing but we owe God everything. All the good things that come from God are acts of grace. We owe Him gratitude. Mary is our model of gratitude. Her gratitude attracts more grace and makes her Blessed

35.10 Mary is the Living Ark of the New Covenant.

In the Old Testament, God gave specific instructions about the Ark of the covenant. (cf. Ex 25-30). It was a place where God himself would dwell (Ex 25:8). God wanted his written words

precisely the ten commandments he gave to Moses, inscribed on stone to be housed in a perfect container covered with pure gold within and without. In effect the gold-covered box or chest containing the two stone tablets of the Ten commandments is called the Ark of the covenant in the OT. In the New Testament, it pleased God to provide a perfect dwelling place for His Living word, the word incarnate, His Son Jesus Christ, in the womb of a human girl, a virgin from Nazareth.

Consequently, the Virgin Mary, the mother of Christ is the living Ark of the word of God, the Ark of the New and Eternal covenant. In fact a careful reading of St. Luke's account of the annunciation of the angel to Mary would recall the images of the tent of meeting with God in Sinai and of the temple of Zion. Note that just as the cloud covered the people of God marching in the desert (cf. Nm 10:34; Dt. 33:12; Ps 91:4), and just as the same cloud, as a sign of divine mystery present in the midst of Israel, hovered over the Ark of the Covenant (cf. Ex. 40:35), so now the shadow of the Most High envelops and penetrates the tabernacle of the New Covenant that is the womb of Mary (cf. LK 1:35). Mary is indeed the living Ark of the New and eternal Covenant.

CHAPTER SIX

SOME PRINCIPAL VIRTUES OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY.

36. There is an old adage which states that whoever loves, endeavours to become like the person loved. No wonder the Popes repeatedly exhort us to endeavour to imitate Mary, if we love her because that is the greatest act of homage we can offer her. St Augustine says that to obtain with more certainty the favour of the saints, we must imitate them; for when they see us practise their virtues, they are more excited to pray for us. Although there is little recorded in the Gospels about Mary's Virtues in details, yet when we learn from the Scriptures that she is full of Grace, this alone makes us understand that she possessed all virtues to a heroic degree. St Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort, in his popular treatise, True Devotion to Mary, highlights what he calls "the ten principal virtues of Mary". De Montfort strongly suggests that we commit these virtues to memory and strive to imitate them in our daily lives. We shall in this write up discuss only these ten principal virtues of Our Mother, Mary.

1. FAITH:

37. The evil done by Eve's incredulity was remedied by Mary's faith. This is confirmed by Tertulian, who says that because Eve, contrary to the assurance she had received from God, believed the serpent, brought death into the world; but Mary, because she believed the Angel when he said that she who was a virgin, remaining a virgin, would become the mother of God, brought salvation into the world. Hence, on account of her faith, Elizabeth called the holy Virgin blessed. "Blessed art thou that hast believed, because those things shall be accomplished in thee that were spoken by the Lord" (LK 1:45). Mary saw her son in the crib at Bethlehem and believed him to be the Creator of the world and Son of the Most High. She saw Him fly from Herod, and yet believed Him to be the King of Kings. She saw Him born and believed Him to be eternal. She saw Him poor and in need of food, and still believed him to be the Lord of the Universe. She saw her Son lying on the manger and believed Him to be Omnipotent. Finally, she saw him in death, despised and crucified, and, although faith wavered in others, Mary remained firm in her faith, in the belief that He was God. Mary's faith is simply indescribable, Her faith is awesome.

2. CHASTITY:

38. Mary said to the Angel, “How shall this be done since I am a virgin?” (LK1:34). Since the fall of our first parents Adam and Eve, the senses became rebellious to reason. Consequent on that the virtues became difficult to practice, and of all virtues, chastity could be said to be the most difficult to practice. The virtue of chastity seems to be appreciated today only within some religious circles. Otherwise, it is generally ignored in the Modern world. Nevertheless, we need to teach our children the importance of chastity. Chastity in this context is more than abstinence from sexual activities: it is a virtue which should inform our character and our life, among the many ways through which our Mother, Mary preserved her chastity, these three are prominent:

- a. The first is fasting and mortification: From records available Mary lived a very disciplined life.
- b. The second is flying occasion of sin: The book of Proverb says, He that is aware of the snares shall be secure (Prov. 11:15). It is generally said that “in the war of chastity, cowards conquer”. This goes to say that those who fly from dangerous occasions are always victorious in the war against unchastity. Mary never associated herself with circumstances or persons that would compromise her purity.
- c. The third is prayer: The wise man said, “I knew, that I could not otherwise be continent expect God gave it... I went to the Lord and be sought Him”, (wisd. 8:21). In John 15:5 Jesus told us that without him, we can do nothing. It is only through sincere prayer that we can obtain the grace of Chastity. Mary was a woman of prayer and a woman of chastity.

3. CHARITY:

39. Love of God and love of neighbour are commanded by God in the same precept. He who loves God should therefore love his brothers and sisters. Mary was always ready to help the needy even without being asked. (cf John 2:3) and (LK 1:30). She also offered the death of her son for our salvation. Mary is simply a model of charity.

4. POVERTY:

40. Jesus taught us that “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for there is the Kingdom of Heaven” (Mt. 5:3). Mary was definitely among the poor this is evident from the fact that at her purification in the temple she did not offer a lamb, which was the offering prescribed in the book of Leviticus for those who could afford it. Lev. 12:6); but she offered two turtle doves or two pigeons which was the oblation prescribed for the poor (Lk 2:24). The poor are blessed because they desire nothing but God, and in God they find every good. Mary desired nothing, but God and God raised her up in her poverty.

5. OBEDIENCE.

41. When the Angel Gabriel announced to Mary God's great designs for her, she displayed love and total obedience. She called herself a handmaid and gave her consent in obedience. “Behold the handmaid of the Lord” (Lk 1:38). The Church teaches that through her obedience, the Blessed

Virgin Mary repaired the evil done to humanity by Eve's disobedience. Through her obedience Mary became the cause of her own salvation and that of all mankind. Mary was a woman of obedience who obeyed legitimate authorities and rules such that she even obeyed the Roman Emperor and undertook a long journey of many miles to Bethlehem, in the winter, while pregnant in order to be counted. It was during that journey that she gave birth to her son Jesus. Mary's obedience is phenomenal.

6. HUMILITY.

42. St. Theresa of the Child Jesus says that, "Humility is the foundation and guardian of the other virtues for without it no other virtue can exist in the soul". The son of God came on earth to teach us by His example. He was an epitome of humility and he willed that we should imitate Him. Thus, he says, "Learn of me, because I am meek and humble of heart (Mt. 11:28). Mary, being the first and most perfect disciple of Jesus Christ in the practice of all virtues, was the first also in that of humility. By this virtue Mary merited to be exalted above all creatures. Mary could happily say that the Lord has looked at her humility and from hence forth all generation will call her blessed. At the same time in her humility, she refers all praises given to her back to God.

When the Angel Gabriel and Elizabeth praised Mary, Blessed art thou among women... blessed art thou that has believed... (Lk 1:42) Mary attributed all to God. "My Soul glorifies the Lord..." Mary is indeed a model of Humility.

7. PATIENCE:

43. God gave us the Blessed Virgin Mary as a model of all virtues, but more especially as an example of patience. Mary's whole life was a continuous exercise of her patience. As a rose grows up among thorns, so did the Blessed virgin Mary grow up amongst tribulations. What she endured at the death of Christ at Calvary is enough to show us her heroic patience. As children of Mary we need to imitate her patience. Patience makes saints. Patience implies readiness to do God's will and accepting whatever comes our way with equanimity. Being patient at the face of crosses from God and challenges from men as Mary did would show us as her children.

8. PRAYER.

44. The scripture tells us always to pray and not to lose heart (LK 18:1). We can see this in the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary who kept all the mysteries that came her way pondering them in her heart. Mary was living a life of unceasing contemplation. She remains for all her children an example of perseverance in prayer.

9. HOPE.

45. Hope is very much rooted in faith. God enlightens us by faith to know His goodness and the promises he has made, through this knowledge we rise by hope to the desire of possessing Him. Given that Mary had the virtue of faith in its highest degree, she also had hope in the same degree of excellence. The most Holy Virgin displayed the greatness of her confidence and hope in God when at the beginning of her pregnancy she saw the anxiety of her holy spouse Joseph. Full of

confidence in God, who could defend her innocence, she abandoned herself to divine providence. Her hope did not fail her for God vindicated her.

Again, Mary demonstrated her faith and hope in God when at Bethlehem, they could not get any room in the inn (LK 2:7), and she gave birth to the Son of the most High, in a stable. These notwithstanding, she was not disappointed. Her faith was not shaken, her hope in God was firm. The Blessed Virgin Mary is indeed a model of hope.

10. DIVINE WISDOM.

46. The angel revealed to Mary that the Holy Spirit would overshadow her. The influence of the Holy Spirit never ever left Mary. The Holy Spirit infused in her divine love and wisdom. That divine wisdom was evident in the life of the Blessed Virgin all through her life. Her actions revealed love and compassion which are indicative of inspired wisdom.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MOTHERHOOD AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MARIAN APPARITIONS

47. One very important feature of Catholicism worthy of some attention in relation to Mary our Mother is the phenomenon of apparition. Marian apparitions are reported or claimed in hundreds, if not thousands of cities around the world. We in Nigeria have also witnessed a good number of claims of apparitions of Mary. Apparition is “the name given to various kinds of supernatural visions of heavenly beings and is frequently applied to the visions associated with Mary”. (cf. Johan C. Roten, *Apparition and Appearances*, 1998). This definition shows that other supernatural visions are also apparitions, but within the context of the Catholic Church, apparitions are very frequently associated with Mary our mother. The definition of Father Johan C. Roten seems to emphasize this frequency of association of the meaning of apparition with the visions of Mary. However, this in itself raises some questions. Why the frequency of Mary's apparitions in the life of the Church?

48. Recall that apparitions are not dogmas of the Church. They do not constitute the basic teachings of the Church which are based on the revelation of God to human beings. Apparition belongs to what is known in theology as private revelations and are “open for selective acceptance and devotion of the faithful”.

Throughout the ages, there have been so-called “private” revelations, some of which have been recognised by the authority of the Church. They do not belong, however, to the deposit of faith. It is not their role to improve or complete Christ's definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history. Guided by the magisterium of the Church, the *sensus fidelium* knows how to discern and welcome in these revelations whatever constitutes an authentic call of Christ or his saints to the Church. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 67).

49. The apparitions of Mary in general are testimonies to the solicitude of Mary Our Mother for the coming of God's Kingdom among the Children of God. When authentic, apparitions of Mary are evidence of her motherly continuing active presence in the life of the Church through which

she “cares for the brethren of her son who still journey on earth”. These apparitions represent interventions of divine power in our natural context to achieve heavenly aims. The aim of the apparitions is therefore not necessarily to purvey cures or to achieve miracles, though these could happen. The aim is rather to recall and reemphasize the Christian message, and nudge people to its application in their daily lives.

In their pastoral letter “Behold your Mother: Woman of Faith”, the American Bishops called authentic apparitions of Mary, “providential happenings which serve as reminders of the basic Christian themes: such as prayer, penance, and the necessity of the sacraments” (cf. Behold Your Mother... 1973, no 100). It means that even when apparitions are properly approved by the teaching authority of the Church, they should be viewed not just as spectacular occurrence attracting human curiosity, but as “assistance to nourish our faith in the central dogmas of the incarnation, the Trinity and the Eucharist.”

50. Though apparitions are private revelations, and thus are not meant to increase the deposit of faith (FonsFidei), it is of utmost importance that they are investigated by the authority of the Church before they are given credence by Christians. To do otherwise is to open the flanks that could be very dangerous to the Christian faith. The Catholic Church has therefore established stringent, hard headed and theological procedures to assess claims of apparitions of Mary. It may be good to note that of the 295 officially reported apparitions studied by the Holy See through the centuries, only twelve have been approved by the Church. The speed of approval in each particular case may not be as fast as many would expect. The last approval of apparition was granted in the year 2008, and that is the apparition of Saint Etienne de-laus which took place within the 17th and the 18th centuries.

51. In 1978, the Sacred Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith published a document named, “Norms of the Congregation for Proceeding in Judging Alleged Apparitions and Revelations”. The Congregation stipulated that in cases of claims of apparition, the Local Ordinary should set up a committee of experts to investigate the authenticity of the claims. In general however, there are four norms that serve as guide in considering authenticity to apparitions.

1. There must be moral certainty or a great probability that something miraculous has occurred.
2. The subject must be mentally sound, honest, sincere, of upright conduct obedient to Church authorities, and be able to return to normal practices of the faith such as participation in communal worship and reception of sacraments.
3. The content of the revelation must be theologically acceptable and morally sound and free from error.
4. The apparition must result in positive spiritual assets which endure, (for example prayer, conversion, increase of charity, etc).

Whenever proved as authentic, apparitions are taken not as subjective experience, but real and objective intervention of divine power. They are generally aimed at strengthening our commitment to the message of Our Saviour and not to increase or change the content of our faith. Thus, the

most important factor in Marian apparitions is the message purveyed to the children of God in general, and how this helps in improving their adherence to the principles of their faith in God.

THE MESSAGE OF FATIMA

52. From 13th May to 13th October, 1917, Our Lady Mary appeared to three shepherd children (Lucia Santos, Jacinta and Francisco Marto), in the village of Fatima in Portugal. It is one of the most momentous and influential apparitions in Christian history, and it also exerted enormous impact in the life of Christians, especially Catholics in Nigeria.

The context of Fatima apparition is the Bolshevik Revolution which took place in Russia in 1917. The Tsarist rulers of Russia were overthrown by Marxist revolutionaries who introduced communism in the guise of the so-called dictatorship of the proletariat. The Bolsheviks introduced a stringent dictatorship which strongly curtailed the freedom of the people including the freedom of worship. Marxism described religion as the opium of the people. Marxism aimed at achieving paradise on earth. Among its tenets are that God, immortality of the soul and attendant life after this earthly life were mere products of the human imagination, inspired by the rich in order to exploit the poor without end. The proletariats were therefore to seek for their heaven on earth since human life has no continuity outside this material world. The message of Fatima addressed this misleading and false ideology.

53. There were of course other concerns which are evident from the message of Our Lady delivered to the three children. In her repeated interaction with the children, Our Lady complained about the situation of sin against the Lord and the Immaculate Heart. She recommended daily Rosary and other prayers and sacrifices for the conversion of sinners and for their salvation. The message of Fatima also includes the three secrets entrusted to the children. The first includes a vision of hell, the second includes that the First World War would end, but that another war, worse than the first would start within the pontificate of Pius XI if people continued to offend God. Our Lady also asked for the consecration of Russia and the Communion of reparation on First Saturdays. She promised that if her requests are granted, Russia would be converted and there would be peace. The third secret is said to be the prediction of the persecution of Christians in the 20th century and the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II in 1981.

54. The now famous miracle of the sun in October 1917 in the presence of about a hundred thousand worshippers is the most convincing proof of supernatural presence at Fatima. But with an eye of faith, we can say that the “Fatima message” has not been in vain. The rise of the movement of Block Rosary Crusade and several other Marian and Rosary Movements significantly increased in the Church, with special impact on Nigeria, especially East of the Niger.

It is also not out of place to link the deluge of prayers, especially the Rosary on account of the request of Our Lady of Fatima to the eventual fall of communism in the early nineteen-nineties. Today only three countries are officially communist, (namely, Vietnam, China and Cuba). The rest of the countries have tried to embrace democracy and freedom, including freedom of worship. The few that remain communist are no longer holding strictly to its tenets. Even though it is not too evident that Russia and other communist countries that abandoned atheistic communism have all been converted as promised by Our Lady if her request is granted, the atmosphere of freedom is

necessary for any future conversion. It means that we Christians should not rest on our oars. We should continue to pray, to recite the rosary daily, and never pretend that we have reached our ultimate point of arrival.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND DEVOTION TO MARY

55. The veneration of Mary as our mother is rooted on her role in the work of Our redemption, in the union between her and her son, and on her motherhood to us as heirs of her son's redemptive grace. It is on account of this relationship between her son and her and all the members of the body of Christ (the Church), that this solicitude as Mother Full of Grace, gives rise to her many apparitions. These apparitions express maternal and spiritual care for all the members of the communion of saints. Vatican II encourages the faithful to embrace devotion to Mary in naming her Mother of God and Mother of the Church.

The sacred synod teaches this Catholic doctrine advisedly and at the same time admonishes all the sons of the Church that the cult, especially the liturgical cult, of the Blessed Virgin, be generously fostered, and that the practices and exercises of piety or devotion towards her, recommended by the teaching authority of the Church in the course of centuries be highly esteemed. (Lumen Gentium, no 67).

56. Through her history, the Church has followed this guidance in relation to Mary. Today there are many Marian Sodalities, groups which aim to imitate Mary in their worship of God. Societies of Mary include; the Legion of Mary, the Block Rosary Crusade, the Blue Army of Our Lady and many more.

These associations are not independent in themselves. They are pious associations open to Christians to join. Through their activities in these societies and through the particular emphasis that are specific to them, members receive necessary assistance in serving God.

It must be underlined that in all cases, such societies must be within the Catholic fold as they are not meant to bring new doctrine and new moral teachings. They are rather meant to confirm, strengthen the faithful in the Christian life within the same Body of Christ, the Church.

Our devotion to Mary should not end in intercessory prayers through Mary or our membership of Marian groups and the practices they entail. A strong and important complement of our devotion to her is the imitation of Mary our Mother in her numerous virtues, including; Humility, Charity, Faith, Hope, Perseverance, Meditative Nature, Courage, Solidarity, Prayerful Communion, and many more. Like St. John the Evangelist, we must take Mary to our home and make her really our Mother.

SOME AUTHENTIC AND PRACTICAL DEVOTIONS TO MARY

57. We Catholics have numerous acts of devotion to Our Blessed Mother Mary these range from intercessory prayers through her, to various forms of filial veneration. Some of the most popular

include, Hail Mary, Hail Holy Queen, the memorare, the Holy Rosary, the Angelus, the may devotion, and total consecration to Jesus through Mary.

All these devotions are aimed at learning from Mary, imitating her virtues, and seeking her intercession.

On the other hand the Church warns us against abuses in Our devotion to Mary. The Church states, “Let the faithful remember that true devotion consists neither in sterile or transitory affection, nor in a certain vain credulity, but proceeds from true faith, by which we are led to know the excellence of the Mother of God, and we are moved to a filial love towards our Mother and to the imitation of her virtues”. (Lumen Gentium, no 67).

58. The servant of God Pope Paul VI reaffirms the teachings of the council in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Marialis Cultus*, no. 38. The Pope insists on some guidelines and principles for authentic devotion to Mary. These principles include that;

- Marian devotion must be Trinitarian
- It must be Christological
- It must be biblical
- Also Marian devotion should be liturgical, Ecclesial, Ecumenical and Anthropological.

It follows that Marian devotion which contradicts biblical revelations or teachings of the Church should be set aside. True devotion should not be based on exaggerations or mere sentiments.

CHAPTER NINE

MARY OUR MOTHER IN THE CONTEXT OF NIGERIA

59. The Nigerian Catholic Church has been very conscious of the position of Mary in the life of Christians. It is on account of this that, the Church as the Family of God in Nigeria, consecrated the country to our Lady in 1954, effectively making her the Queen of Nigeria. Again in 1960 at independence, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, consecrated Nigeria to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. This was in recognition of the powerful role Mary the mother of Jesus plays in the economy of man's salvation. Recently, during the 2017 celebration of the centenary of the apparition of Our Lady at Fatima and the celebration of a National Marian year, the Catholic Church in Nigeria re-consecrated the country to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Many dioceses including our own Onitsha Archdiocese did the same at the diocesan level.

These acts of the Catholic Church in Nigeria constitute a filial recognition of Mary's Motherhood, with the implication of being heir to her mystical and historical role in the life of the pilgrim Church. There are so many other signs of the consciousness of the role of Mary in the life of Christians. These include communal prayers in many families, in parishes and dioceses where the recitation of the rosary is a constant feature. Mary is honoured in the naming culture among

Catholics: personal names, names of institutions, including Churches, Schools and Universities, some of Our religious Congregations bear the name of Mary. Among these include the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary; and the Daughters and Sons of Mary Mother of Mercy. Many of Our Cathedral Churches bear the name of Mary.

60. Our sense of history must also be drawn to the roles devotions to Mary played and continues to play in the life of our young Church. The role of the members of the Legion of Mary in the work of evangelization and the role of the Block Rosary Crusade in shaping the religious and moral sensibilities of the Children especially after the Nigerian civil war in the areas where Catholic Missionaries were expelled, and Catholic Schools were confiscated from the Church. The Block Rosary enabled the Catholic Church to weather the storms generated by the expulsion of her missionaries and unjust confiscation of her schools by the government. The message of Fatima thus played an important role in the history of our local Church.

Today most of our schools have been handed back to the Church, we are once more challenged to make proper use of the avenues we have for proper evangelization. As children of Mary we have the responsibility of showing the light to the world, and becoming models of uprightness in our specific context of Nigeria.

CHAPTER TEN

LEARNING AT THE SCHOOL OF MARY

61. Mary is an excellent example of discipleship for all Christians, Catholics and non-Catholics. We know that achievement and success become easier when we have a model to look up to especially when we personally love and admire our model. Above all, imitating our model becomes much easier when we are sure that our model is excellent and efficient in the field we want to pursue. On this point St. John Paul II has this to say about Mary; “Christ is the supreme Teacher, the revealer and the one revealed. It is not just a question of learning what he taught but of “learning him”. In this regard, could we have any better teacher than Mary? From the divine standpoint, the Spirit is the interior teacher who leads us to the full truth of Christ (cf. Jn 14:26, 15:26;16: 13). But among creatures no one knows Christ better than Mary; no one can introduce us to a profound knowledge of his mystery better than his Mother... This school of Mary is all the more effective if we consider that she teaches by obtaining for us in abundance the gifts of the Holy Spirit, even as she offers us the incomparable example of her own “pilgrimage of faith”(Rosarium Virgins Mariae no. 14). To enrol into the school of Mary is to take Mary as our model, our mentor and our teacher.

62. When we learn from Mary She teaches us:

- Love for the word of God which she always contemplated
- Love for Christ's divinity in the Holy Eucharist as she discovered and encountered the divinity of Christ even in his physical presence
- Love for prayer which she so loved and practiced.

·Love for neighbour, which she lived and demonstrated

·Love for Jesus, her son whom she loved.

63. Again it is always easy to learn from or imitate a teacher whom we love. And, I will like to conclude this chapter by giving you ten reasons why I love Mary.

1. God came to us through Mary, so we can go to him through her.

2. Jesus took flesh through Mary. God who is Spirit became visible through Mary so she is an Epiphany-manifestation of the divine.

3. She is full of Grace (LK. 1:28) she can therefore obtain grace for us

4. Her intercession is always effective. (cf. Jn 2:1-10)

5. When we are lost Mary searches for us as she searched for Jesus (LK. 2:46)

6. She has a special relationship with the blessed Trinity

·Daughter of the Father

·Beloved Mother of the Son

·Beloved spouse of the Holy Spirit

7. Mary was the last gift Jesus gave to humanity. Jn. 19:26-27

8. She is a woman of peace who did the will of God. She heard the word of God and kept it.

9. She is a woman of the scriptures. She was familiar with the sacred book.

10. She was a woman of gratitude. She was full of grace and full of gratitude.

CONCLUSION

TAKE MARY HOME.

64. Before Jesus died on the cross for us he gave us his Mother Mary to be our Mother. The Gospel of John records that “Near the Cross of Jesus stood his Mother ... when Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, “woman here is your son” and to the disciple “Here is your Mother”. From that time on, this disciple took her into his home” (John 19:25-27). These last words of Jesus did not refer only to Mary and John but also to Mary and all the believers, all disciples of Jesus who would accept her as their Mother.

As Christians we should all be strengthened by the last words of the crucified Lord to his beloved Apostle, "Behold your mother". With every confidence each and every one of us should take Mary to his or her home as our Mother. The Motherhood of Mary to all of us, to all the members of the mystical body of Christ is not only proven by the history of our faith, it is also attested to by the sacred Scriptures, by the tradition of the Church and by the sensus fidei.

65. The theological foundation of Mary's Motherhood to us is strongly based on our relationship with Christ. Because we are really the body of Christ, because he dares to call us his brothers, and because by baptism we have embraced his death and his resurrection, his mother is also our Mother.

We are happy to proclaim that Mary our Mother is without doubt the first and the best Christian. She is thus a shining model for all of us. She has been prepared by God to be the unblemished mother of his son. The Blessed Virgin is thus a symbol to behold and to keep in sight for all Christians. Let us endeavour to be true children of Mary. Let us take Mary home and be under her maternal care.

PRAYER

66. Almighty Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, you have revealed the beauty of your power by exalting the lowly virgin of Nazareth and making her the mother of Our Saviour and our mother. May the prayers of this woman, clothed with the sun bring Jesus to the waiting world and fill the void of incompleteness with the presence of her child, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen

(Adapted from the alternative collect of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary).

**Given in Onitsha, at the Cathedral Basilica of the Most Holy Trinity, on 14th February,
Ash Wednesday, in the year of our Lord 2018**

+MOST REV. VALERIAN M. OKEKE

Archbishop of Onitsha

