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Beside the Cross of Jesus: Magisterium, Saints, Poets

Texts from the magisterium,
saints and Christian poets
reflecting on the presence of
Christ's Mother at his
crucifixion.

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VOICE OF THE MAGISTERIUM

In the public life of Jesus, Mary makes significant appearances. This is so even at the very beginning, when at the marriage feast of Cana,

moved with pity, she brought about by her intercession the beginning of miracles of Jesus the Messiah. In the course of her Son's preaching she received the words whereby in extolling a kingdom beyond the calculations and bonds of flesh and blood, He declared blessed those who heard and kept the word of God, as she was faithfully doing. After this manner the Blessed Virgin advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and faithfully persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross, where she stood, in keeping with the divine plan, grieving exceedingly with her only begotten Son, uniting herself with a maternal heart with His sacrifice, and lovingly consenting to the immolation of this Victim which she herself had brought forth.

Finally, she was given by the same Christ Jesus dying on the cross as a mother to His disciple with these words: *Woman, behold thy son* (cf. Jn 19: 26-27).

(from *Lumen Gentium*, no. 58)

The Blessed Virgin's "standing erect" at the foot of the Cross recalls her unfailing constancy and extraordinary courage in facing suffering. In the tragic events of Calvary, Mary is sustained by faith, strengthened during the events of her life and especially during Jesus' public life. The Council recalls that "the Blessed Virgin advanced in her pilgrimage of faith and faithfully persevered in her union with her Son unto the Cross" (*Lumen gentium*, no. 58).

Sharing his deepest feelings, she counters the arrogant insults addressed to the crucified Messiah with forbearance and pardon, associating herself with his prayer to the Father: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). By sharing in the feeling of abandonment to the Father's will

expressed in Jesus' last words on the Cross: "Father into your hands I commend my spirit!" (ibid., 23:46), she thus offers, as the Council notes, loving consent "to the immolation of this victim which was born of her" (*Lumen gentium*, no. 58).

(from John Paul II, General Audience, April 2, 1997)

What is the meaning of Mary's unique co-operation in the plan of salvation? It should be sought in God's particular intention for the Mother of the Redeemer, whom on two solemn occasions, that is, at Cana and beneath the Cross, Jesus addresses as "Woman" (cf. Jn 2, 4; 19, 26). Mary is associated as a woman in the work of salvation. Having created man "male and female" (cf. Gn 1:27), the Lord also wants to place the New Eve beside the New Adam in the Redemption. Our first parents had chosen the way of sin as a

couple; a new pair, the Son of God with his Mother's co-operation, would re-establish the human race in its original dignity.

Mary, the New Eve, thus becomes a perfect icon of the Church. In the divine plan, at the foot of the Cross, she represents redeemed humanity which, in need of salvation, is enabled to make a contribution to the unfolding of the saving work.

(from John Paul II, General Audience, April 9, 1997)

After recalling the presence of Mary and the other women at the Lord's cross, St John relates: "When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!'. Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!'" (Jn 19:26-27). These particularly moving words are a "revelation scene": they reveal the deep sentiments of the

dying Christ and contain a great wealth of meaning for Christian faith and spirituality. At the end of his earthly life, as he addressed his Mother and the disciple he loved, the crucified Messiah establishes a new relationship of love between Mary and Christians.

Interpreted at times as no more than an expression of Jesus' filial piety towards his Mother whom he entrusts for the future to his beloved disciple, these words go far beyond the contingent need to solve a family problem. In fact, attentive consideration of the text, confirmed by the interpretation of many Fathers and by common ecclesial opinion, presents us, in Jesus' twofold entrustment, with one of the most important events for understanding the Virgin's role in the economy of salvation.

The words of the dying Jesus actually show that his first intention was not to entrust his Mother to John, but to entrust the disciple to Mary and to give her a new maternal role.

Moreover, the epithet "woman", also used by Jesus at the wedding in Cana to lead Mary to a new dimension of her existence as Mother, shows how the Saviour's words are not the fruit of a simple sentiment of filial affection but are meant to be put at a higher level....

Instead, Jesus' words acquire their most authentic meaning in the context of his saving mission. Spoken at the moment of the redemptive sacrifice, they draw their loftiest value precisely from this sublime circumstance. In fact, after Jesus' statements to his Mother, the Evangelist adds a significant clause: "Jesus, knowing that all was now finished...." (Jn 19:28), as if he wished to stress that he had brought his

sacrifice to completion by entrusting his Mother to John, and in him to all men, whose Mother she becomes in the work of salvation.

(from John Paul II, General Audience, April 23, 1997)

From the title "Mother of God" are drawn all the other titles with which the Church honors Mary, but this one is the fundamental title. We think of the privilege of the "Immaculate Conception," of being, that is, immune from sin from the moment of her conception: Mary was preserved from every stain of sin because she had to be the Mother of the Redeemer. The same goes for the title "Assumed": she who gave birth to the Savior could not be subjected to the corruption that comes from original sin. And we know that all these privileges are not given to distance Mary from us, but on the contrary to make her more near; in

fact, being totally with God, this Woman is very close to us and helps us as mother and sister. Even the unique and unrepeatable place that Mary has in the community of believers derives from this fundamental vocation of being the Mother of the Redeemer. Precisely as such, Mary is also the Mother of the Mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church. Justly, then, during the Second Vatican Council, on November 21, 1964, Paul VI solemnly attributed to Mary the title of "Mother of the Church."

Precisely because Mother of the Church, the Virgin is also Mother of each one of us, who are members of the Mystical Body of Christ. From the cross Jesus entrusted the Mother to each of his disciples and, at the same time, entrusted each of his disciples to the love his Mother. The evangelist John concludes his brief and suggestive account with the words:

“And from that moment the disciple took her into his house” (John 19:27) . . . he welcomed her into his own reality, into his being . . . Thus, in the supreme moment of the fulfillment of his messianic mission, Jesus leaves to each of his disciples, as a precious inheritance, his own Mother, the Virgin Mary.

(from Benedict XVI, General Audience, January 2, 2008)

VOICE OF THE SAINTS

We may therefore make bold to say that the Gospels are the first fruits of all the Scriptures, but that of the Gospels that of John is the first fruits. No one can apprehend the meaning of it except he have lain on Jesus' breast and received from Jesus Mary to be his mother also. Such an one must he become who is to be another John, and to have shown to him, like John, by Jesus Himself Jesus as He is. For if Mary, as those declare who

with sound mind extol her, had no other son but Jesus, and yet Jesus says to His mother, "Woman, behold thy son," and not "Behold you have this son also," then He virtually said to her, "Lo, this is Jesus, whom thou didst bear." Is it not the case that every one who is perfect lives himself no longer, but Christ lives in him; and if Christ lives in him, then it is said of him to Mary, "Behold thy son Christ."

from Origen (3rd c.), "Commentary on John," I, 6

Truly, O blessed Mother, a sword has pierced your heart. For only by passing through your heart could the sword enter the flesh of your Son. Indeed, after your Jesus – who belongs to everyone, but is especially yours – gave up his life, the cruel spear, which was not withheld from his lifeless body, tore open his side. Clearly it did not touch his soul and

could not harm him, but it did pierce your heart. For surely his soul was no longer there, but yours could not be torn away. Thus the violence of sorrow has cut through your heart, and we rightly call you more than martyr, since the effect of compassion in you has gone beyond the endurance of physical suffering.

Do not be surprised, brothers, that Mary is said to be a martyr in spirit. Let him be surprised who does not remember the words of Paul, that one of the greatest crimes of the Gentiles was that they were without love. That was far from the heart of Mary; let it be far from her servants.

Perhaps someone will say: "Had she not known before that he would die?" Undoubtedly. "Did she not expect him to rise again at once?" Surely. "And still she grieved over her crucified Son?" Intensely. Who are you and what is the source of

your wisdom that you are more surprised at the compassion of Mary than at the passion of Mary's Son? For if he could die in body, could she not die with him in spirit? He died in body through a love greater than anyone had known. She died in spirit through a love unlike any other since his.

from St. Bernard of Clairvoux (12th c.), Sermon on the Assumption

Because Mary is our mother, devotion to her teaches us to be authentic sons: to love truly, without limit; to be simple, without the complications which come from selfishly thinking only about ourselves; to be happy, knowing that nothing can destroy our hope. "The beginning of the way, at the end of which you will find yourself completely carried away by love for Jesus, is a trusting love for Mary." I wrote that many years ago, in the

introduction to a short book on the rosary, and since then I have often experienced the truth of those words. I am not going to complete that thought here with all sorts of reasons. I invite you to discover it for yourself, showing your love for Mary, opening your heart to her, confiding to her your joys and sorrows, asking her to help you recognize and follow Jesus.

from St. Josemaria, "Christ Is Passing By," no. 143

VOICE OF THE POETS

By the cross of expiation

The Mother stood, and kept her station,

Weeping for her Son and Lord:

With the nails his hands were riven;

Through her heart the sword was driven,

Simeon's dread, predicted sword.

Oh, that blessed one grief-laden,

Blessed Mother, blessed Maiden,

Mother of the All-holy One;

Oh, that silent, ceaseless mourning,

Oh, those dim eyes never turning

From that wondrous, suffering Son.

Who is of nature human

Tearless that could watch the
Woman?

Hear unmoved that Mother's moan?

Who, unchanged in shape and
colour,

Who could mark that Mother's
dour,

Weeping with her Son alone?

For his people's sins the All-holy
There she saw, a victim lowly,
Bleed in torments, bleed and die:
Saw the Lord's Anointed taken;
Saw her Child in death forsaken;
Heard his last expiring cry.
Fount of love and sacred sorrow,
Mother, may my spirit borrow
Sadness from thy holy woe;
May it love - on fire within me -
Christ, my God, till great love win me
Grace to please him here below.
Those five wounds of Jesus smitten,
Mother, in my heart be written
Deeply as in thine they be;

Thou my Savior's cross who bearest,
Thou my Son's rebuke who sharest,
Let me share them both with thee.
In the passion of my maker
Be my sinful soul partaker;
Let me weep till death with thee;
Unto me this boon be given,
By thy side, like thee bereaven.
To stand beneath the atoning tree.
Virgin holiest, Virgin purest,
Of that anguish thou endurest
Make me bear with thee my part;
Of his passion bear the token
In a spirit bowed and broken,
Bear his death within my heart.

May his wounds both wound and
heal me;

His blood enkindle, cleanse, anneal
me;

Be his cross my hope and stay:

Virgin, when the mountains quiver,
From that flame which burns for
ever,

Shield me on the judgement-day.

Christ, when he that shaped me calls
me,

When advancing death appals me,

Through her prayer the storm make
calm:

When to dust my dust returneth

Save a soul to thee that yearneth;

Grant it thou the crown and palm.

Jacopone Da Todi (1228-1306)

Translated from the Latin by A. De
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