

Holy Mass
26th Plenary Assembly
Pontifical Council for the Laity
Proclaiming Christ in the digital era

Homily

“Mary under the gaze of God”

(Gn 3:9-15.20 - Eph 1:3-6.11-12 - Lk 1:26-38)

Mass on the vigil of the Solemnity
of the Immaculate Conception of the B.V.M.

Villa Aurelia chapel
Rome, 7 December 2013, 7 p.m.

Your eminences, excellencies,
Confreres in the episcopacy and priesthood,
Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

From the great collection of homilies that we have received from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger over the years, there is one that has left a lasting impression on me. It was given sixteen years ago on 8 December 1997, the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception and the feast of the patron of the Archconfraternity of Our Lady of Mercy of the Germans and Flemish, to which we both belong.¹ I think that it would be good to meditate on the profound original thoughts of the cardinal-theologian and Pope Benedict XVI, even after his resignation from the petrine ministry, regarding the mystery of the Immaculate Conception.

1. The essence of communion with God

The cardinal began this reflection in 1997 with the question: what does the fact that the mother of Jesus is the “Immaculate” mean for our faith? His immediate

¹ Cfr. German Rovira (ed.), *Immaculata* - Gedanken zur Unbefleckten Empfängnis von Joseph Kardinal Ratzinger, Joachim Kardinal Meisner, Leo Kardinal Scheffczyk, fe-medien Verlag, Kisslegg 2004, 11-20; Joseph Ratzinger, «*Tu sei la piena di grazia*», Elementi per una devozione mariana biblica, in: Id., *Maria. Chiesa nascente*, Edizioni San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 1998, 51-68; Michele Giulio Masciarelli, *Il segno della Donna*. Maria nella teologia di Joseph Ratzinger, Edizioni San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2007, 24-41.

response was surprising: “The ‘Immaculate’ simply means that Mary is a person who responds to God’s idea of her in an unlimited way. To be ‘immaculate’ means to be completely transparent towards God. The Immaculate is a person who puts no limits to being what a person should essentially be – in the image of God. In Mary the image of God is not disfigured or altered, stained or soiled. Her life allows God to shine through in an unlimited way.”²

This reply gives rise to a second question: *who* is God and *what* is God like? The cardinal replied: “The deepest and purest answer was given by John the Evangelist who wrote that ‘God is love’ (1Jn 4:8).³ God is love and therefore is not alone. The triune God communicates and speaks of God’s self and autonomously creates the eternal space between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”⁴

God’s identity as communion means that God communicates and wants to be “poured out” abundantly. This desire brought creation into being, and creation transmits and reflects God’s beauty and goodness. God loves and can be loved. This “identity” is followed by another distinctive feature of God’s that Cardinal Ratzinger presented with the words addressed to Moses in the Book of Exodus: “I have indeed seen the misery of my people ... I have heard them crying out ... So I have come down to rescue them” (cf *Ex* 3:7-8). It is because God is love that God suffers with us. The Compassionate One does not withdraw but goes out and enters into the suffering of humankind. God who is love goes precisely to those places where the world is at its saddest, dirtiest and most miserable, where the voice of misery is most heard and where there is most need of love.”⁵

2. *Humanity’s fear of the love of God*

Eight years later on 8 December 2005, Cardinal Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI, again gave a homily for the feast of the day, the only one of his almost eight-year pontificate. The Pope focused on humanity’s response to the gift of God’s love.⁶

□ Ratzinger, *Schmerzensmutter und Unbefleckt Empfangene* 11 s. (Traduzione propria); cfr. Benedetto XVI, *Pregliera* in occasione dell’ omaggio all’Immacolata a Piazza di Spagna, 8 dic. 2005, in: *Insegnamenti* I (2005), 951-953, 951; Benedetto XVI, *Discorso* in occasione dell’atto di venerazione all’Immacolata a Piazza di Spagna, 8 dic. 2009, in: *Insegnamenti* V, 2 (2009), 671-673; Benedetto XVI, *Discorso* in occasione dell’atto di venerazione all’Immacolata a Piazza di Spagna, 8 dic. 2012, in: O. R., n. 284, 11-12 dic. 2012, 8.

□ Cfr. Benedetto XVI, Lettera Enciclica «*Deus caritas est*», 25 dic. 2005, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2005.

□ Ratzinger, *Schmerzensmutter und Unbefleckt Empfangene* 13.

□ Ibid.

□ Cfr. Benedetto XVI, *Omelia* durante la solenne Concelebrazione Eucaristica nella solennità dell’Immacolata Concezione in occasione del 40° anniversario della conclusione del Concilio Ecumenico Vaticano II. L’Immacolata all’uomo di oggi: «Compromettiti con Dio», in: *Insegnamenti* I (2005), 942-947.

In his meditation on the image of the serpent that came in the first reading taken from the Book of Genesis (cf *Gen* 3:9-15.20), Benedict XVI said that this biblical passage tells of the struggle between humankind and the serpent, that is, between humankind and the powers of evil and death that would continue throughout all of history.⁷ This is how the meaning of *original sin*, inherited sin, becomes clear, and it also explains the protection we have from that inherited sin, the meaning of redemption.

Right down to our times it can be seen that human beings have not trusted God but have been tempted by the serpent's words (cf *Gen* 3:5). We are afraid that God will take something from our lives, that God is a competitor limiting our freedom, and that it is only by putting God aside that we can be completely free. People feel that God's love can create dependence and so they do not want to receive their existence from God and the fullness of life.⁸

Human beings want to take from the tree of knowledge and shape the world. They want to be gods and to rise to God's level, and they want to vanquish death and darkness with their own strength. Human beings do not want to depend on God's love. They rely on knowledge because it gives them power. They rely on power and not on love, and so they take their lives into their own hands. In so doing, they trust more in lies than in truth, and their lives fall into emptiness, into death.⁹

However, God's love does not create dependency. It is a gift that makes us live. We live an upright life if we live according to the truth of our being, that is, according to God's will. It is not a law imposed from outside. It is the intrinsic measure of our nature, a measure inscribed in each one through which we are in the image of God and hence free creatures.¹⁰

Benedict XVI stressed that the *Book of Genesis* does not only speak of the past, but also of the present. We all have a "drop of poison" of this way of thinking, and this "drop" is called original sin. It is precisely on the feast of the Immaculate Conception that the suspicion arises that if we do not sin, then something is missing from our humanity. We suspect that, without sin, human beings will lack the drama of being autonomous which implies the power to say no and the will to act alone. We think that this is the only way to enjoy existence thoroughly, and we put freedom to the test against God. Benedict XVI

□ Cfr. Benedetto, *Omelia* ; cfr. anche Joseph Ratzinger, *La figlia di Sion*. La devozione a Maria nella Chiesa, Editoriale Jaca Book, Milano 21995, 59-68.

□ Cfr. Joseph Kardinal Ratzinger, *Dio e il mondo*. Essere cristiani nel nuovo millennio In colloquio con Peter Seewald, Edizioni San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2001, 276 s.

□ Cfr. J. Ratzinger, *Considerazioni sulla posizione della mariologia e della devozione mariana nel complesso della fede e della teologia*, in: Id., *Maria - Chiesa nascente*, 11-27, 23.

□ Cfr. Benedetto XVI, *Omelia* 945.

summarised by saying: “we think that evil is basically good, we think that we need it, at least a little, in order to experience the fullness of being.”¹¹

3. *Mary “full of grace” is our example*

In his homily in 1997, Cardinal Ratzinger said that the reply given by Mary, the “full of grace”, is totally different from the way of thinking and acting we have described.¹² Mary’s reply to the words of the angel Gabriel (“Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you”) show us that the example of the “autonomous” person described above is not the way to go. Mary freely accepts the grace that God offers: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word”.¹³

Benedict XVI reminds us that in the passage in the Book of Genesis “it was also foretold that the ‘offspring’ of a woman would one day triumph and would crush the head of the serpent to death; it was foretold that the offspring of the woman – and in this offspring the woman and the mother herself – would be victorious and that thus, through humankind, God would triumph.”¹⁴ This prophesy was fulfilled in Mary.

In order to explain the concept of grace, Cardinal Ratzinger took Saint Paul’s explanation in the second reading taken from the Letter to the Ephesians (*Eph* 1:3-6.11-12). All believers are described in that passage with the words “*sancti et immaculati*”.¹⁵ All believers should look to the true essence of the Church which was fulfilled in Mary. The essence of being immaculate, the ultimate meaning of which is *grace*, is explained by Saint Paul as “*in conspectu Dei stare, in caritate*”, to stand “*al suo cospetto nella carità*” (cf *Eph* 1:4).¹⁶ This means: *to be in love before God’s face, to stand in the sight of God and to look towards God.*

Grace is to be *looked upon by God, to allow ourselves to be looked upon by God, and to place ourselves in God’s light.* Grace is relationship. It is the *reciprocal gaze* of God and human beings.¹⁷ This relationship is not something external for human beings. On the contrary, it touches us to the depths of our

□ Benedetto XVI, *Omelia* 945 s.

□ Ratzinger, *Schmerzensmutter und Unbefleckt Empfangene* 19; cfr. Id., «*Tu sei piena di grazia*», in: Id., *Maria – Chiesa nascente* 51-68.

□ *Ibd.*

□ Benedetto XVI, *Omelia* 945.

□ Cfr. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Der Brief an die Epheser*, in: EKK X, 42-63; Joachim Gnilka, *Der Epheserbrief*, in: HThK NT, 55-84; Heinrich Schlier, *Der Brief an die Epheser. Ein Kommentar*, Editrice Patmos Düsseldorf 1957, 37-68.

□ Cfr. Ratzinger, *Schmerzensmutter und Unbefleckt Empfangene* 18; Benedetto XVI, *Preghiera in occasione dell’ omaggio all’Immacolata a Piazza di Spagna*, 8 dic. 2006, in: *Insegnamenti* II, 2 (2006), 771-774, 772.

□ Cfr. Ratzinger, «*Tu sei piena di grazia*» 56 s.

being and transforms us, because it is a creative force. To be under God's gaze means to be seen and touched by his love. Love cannot be produced by itself. It comes into being because it came into us from above and so awakens within us.¹⁸

Mary is the one who fearlessly stood humbly and believing before God's gaze. Thus it became her path in life. Mary is calling us today and shows us the true meaning of the feast. She is saying: Allow God to look upon you. You do not need to fear that God may not exist or may be far from us, or that God may not want to look at the reality of this world. Do not be afraid that God's gaze might take something from your small freedoms. Do not be afraid that it might be dangerous to find yourself under God's gaze.

Let us remember that Adam no longer wanted to be seen by God. He no longer considered God to be a friend, but rather a competitor (cf *Gen* 3:8). We are the same in that we fear that God might take away the best and most joyful part of our lives. We feel threatened by God's gaze.

Mary, on the other hand, tells us to trust God. She says: Allow God to look upon you because God exists. When you place yourself under God's gaze, God touches you and you immediately recognise and follow Him. Only in this way can the really Great enter your life. This is how your life will be upright, because love not only gazes, but also touches and works creatively in you. It helps you discover the beauty of the world and the truth of God, even in those who suffer.

The solemnity of the Immaculate Conception reminds us that those who abandon themselves completely into the hands of God will not lose their freedom. On the contrary, they find it with its full meaning. They will find the great, creative immensity of the freedom of goodness. It reminds us that those who turn to God do not become smaller. They become greater and really become themselves.¹⁹ Trust in God does not distance us from others and cause us to retreat to a private salvation. On the contrary, our hearts open up, we become more sensitive and kind and open up towards others.²⁰

Mary shows us that people who are close to God are closer to other people. That is why she can be Mother of every consolation and help. She is a Mother to whom we can go in our need. Anyone can have recourse to her in their

□ Cfr. Ratzinger, *Schmerzensmutter und Unbefleckt Empfangene* 19.

□ Cfr. Benedetto XVI. *Omelia* nella S. Messa per il centocinquantenario delle apparizioni della Madonna alla Prairie, Lourdes, 14 sett. 2008, in: *Insegnamenti* IV, 2 (2008), 307-312, 310.

□ Cfr. Benedetto XVI, *Omelia* 946 s.

weakness and sin because she is understanding and has the power of creative goodness.²¹

Benedict XVI concluded that homily of eight years ago with the words: “Mary thus stands before us as a sign of comfort, encouragement and hope. She turns to us, saying: ‘Have the courage to dare with God! Try it! Do not be afraid of him! Have the courage to take the plunge with faith! ... with goodness! ... with a pure heart! Commit yourselves to God, then you will see that it is precisely by doing so that your life will be enlarged and brighter. It will not be boring, but will be filled with infinite surprises, for God's infinite goodness is never depleted!’. On this Feast Day, let us thank the Lord for the great sign of his goodness which he has given us in Mary, his Mother and the Mother of the Church. Let us pray to him to place Mary on our path to be a light that will help us also to become a light and to carry this light into the nights of history. Amen.”²²

✠ *Bishop Josef Clemens*
Secretary of the Pontifical Council for the Laity
Vatican City

□ Benedetto XVI, *Omelia* 947: “È in lei che Dio imprime la propria immagine, l'immagine di Colui che segue la pecorella smarrita fin nelle montagne e fin tra gli spini e i pruni dei peccati di questo mondo, lasciandosi ferire dalla corona di spine di questi peccati, per prendere la pecorella sulle sue spalle e portarla a casa. Come Madre che compatisce, Maria è la figura anticipata e il ritratto permanente del Figlio ... Il suo cuore, mediante l'essere e il sentire insieme con Dio, si è allargato. In lei la bontà di Dio si è avvicinata e si avvicina molto a noi.”

□ Ibid.