

**Mary at Calvary, united with her Son and his Sacrifice**

This Palm Sunday is a suitable time to reflect on Mary's presence at Calvary, and the part God willed her to play in our redemption. We know well the words from John's Gospel: 'Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 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!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.' (*Jn* 19:25-27)

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us, 'Jesus desires to associate with his redeeming sacrifice those who were to be its first beneficiaries. This is achieved supremely in the case of his mother, who was associated more intimately than any other person in the mystery of his redemptive suffering.' (618) The *Catechism* refers here to the words of Simeon at the Presentation, 'A sword will pierce through your own soul also'. (*Lk* 2:35)

In its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (1964), Vatican II set forth this inner meaning of Mary's presence at Calvary. The Council wrote: 'The Blessed Virgin advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and faithfully persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross...' (58)

St John Paul II explained how Mary's union with her dying Son was indeed 'a union through faith – the same faith with which she had received the angel's revelation at the Annunciation. At that moment she had also heard the words: "He will be great...and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end" (*Lk* 1:32-33). And now, standing at the foot of the Cross, Mary is the witness, humanly speaking, of the complete negation of these words...How great, how heroic then is the obedience of faith shown by Mary in the face of God's "unsearchable judgments"! ...Through this faith Mary is perfectly united with Christ in his self-emptying.' (*Redemptoris Mater* (1987) 18)

This then is the supreme moment of her 'pilgrimage of faith'. '[There] 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.' (*Lumen Gentium* 58)

In the language of sacrifice, 'immolation' means the slaying of the sacrificial victim. The word 'victim' itself, though typically used today simply to mean anyone who is harmed by another, derives that meaning by extension from the Latin *victima*, which simply meant 'that which is slain in sacrifice'; and the original meaning of 'sacrifice' (Latin *sacrificium* – make sacred, set apart) was 'to offer something as a gift to a deity'. These interrelated terms were first religious.

Christ was immolated as sacrificial Victim on Calvary – not of course by his own hand, yet with his free acceptance as he offered himself to the Father; and as we hear in those words of Vatican II, this immolation was lovingly consented to by his Mother. She 'offered him on Golgotha to the Eternal Father for all the children of Adam...and her mother's rights and her mother's love were included' in the offering. (Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis Christi* (1943) 110)

The Council explained in depth the spiritual motherhood of Mary conferred by her Son at Calvary. [In a singular way] ‘she cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the work of the Saviour in giving back supernatural life to souls. Wherefore she is our mother in the order of grace. This...began with the consent which she gave in faith at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the cross, and lasts until the eternal fulfilment of all the elect. Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this salvific duty, but by her constant intercession continued to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation...Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked by the Church under the titles of Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Adjutrix, and Mediatrix.’ (*Lumen Gentium* 61-62)

In his encyclical on the Immaculate Conception *Ad diem illum* (1904) for the fiftieth anniversary of the definition of the dogma, Pope St Pius X wrote: ‘When the supreme hour of the Son came, beside the Cross of Jesus there stood Mary His Mother, not merely occupied in contemplating the cruel spectacle, but rejoicing that her Only Son was offered for the salvation of mankind, and so entirely participating in His Passion, that if it had been possible she would have gladly borne all the torments that her Son bore. And from this community of will and suffering between Christ and Mary she merited to become most worthily the Reparatrix of the lost world and Dispensatrix of all the gifts that Our Saviour purchased for us by His Death and by His Blood.’ (12)

‘[We are] very far from attributing to the Mother of God a productive power of grace – a power which belongs to God alone. Yet, since Mary...has been associated by Jesus Christ in the work of redemption, she merits for us *de congruo*, in the language of theologians, what Jesus Christ merits for us *de condigno*, and she is the supreme Minister of the distribution of graces.’ (14)

That means that on the one hand, only Christ merits the graces of our redemption *by strict right*. Because he is the infinite Son of God, his redemptive action is truly deserving, in God’s justice, of obtaining salvation for the world. This cannot be said of Mary’s role. But as Pius X states, she merits ‘*de congruo*’ to dispense these graces of salvation. Granting her this role is not strictly required for God to be true to his own justice. Yet, it is *congruous* – fitting and suitable – that the graces of Christ be dispensed through the hands of the one who cooperated so fully and lovingly in Christ’s self-offering (her cooperation itself deriving totally from God’s prior gift of grace to her).

Mary’s faith, hope and charity, St Pius X continued, ‘attained their highest degree of splendour at the time when she stood by her dying Son. Jesus is nailed to the cross, and the malediction is hurled against Him that “He made Himself the Son of God” (*Jn* 19:7). But she unceasingly recognised and adored the divinity in Him. She bore His dead body to the tomb, but never for a moment doubted that He would rise again. Then the love of God with which she burned made her a partaker in the sufferings of Christ and the associate in His passion; with him moreover, as if forgetful of her own sorrow, she prayed for the pardon of the executioners...’ (21)

As we celebrate in these days our Lord’s saving Passion, Death and Resurrection, may we do so in union with this faith, hope and charity of Mary – and thus through her intercession receiving richness of graces for ourselves, and ourselves becoming channels of grace to others.