

2023 -2024 Year of Prayer

Pope Francis' Catechesis on Prayer, arranged for each liturgical week

Mary Mother of God, and the Epiphany

7th January 2024

In our readings for these two great Christmas feasts we see in Mary's feast, the shepherds, guided by angels, then at the Epiphany feast the kings guided by the star, both coming to do homage to this child who is son of God and son of Mary. On 24th March 2021 Pope Francis gave a catechesis on Mary, mother of God and our mother. This helps us to enter into these mysteries and unite ourselves to Mary and her son.

Praying in communion with Mary

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Good morning!

Today the catechesis is dedicated to prayer in communion with Mary. It occurs precisely on the Vigil of the Solemnity of the Annunciation. We know that the main pathway of Christian prayer is the humanity of Jesus. In fact, the confidence typical of Christian prayer would be meaningless if the Word had not become incarnate, giving us, in the Spirit, his filial relationship with the Father. We heard in the Reading of the gathering of the disciples, the pious women and Mary, praying after Jesus' Ascension. The first Christian community was awaiting Jesus' gift, Jesus' promise.

Christ is the Mediator, the bridge that we cross to turn to the Father (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2674). He is the only Redeemer: there are no co-redeemers with Christ. He is the Mediator *par excellence*. He is *the* Mediator. Each prayer we raise to God is through Christ, with Christ and in Christ, and is fulfilled thanks to his intercession. The Holy Spirit extends Christ's mediation to every time and every place: there is no other name by which we can be saved (cf. *Acts* 4:12). Jesus Christ, the only Mediator between God and humanity.

Other references Christians find for their prayer and devotion take on meaning from Christ's sole mediation, first among them, the Virgin Mary, Jesus' Mother.

She occupies a privileged place in the lives of Christians, and therefore, in their prayer as well, because she is the Mother of Jesus. Eastern Churches have often depicted her as the *Odigitria*, the one who "shows the way"; that is, her Son, Jesus Christ. The beautiful, ancient painting of the *Odigitria* in the Cathedral of Bari comes to my mind. It is simple. Our Lady who shows Jesus, naked. Then they put a shirt on him to cover his nakedness, but the truth is that Jesus is depicted naked, to reveal that he, man, born of Mary, is the Mediator. And she indicates the Mediator: she is the *Odigitria*. Her presence is everywhere in Christian iconography, sometimes very prominently, but always in relation to her Son and in connection with him. Her hands, her eyes, her behaviour are a living "catechesis", always indicating the cornerstone, the centre: Jesus. Mary is completely directed toward him (cf. *CCC*, 2674) to such an extent that we can say she is more disciple than Mother. That indication, at the wedding at Cana, Mary states: "do whatever he will tell you". She always refers to Christ. She is the first disciple.

This is the role Mary fulfilled throughout her entire earthly life and which she forever retains: to be the humble handmaid of the Lord, nothing more. At a certain point in the Gospels, she almost seems to disappear; but she reappears in the crucial moments, such as at Cana, when her Son, thanks to

her caring intervention, performs his first “sign” (cf. *Jn* 2:1-12), and then on Golgotha at the foot of the cross.

Jesus extended Mary’s maternity to the entire Church when he entrusted her to his beloved disciple shortly before dying on the cross. From that moment on, we have all been gathered under her mantle, as depicted in certain medieval frescoes or paintings. Even the first Latin antiphon —*sub tuum praesidium confugimus, sancta Dei Genitrix*: Our Lady, who, as the Mother to whom Jesus entrusted us, ‘enfolds’ us all; but as a Mother, not as a goddess, not as co-redeemer: as a Mother. It is true that Christian piety has always given her beautiful titles, as a child gives his or her mom: how many beautiful things children say to their mom whom they love so much! But let us be careful: the beautiful things that the Church, the Saints, say about Mary, take nothing away from Christ’s sole Redemption. He is the only Redeemer. They are expressions of love like a child for his or her mom — some are exaggerated. But love, as we know, always makes us exaggerate things, but out of love.

And so, we began to pray to her using several expressions present in the Gospels directed to her: “full of grace”, “blessed are you among women” (cf. CCC, 2676s.). Sanctioned by the Council of Ephesus, the title “Theotokos”, “Mother of God”, was soon added to the Hail Mary. And, analogously as with the Our Father, after the praise we add the supplication: we ask Mary to pray for us sinners, that she intercede with her tenderness, “now and at the hour of our death”. Now, in life’s concrete situations, and in the final moment, so that she may accompany us — as Mother, as the first disciple — in our passage to eternal life.

Mary is always present at the bedside of her children when they depart this world. If someone is alone and abandoned, she is Mother, she is nearby, as she was beside her Son when everyone had abandoned him.

Mary has been and is present in these days of the pandemic, close to the people who, unfortunately, have ended their earthly journey in a condition of isolation, without the comfort of the closeness of their loved ones. Mary is always there beside us, with her maternal tenderness.

Prayers said to her are not in vain. The Woman who said “yes”, who promptly welcomed the Angel’s invitation, also responds to our supplications; she hears our voices, even those that remain closed in our hearts that do not have the strength to be uttered but which God knows better than we ourselves do. She listens as Mother. Just like, and more than, every good mother, Mary protects us from danger, she is concerned about us even when we are focused on our own matters and lose a sense of the way, and endanger not only our health, but also our salvation. Mary is there, praying for us, praying for those who do not pray. Praying with us. Why? Because she is our Mother.