

Mary — A Woman of Faith

The father of all believers, Abraham, finds his counterpart in our blessed Mother, the first believer of the New Testament. The II Vatican Council described Mary in "her pilgrimage of faith" and noted that "she stands out among the poor and humble of the Lord who confidently await and receive salvation from Him."



This same focus on her faith is found in the writings of the Fathers of the Church. St. Bernard, who came to be known as the troubadour of Mary, wrote in the 12th century, "The Virgin believed and in her faith the Virgin conceived." Eight centuries before Bernard, St. Augustine affirmed the same truth: "She first conceived Him in her heart before conceiving Him in her womb."

All the Christian writers of the first four centuries paid more attention to the unique act of faith of Mary at the Annunciation than to the revelation of her divine Motherhood at the Nativity. This tradition is firmly rooted in the New Testament where all the texts that provide substantial information on the life of Mary speak about her words and deeds as believer. She is praised because of her faith.

Mary's response to the message of the Annunciation was a simple surrendering of herself wholly to a life of faith. At that moment she gave herself completely to the Word of God, a Word which she had not yet fully grasped but on which she was prepared to base her life. Mary believed that God called her; she surrendered herself to that call and followed

Him into the unknown. She did not yet know where He would lead her, but she was prepared to put her whole life at stake. As with Abraham, there was a call of God, no guarantees offered — only a promise.

Mary had been reared in the traditional Old Testament reverence for the awesome majesty of God and His infinite distance above our lowly human conditions. And yet, it is with Mary that the New Testament begins. God is no longer remote in awesome majesty but very close in His human helplessness. This requires a radical transformation of faith. Think of the adjustment that Mary had to make: Yet, quietly and graciously she made the transition. I think of her especially today when I see so many upset by changes in the Church and the many certainties of the past which have vanished. The Jews had expected a Messiah born of man and adopted by God. Actually, God sent a Messiah born of God and become man. And Mary was the first to absorb this turning upside down of the Jewish faith — tradition. Mary advanced from one surprise to another. Everything in her life seemed different, contrary to what she had expected or even imagined, and all the circumstances of her life demanded of her a response of faith.

Having pondered His mystery in her heart, she followed Him where he led and thus let her life be shaped by Him. Ever at the disposal of God's Word, Mary was truly a woman of faith. Eventually all this will bring her to Calvary. Near the cross of Jesus stood His mother. (Jn 19-25). More than anyone else she shares the death of her Son. This separation by death is part of the divine mystery of Jesus continually eluding His mother. It is the final implication of her fiat to all that the angel had left unexplained, all that Mary had had to find out in a

lifetime. When she leaves Calvary, she is a thoroughly lonely woman, but still a woman of faith. A Dominican litany of the thirteenth century contains the lovely invocation: "Holy Mary, who kept the faith on Holy Saturday, pray for us." It was just this faith which made her lonely. When Jesus died the death of a criminal, even His best friends, His most faithful followers abandoned all hope. There was no longer any one of them who believed in Him. Mary alone kept faith between the death and the resurrection. Once again the comparison between Mary and Abraham becomes striking: at a given point in time both were the only believers in the whole world.

After the appearances of the risen Lord and His ascension Mary joined the disciples in prayer in the upper room: "All these joined in continuous prayer together with several women, including Mary the mother of Jesus" (Acts 1:14). This, the last of the more than forty times Mary is mentioned in scripture, describes her in an attitude typical of her: inspiring with her faith and her prayer the community of the early Church. She continues to do what she has always done: to be open to the Word of God become flesh through her.

At the end of her life when she has faithfully accomplished everything that had been implied in her fiat, she is once more surprised by the God in Whom she has believed. A life-time of faith has created in her an immense receptivity. All this is filled now to the brim when God lets her share the glory of her risen Son. As she had been the first in many other instances, she is now the first to attain the last goal: filled in body, mind, and soul by the life of the resurrection, she is assumed into that heaven where her faith is raised to total vision.

Pope on Women: New Point of Departure

Following is the text of the Jan. 31 address of Pope Paul VI to the Study-Commission on the Role of Women in the Church and in Society, and to the Committee for International Women's Year.

After more than two years of intense and difficult work you have now come to the end of the sixth and last plenary session of your Commission. As you consider the progress made, you can feel legitimate pride and sentiments of thanksgiving to the Lord. We too wish to express to you today our joy and lively satisfaction at the work that you have accomplished.



In taking note of the wide-spread movement for the advancement of women in the world, the 1971 Synod of Bishops had expressed the desire "that women should have their own share of responsibility and participation in the community, life of society and likewise of the Church. Your Study-Commission on women in society and in the Church was created precisely for this purpose. As we recalled on 18 April 1975 to the Committee for International Women's Year, this commission had as its task to study the means of bringing about "the effective promotion of the dignity and responsibility of women. And we added that it was necessary "to encourage a re-examination of life... as to the participation of women in the life of society on the one hand, and in the life and mission of the Church on the other." We are happy to know that after two years of work your commission has drawn up an abundant dossier on these questions which will render great service to the universal Church and to the local Churches. You have had the wisdom to begin by recalling the place of the human being, man and woman, in God's plan, so that all those working within the Church in one way or another for the advancement of women may always do so from an authentically Christian viewpoint. Moreover, you have assembled an important documentation on the participation of women in pastoral

responsibilities in the Church; you have also made concrete proposals, so that women may have a greater part in the Church's activity; and finally, at the 1974 Synod of Bishops, you expressed the desire that the participation of women in the work of evangelization should be increased. We wish to express to you our gratitude for this considerable work, which shows your sincere love of the Church.

International Women's Year is now over, and the labors of your commission are coming to an end. But instead of speaking of an end, one should rather speak of a new point of departure. The programmes that you have drawn up in recent months must now be progressively realized in deeds. As we told you on 18 April 1975, what is most urgent is "the task of working everywhere for the recognition, respect and protection of the rights and prerogatives of every woman, whether single or married, in the educational, professional, civic, social and religious fields." This is the task that must be accomplished, and in which each of you must endeavor to cooperate according to his or her means. On this occasion we would like to point out certain principles that will guide you in your effort.

We would first of all recall the fundamental principle of Christianity: God created the human person, man and woman, in a single plan of love; he created the human being in his own image. Men and women are therefore equal before God: equal as persons, equal as children of God, equal in dignity, equal also in their rights. This radical equality must be realized at different levels. Above all, at the personal level, women have an inalienable right to respect; in private as in public, their dignity must be recognized and safeguarded. Vigorous action must be undertaken in this domain, for there exist new forms of enslavement and degradation of women. It is also urgently necessary to make the climate of our public life in this matter more moral, more wholesome and more respectful of women's dignity.

The equality of men and women must also be attained in professional and social life. It is true that in many countries, theoretically at

least, men and women have already acquired the same fundamental rights. But discrimination still exists. We are thinking of the situation of the wives of emigrant workers, and of emigrant women who are themselves workers. We are thinking of the women in rural and working environments who cannot receive the formation needed for their human development, and who must work for wages which are often insufficient. We wish to repeat here the earnest appeal of the Holy See's delegation at the World Conference in Mexico, on behalf of women living in poverty or distress. We invite you all to read and to make known the text of this Resolution, and to do everything in your power to assist poor women, everywhere in the world. But we cannot fail to emphasize the fact that in the most highly developed countries the accession of women to posts of reflection and decision-making which condition all spheres of life in society needs to progress with wisdom and realism.

It is also our wish that women should be encouraged and assisted in the role of prime importance which they take on for their families. We are well aware that certain feminist movements suspect us of wishing to shut women within the hard and limited work of the family, thus preventing them from exercising their talents in other social spheres. For this reason these feminist movements are against any reminder of women's role in the home. Is it realistic, is it wise, to swing from one excess to another? On this capital point, we believe that Christians must give proof of wisdom and courage in their convictions and their commitment. It is precisely desirable that the bringing up and education of children should be the joint task of the father and the mother, and there is certainly progress to be made in order that men should take their part in this task to a greater degree. But it is only too clear that the role of the woman remains an essential one. Is it an unworthy task — that of contributing to the formation of human personalities, of preparing the generations of tomorrow, the generations which will make up society? Tomorrow's society will call to account the homes of today on the determining quality of the love and the education given to children and adolescents.