



## The Great Sign

### **Signum Magnum**

Letter of His Holiness Paul VI

May 13, 1967

Venerable brothers, health and apostolic blessings

The great sign which the Apostle John saw in heaven, "a woman clothed with the sun,"[1] is interpreted by the sacred Liturgy,[2] not without foundation, as referring to the most blessed Mary, the mother of all men by the grace of Christ the Redeemer.

The memory, venerable brothers, is still vivid in our mind of the great emotion we felt in proclaiming the august Mother of God as the spiritual Mother of the Church, that is to say, of all the faithful and of the sacred pastors, as the crowning of the third session of the Second Vatican Council, after having solemnly promulgated the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.[3] Great also was the happiness of numerous Council Fathers, as well as of the faithful, who were present at the sacred rite in St. Peter's basilica and of the entire Christian people scattered throughout the world.

The memory came spontaneously to many minds of the first grandiose triumph achieved by the humble "handmaid of the Lord"[4] when the Fathers from East and West, gathered in an ecumenical council at Ephesus in the year 431 greeted Mary as "Theotokos" -- genitrix of God. The Christian population of the illustrious city associated themselves with a jubilant impulse of faith with the exultance of the Fathers and accompanied them with torchlights to their dwellings.

Oh! with how much maternal satisfaction the Virgin Mary must have looked on the pastors and the faithful in that glorious hour of the history of the Church, recognizing in the hymns of praise, raised in honor principally of the Son and then in her own, the echo of the prophetic canticle which she herself on the impulse of the Holy Spirit had raised to the Most High:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, because He has regarded the lowliness of His handmaid;

for, behold, henceforth all generations shall call me blessed;

because He who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is His name."[5]

On the occasion of the religious ceremonies which are taking place at this time in honor of the Virgin Mother of God in Fatima, Portugal, where she is venerated by countless numbers of the faithful for her motherly and compassionate heart,[6] we wish to call the attention of all sons of the Church once more to the indissoluble link between the spiritual motherhood of Mary, so amply illustrated in the (council's) Dogmatic Constitution on the Church[7] and the duties of redeemed men toward her, the Mother of the Church.

Once it is acknowledged, by virtue of the numerous testimonies offered by the sacred texts and by the holy Fathers and remembered in the constitution mentioned above, that "Mary, the Mother of God and Mother of the Redeemer"[8] has been "united to Him by a close and indissoluble tie"[9] and that she has a most singular role in "the mystery of the Incarnate Word and of the Mystical Body,"[10] that is to say, in "the economy of salvation,"[11] it appears evident that the Virgin is "rightly honored by the Church with a special veneration,[12] particularly liturgical,"[13] not only as "the most holy Mother of God, who took part in the mysteries of Christ,"[14] but also "as the Mother of the Church." [15]

Nor is it to be feared that liturgical reform, if put into practice according to the formula "the law of faith must establish the law of prayer"[16] may be detrimental to the "wholly singular" veneration[17] due to the Virgin Mary for her prerogatives, first among these being the dignity of the Mother of God. Nor is it to be feared that the greater veneration, liturgical as well as private, given to her may obscure or diminish "the adoration which is offered to the Incarnate Word, as well as the Father and to the Holy Spirit." [18]

Accordingly, without wishing to restate here, venerable brothers, the traditional doctrine of the Church regarding the function of the Mother of God on the plane of salvation and her relations with the Church, we believe that, if we dwell on the consideration of two truths which are very important for the renewal of Christian life, we would be doing something of great utility for the souls of the faithful.

The first truth is this: Mary is the Mother of the Church not only because she is the Mother of Christ and His most intimate associate in "the new economy when the Son of God took a human nature from her, that He might in the mysteries of His flesh free man from sin,"[19] but also because "she shines forth to the whole community of the elect as a model of the virtues." [20] Indeed, just as no human mother can limit her task to the generation of a new man but must extend it to the function of nourishing and educating her offspring, thus the blessed Virgin Mary, after participating in the redeeming sacrifice of the Son, and in such an intimate way as to deserve to be proclaimed by Him the Mother not only of His disciple John but -- may we be allowed to affirm it -- of mankind which he in some way

represents,[21] now continues to fulfill from heaven her maternal function as the cooperator in the birth and development of divine life in the individual souls of redeemed men. This is a most consoling truth which, by the free consent of God the All-Wise, is an integrating part of the mystery of human salvation; therefore it must be held as faith by all Christians.

But in what way does Mary cooperate in the growth of the members of the Mystical Body in the life of grace? First of all, by her unceasing prayers inspired by a most ardent charity. The Holy Virgin, in fact, though rejoicing in the vision of the august Trinity, does not forget her Son's advancing, as she herself did in the "pilgrimage of the faith".[22] Indeed, contemplating them in God and clearly seeing their necessities, in communion with Jesus Christ, "who continues forever and is therefore able at all times to intercede for them,"[23] she makes herself their Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Adjutrix and Mediatrix.[24] Of this intercession of hers for the People of God with the Son, the Church has been persuaded, ever since the first centuries, as testified to by this most ancient antiphon which, with some slight difference, forms part of the liturgical prayer in the East as well as in the West: "We seek refuge under the protection of your mercies, oh Mother of God; do not reject our supplication in need but save us from perdition, O you who alone are blessed." [25] Nor should anyone believe that the maternal intervention of Mary would prejudice the predominant and irreplaceable efficacy of Christ, our Savior. On the contrary, it draws its strength from the mediation of Christ of which it is the luminous proof.[26]

But the cooperation of the Mother of the Church in the development of the divine life of the souls does not come to an end with the appeal to the Son. She exercises on redeemed men another influence: that of example. An influence which is indeed most important, according to the well-known axiom: "Verba movent, exempla trahunt" (Words move, examples attract). In fact, just as the teachings of the parents become far more efficacious if they are strengthened by the example of a life conforming with the norms of human and Christian prudence, so the sweetness and the enchantment emanating from the sublime virtues of the immaculate Mother of God attract souls in an irresistible way to imitation of the divine model, Jesus Christ, of whom she was the most faithful image. Therefore the council declared: "The Church, devotedly meditating on her and contemplating her in the light of the Word made man, enters more intimately into the supreme mystery of the Incarnation and becomes ever increasingly like her Spouse." [27]

Furthermore, it is well to bear in mind that Mary's eminent sanctity was not only a singular gift of divine liberality. It was also the fruit of the continuous and generous cooperation of her free will in the inner motions of the Holy Spirit. It is because of the perfect harmony between divine grace and the activity of her human nature that the Virgin rendered supreme glory to the Most Holy Trinity and became the illustrious ornament of the Church, which thus greets her in sacred Liturgy: "You are the glory of Jerusalem, the joy of Israel, the honor of our people." [28]

Let us then admire in the pages of the Gospel the testimonies of such sublime harmony. Mary, as soon as she was reassured by the voice of the Angel Gabriel that God had chosen her as the unblemished mother of His only-begotten Son, unhesitatingly gave her consent to a work which would have engaged all the energies of her fragile nature and declared: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word." [29] From that moment, she consecrated all of herself to the service not only of the heavenly Father and of the Word Incarnate who had become her Son, but also to all mankind, having clearly understood that Jesus, in addition to saving his people from the slavery of sin, would become the King of a messianic Kingdom, universal and eternal. [30]

Therefore, the life of Joseph's pure spouse, who remained a virgin "during childbirth and after childbirth" -- as the Catholic Church has always believed and professed [31] and as was fitting for her who was raised to the incomparable dignity of divine motherhood [32] -- was a life of such perfect union with the Son that she shared in His joys, sorrows and triumphs. And even after Christ had ascended to heaven she remained united to Him by a most ardent love while she faithfully fulfilled the new mission of spiritual Mother of the most beloved of the disciples and of the nascent Church. It can be asserted that the whole life of the humble handmaid of the Lord, from the moment when she was greeted by the Angel, until her assumption in body and soul to heavenly glory, was a life of loving service.

We, therefore, associating ourselves with the Evangelists, with the Fathers and the Doctors of the Church, recalled in the dogmatic constitution "Lumen gentium" (Chap. VIII), full of admiration, contemplate Mary, firm in her faith, ready in her obedience, simple in humility, exulting in praising the Lord, ardent in charity, strong and constant in the fulfillment of her mission to the point of sacrificing herself, in full communion of sentiments with her Son who immolated Himself on the Cross to give men a new life.

Before such splendor of virtue, the first duty of all those who recognize in the Mother of Christ the model of the Church, is to unite themselves to her in giving thanks to the Most High for working great things in Mary for the benefit of all mankind. But this is not enough. It is also the duty of all the faithful to pay as tribute to the most faithful handmaid of the Lord, a veneration of praise, of gratitude and of love because, by a wise and mild divine provision, her free consent and her generous cooperation in the designs of God had, and still have, a great influence in the attainment of human salvation. [33] Therefore every Christian must make St. Anselm's prayer his own: "Oh, glorious Lady, grant that through you we may deserve to ascend to Jesus, your Son, who through you deigned to descend among us." [34]

Neither the grace of the divine Redeemer, nor the powerful intercession of His Mother and our spiritual Mother, nor yet her sublime sanctity, could lead us to the port of salvation if we did not respond to them by our persevering will to honor

Jesus Christ and the Holy Virgin with our devout imitation of their sublime virtue.

It is therefore the duty of all Christians to imitate in a reverent spirit the examples of goodness left to them by their heavenly Mother. This, venerable brothers, is the other truth to which we are pleased to call your attention and the attention of the faithful entrusted to your pastoral care, that they may second with docility the exhortation of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council: "Let the faithful remember that true devotion consists neither in fruitless and passing emotion, nor in a certain vain credulity. Rather, it proceeds from true faith, by which we are led to know the excellence of the Mother of God, and are moved to a filial love toward our mother and to the imitation of her virtues."[35]

Imitation of Jesus Christ is undoubtedly the regal way to be followed to attain sanctity and reproduce in ourselves, according to our forces, the absolute perfection of the heavenly Father. But while the Catholic Church has always proclaimed a truth so sacrosanct, it has also affirmed that imitation of the Virgin Mary, far from distracting the souls from the faithful following of Christ, makes it more pleasant and easier for them. For, since she had always done the will of God, she was the first to deserve the praise which Christ addressed to His disciples: "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven, he is my brother and sister and mother."[36]

The general norm "Through Mary to Jesus" is therefore valid also for the imitation of Christ. Nevertheless, let our faith not be perturbed, as if the intervention of a creature in every way similar to us, except as regards sin, offended our personal dignity and prevented the intimacy and immediacy of our relationships of adoration and friendship with the Son of God. Let us rather recognize the "goodness and the love of God the Savior,"[37] who, condescending to our misery, so remote from His infinite sanctity, wished to make it easier for us to imitate it by giving us as a model the human person of His Mother. She, in fact, among the human beings, offers the most shining example and the closest to us, of that perfect obedience whereby we lovingly and readily conform with the will of the eternal Father. Christ Himself, as we well know, made this full closeness to the approval of the Father, the supreme ideal of His human behavior, declaring: "I do always the things that are pleasing to Him."[38]

If we then contemplate the Virgin of Nazareth in the halo of her prerogative and of her virtues, we will see her shine before our eyes as the "New Eve,"[39] the exalted daughter of Sion, the summit of the Old Testament and the dawn of the New, in which "the fullness of time"[40] was realized, which was preordained by God for the mission in the world of His only-begotten Son. In truth, the Virgin Mary, more than all the patriarchs and prophets, more than the "just" and "pious" Simeon awaited and implored "the consolation of Israel . . . the Christ of the Lord"[41] and then greeted His advent with the hymn of "Magnificat" when He descended into her most chaste womb to take on our flesh.

It is in Mary, therefore, that the Church of Christ indicates the example of the worthiest way of receiving in our spirits the Word of God, in accordance with the luminous sentence of St. Augustine: "Mary was therefore more blessed in receiving the faith in Christ than in conceiving the flesh of Christ. Accordingly, maternal consanguinity would not have benefited Mary if she had not felt more fortunate in having Christ in her heart than in her womb." [42] And it is still in her that Christians can admire the example of how to fulfill, with humility and at the same time with magnanimity, the mission which God entrusts to each one in this world, in relation to his own salvation and that of his fellow beings.

"Therefore, I beg you, be imitators of me as I am of Christ." [43] These words, and with greater reason than the Apostle Paul to the Christians of Corinth, can be addressed by the Mother of the Church to the multitudes of the faithful, who, in a symphony of faith and love with the generations of past centuries, acclaim her as blessed. [44] It is an invitation which it is a duty to heed docilely.

And then a message of supreme utility seems today to reach the faithful from her who is the Immaculate, the holy, the cooperator of the Son in the work of restoration of supernatural life in souls. [45] In fact, in devoutly contemplating Mary they draw from her a stimulus for trusting prayer, a spur to the practice of penance and to the holy fear of God. Likewise, it is in this Marian elevation that they more often hear echoing the words with which Jesus Christ announced the advent of the Kingdom of heaven: "Repent and believe in the Gospel" [46] ; and His severe admonition: "Unless you repent you will all perish in the same manner." [47]

Therefore, impelled by love and by the wish to placate God for the offenses against His sanctity and His justice and, at the same time, moved by trust in His infinite mercy, we must bear the sufferings of the spirit and of the body that we may expiate our sins and those of our fellow beings and so avoid the twofold penalty of "harm" and of "sense," that is to say, the loss of God -- the supreme good -- and eternal fire. [48]

What must stimulate the faithful even more to follow the examples of the most holy Virgin is the fact that Jesus Himself, by giving her to us as our Mother, has tacitly indicated her as the model to be followed. It is, in fact, a natural thing that the children should have the same sentiments of their mothers and should reflect their merits and virtues. Therefore, as each one of us can repeat with St. Paul: "The Son of God loved me and gave Himself up for me," [49] so in all trust he can believe that the divine Savior has left to him also, in spiritual heritage, His Mother, with all the treasures of grace and virtues with which He had endowed her, that she may pour them over us through the influence of her powerful intercession and our willing imitation. This is why St. Bernard rightly affirms: "Coming to her the Holy Spirit filled her with grace for herself; when the same Spirit pervaded her again she became superabundant and redounding in grace for us also." [50]

From what we have been illustrating in the light of the holy Gospel and of the



Catholic tradition, it appears evident that the spiritual motherhood of Mary transcends space and time and belongs to the universal history of the Church, since she has always been present in the Church with her maternal assistance. Likewise the meaning of the affirmation appears clear, which is so often repeated: our era may well be called the Marian era. In fact, if it is true that, by an exalted grace of the Lord, the providential role of the most holy Mary in the history of salvation has been more deeply understood by the vast strata of the Christian people, this, however, should not lead us to believe that in past ages we had no intuition whatever of this truth or that future ones will ignore it. In truth, all periods of the Church's history have benefited and will benefit from the maternal presence of the Mother of God because she will remain always indissolubly joined to the mystery of the Mystical Body, of whose Head it was written: "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday and today, yes, and forever." [51]

Venerable brothers, the persuasion that the thought of the Church regarding the veneration of praise, gratitude and love due to the most blessed Virgin is in full accord with the doctrine of the holy Gospel, as it was more precisely understood and explained by the tradition of the East as well as of the West, stirs in our spirit the hope that this pastoral exhortation of ours for an ever more fervid and more fruitful Marian piety will be received with generous acceptance not only by the faithful entrusted to your care, but also by those who, while not enjoying full communion with the Catholic Church, nevertheless, together with us, admire and venerate the handmaid of the Lord, the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Son of God.

May the Immaculate Heart of Mary shine before the eyes of all Christians as the model of perfect love toward God and toward our fellow beings; may it lead them toward the Holy Sacraments by virtue of which souls are cleansed from the stains of sin and are preserved from it. May it also stimulate them to make reparation for the innumerable offenses against the Divine Majesty. Lastly, may it shine like a banner of unity and a spur to perfect the bonds of brotherhood among all Christians in the bosom of the one Church of Jesus Christ, which "taught by the Holy Spirit, honors her with filial affection and piety as a most beloved mother." [52]

Since the 25th anniversary is recalled this year of the solemn consecration of the Church and of mankind to Mary, the Mother of God, and to her Immaculate Heart, by our predecessor of venerated memory, Pius XII, on Oct. 31, 1942 on the occasion of the broadcast message to the Portuguese nation [53] -- a consecration which we ourselves have renewed on Nov. 21, 1964, [54] -- we exhort all the sons of the Church to renew personally their consecration to the Immaculate Heart of the Mother of the Church and to bring alive this most noble act of veneration through a life ever more consonant with the divine will [55] and in a spirit of filial service and of devout imitation of their heavenly Queen.

Lastly, venerable brothers, we express the trust that, thanks to your encouragement, the clergy and the Christian people entrusted to your pastoral

ministry will respond in a generous spirit to this exhortation of ours so as to demonstrate toward the Virgin Mother of God a more ardent piety and a firmer confidence. Meanwhile while we are comforted by the certainty that the glorious Queen of Heaven and our most sweet Mother will never cease to assist all and each one of her sons and will never withdraw from the entire Church of Christ her heavenly patronage, to you yourselves and to your faithful, as a pledge of divine favors and as a sign of our benevolence, we wholeheartedly impart the apostolic blessing.

Given in Rome, at St. Peter, on the 13th day of the month of May in the year 1967, the fourth of our pontificate.

Paulus PP. VI

#### Footnotes

1. Cf. Apocalypse 12, 1.
2. Cf. Epistle of Mass for the feast of the Apparition of Mary Immaculate, Feb. 11.
3. Cf. Acta Apostolicae Sedis 57, 1965, pp. 1-67.
4. Cf. Luke 1, 38.
5. Ibid.. 1. 46 and 4849.
6. Radio message of Pius XII, May 13, 1946, given for the Christians of Portugal, Acta Apostolicae Sedis 38, 1946, p. 264.
7. Cf. chapter VIII, paragraph III, on the Blessed Virgin and the Church, Acta Apostolicae Sedis, 57, 1965, pp. 62-65.
8. Cf. ibid. n. 53, p. 58.
9. Cf. ibid.
10. Ibid. n. 54, p. 59.
11. Ibid. n. 55, p. 59.
12. Ibid. n. 66, p. 65.
13. Allocution to the Council Fathers in the Vatican Basilica on the feast of the Presentation, third session of the Council, Acta Apostolicae Sedis, 56, 1964, p. 1016.
14. Cf. dogmatic constitution Lumen Gentium, n. 66: Acta Apostolicae Sedis, 57, 1965, p. 65.
15. Cf. ibid. n. 67. p. 65.
16. Pius XII, encyclical letter Mediator Dei: Acta Apostolicae Sedis, 38, 1947, p. 541.
17. Cf. dogmatic constitution Lumen Gentium, n. 66: Acta Apostolicae Sedis, 57, 1965, p. 65.
18. Ibid. n. 66, p. 65.
19. Ibid. n. 55, p. 60.
20. Ibid. n. 65, p. 64, also n. 63.
21. Cf. ibid. n. 58, p. 61; Leo XIII encyclical letter Adiutricem populi, Acts of Leo XIII 15, 1896, p. 302.
22. Dogmatic constitution Lumen Gentium, n. 58; Acta Apostolicae Sedis, 57, 1967, p. 61.



23. Heb. 7. 25.
24. Cf. dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, n. 62: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 57, 1965, p. 61.
25. Cf. Dom F. Mercenier, *L'Antienne Mariale grecque la plus ancienne* in *Le Museon* 52, 1939, pp. 229-233.
26. Cf. dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, n. 62: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 57, 1965, p. 63.
27. *Ibid.* n. 65, p. 64.
28. Second Antiphon of lauds, feast of the Immaculate Conception.
29. Luke 1, 38.
30. Cf. Matt. 1, 21; Luke 1, 33.
31. Cf. St. Leo, martyr, letter, *Lectis dilectionis tuae* to Flavianum; PL 54, 759; *idem*, letter, *Licet per nostros* to Julian, Ep. Coensem: p. 54, 803; St. Hormisdas, Ep. *Inter ea quae* to Justinian, emperor, PL 63, 407; Lateran Council, October, 609, under Martin I, canon 3: Caspar, ZKG, 51, 1932, p. 88; Conc. Tolet. XVI, Symbol. article 22: J. Madoz, *El Simbolo del Concilio XVI de Toledo* in *Estudios Onienses*, ser. I, volume 3, 1946; dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* nn. 52 55, 57, 59, 63; *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 57, 1965, pp. 58-64.
32. Cf. St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, q. 25, a. 6, ad. 4.
33. Cf. dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, n. 56; *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 57, 1965, p. 60.
34. *Orat.* 54, PL 158, 961.
35. Dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, n. 67; *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 57, 1965, p. 66; confer St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, Part II-II, q. 81, a. 1, ad. 1; Part III, q. 25, aa. 1, 5.
36. Matt. 12. 50.
37. Cf. Titus 3. 4.
38. St. John 8, 29.
39. Cf. St. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III, 22, 4: PG 959; St. Epiphanius, *Haer.* 78, 18: PG 42, 728-729; St. John Damascene, first homily on the birth of Mary: PG 96, 671 ss; dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, n. 56; *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 57, 1965, pp. 60-61.
40. Galatians 4, 4.
41. St. Luke 2. 25-26.
42. *Serm.* 215, 1: PL 38, 1074.
43. I Cor., 4, 16.
44. Cf. St. Luke, 1, 48.
45. Cf. dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, n. 61; *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 57, 1965, p. 63.
46. St. Mark 1, 15; cf. St. Matthew 3, 2; 4, 17.
47. St. Luke 13, 5.
48. Cf. St. Matthew 25, 41; dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, n. 48: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 57, 1965, p. 54.
49. Galatians 2, 20- cf. Eph. 5, 2.
50. Second homily super *Missus est*, n. 2: PL 183, 64.
51. Heb. 13, 8.

52. Dogmatic constitution Lumen Gentium, n. 53: Acta Apostolicae Sedis, n. 53, 57, 1965, p. 59.
53. Cf. discourses and radio messages of Pius XII, volume IV pp. 260-262; cf. Acta Apostolicae Sedis, 34, 1942, pp. 345-346.
54. Cf. Acta Apostolicae Sedis, 56, 1964, p. 1017.
55. Cf. oration for feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Aug. 22.