

HOMILY, Mary's Garden

by The Most Reverend Gabriel Montalvo, Papal Nuncio to the United States, on the occasion of the dedication of the Mary Garden at the U.S. National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington D.C. on 10 June 2000

It is truly a source of great joy to celebrate this Eucharist with all of you on this occasion of the Dedication of "Mary's Garden", here at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. I am especially grateful to the National Council of Catholic Women, an outstanding association that has served the Church since 1920, for their extraordinary efforts in support of this very worthwhile and beautiful project. The natural beauty of Mary's Garden compliments the architectural and artistic grandeur of this magnificent basilica. It has been the hope of the National Council of Catholic Women and of all those associated with the shrine that pilgrims will find in Mary's Garden a place for rest and pause, reflection and prayer.

How fitting it is that this garden should be dedicated to Our Lady! In the response to the first reading we heard those prophetic words of Isaiah, "As the earth brings forth its plants, and a garden makes its growth spring up, so will the Lord God make justice and praise spring up before the nations." We joined together in singing the refrain, "O Mary, you are the new earth in whom justice dwells." Yes, the womb of the Blessed Virgin received the Incarnate Word of God by the power of the Holy Spirit and there in the depths of her being, Mary nourished, supported and gave flesh to Jesus, the Son of the Eternal Father.

As we celebrate this Mass of Holy Mary, the New Eve - we recall that it was in a garden that the first woman, Eve - our first mother, turned away from God and chose sin. The effects of that first sin could only be overcome by the power of grace. We rejoice and give thanks that Mary, by her faith and obedience, brought forth Jesus - who restored what was lost by humanity due to the unbelief and the sin of the first Eve: "The knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by Mary's obedience. The bonds fastened by the virgin Eve through disbelief were untied by the Virgin Mary through faith." (St. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 3:22, 4: Sch, no. 34, p.82) The Blessed Virgin Mary is the Mediatrix of grace; Mary, the New Eve, surrenders selflessly to the Will of the Father. She is "full of grace" in that she received the Word of God in the depths of her being; she gave birth to Jesus Christ, lived as mother and disciple of the Lord and now continues to lead souls to her Son. Throughout her life she "devoted herself totally as the handmaid of the Lord to the person and work of her Son." (*Lumen Gentium*, 56)

Although there is little written in the Gospels about Mary, the accounts of the evangelists offer moments in the life of the Virgin which give us insight into the maternity of Mary and the almost hidden quality of her apostolate. So often we see the Blessed Mother, graced by the Holy Spirit, quietly doing the Will of the Father in loving support of the Son. At the Annunciation, this humble servant willingly and trustingly accepts and embraces God's plan for her. She welcomes the Word of God with a gracious receptivity, declaring, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." At Our Lord's birth in Bethlehem, when he is presented in the temple in Jerusalem and when, as a young man, he is found teaching the elders in that same temple - Mary is always the loving mother and disciple. At Cana, it is Our Lady who brings the need of a newlywed couple to her Son and then she speaks to the waiters those words, which can still be heard today, "Do whatever He tells you."

In each of these moments, Mary demonstrates a discreet yet essential presence. Our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, teaches us, in his encyclical letter, *Redemptoris Mater* - that "she who is present in the mystery of Christ as Mother becomes - by the will of the Son and the power of the Holy Spirit - present in the mystery of the Church. In the Church too she continues to be a maternal presence, as is shown by the words spoken from the Cross: 'Woman, behold your son!; Behold, your mother.'" (*Redemptoris Mater*, 24)

This maternal image of Mary, important to all the Faithful, is especially appreciated by women in the Church. "Women have a unique relationship with the Mother of the Redeemer." (*RM*, 46) For centuries women have recognized in the life of the Blessed Mother, that which is at the heart of their vocation. This maternal quality, which sensitively and lovingly nurtures and supports human life, is a gift given by God to all women: wives and mothers, religious sisters and single women as well. In that same encyclical the Pope calls us to see the Mother of Jesus as a model for all women as he states:

"The figure of Mary of Nazareth sheds light on womanhood as such by the very fact that God, in the sublime event of the Incarnation of his Son, entrusted himself to the ministry, the free and active

ministry, of a woman. It can thus be said that women, by looking to Mary, find in her the secret of living their femininity with dignity and of achieving their own true advancement. In the light of Mary, the Church sees in the face of women the reflection of a beauty which mirrors the loftiest sentiments of which the human heart is capable: the self-offering totally of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement." (*Redemptoris Mater*, 46)

For these reasons, the married woman and mother is called to exercise these unique gifts in the home and thus serves as the anchor of family life and the center of the domestic church. Just as Mary nurtured and supported Jesus in the home at Nazareth, so it is that for two thousand years women, both religious and lay, have placed their unique gifts and talents at the service of the Church, thus building up the Body of Christ on earth. Like the Blessed Mother, the Catholic Woman enriches the Church by expressing the gift of her maternity in faithful obedience to the Will of God.

The National Council of Catholic Women has given, in Mary's Garden, a great gift to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception and to the Church in the United States. So many are so grateful to Almighty God for the efforts of these faithful women who, through great faith, continual prayer and much hard work, have realized such a splendid and wonderful accomplishment. Let us pray that countless numbers of pilgrims will profit from moments of quiet and prayer in this garden dedicated to Our beautiful Blessed Mother.