

MARIAN SHRINES: HOMES AND SCHOOLS OF THE HEART OF MARY

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*Blessed John Paul II considered one of the goals of the spiritual life to go on pilgrimage to the Marian shrines scattered throughout the world. He made this remark in one of his homilies during his visit to the Marian shrines of Egypt. It is part of our life's itinerary of faith and love to visit the shrines, whose spiritual and historic significance in the life of nations and of the Church always have a **direct link with a passage from Scripture, an apparition of Our Lady, a particular devotion to a miraculous image, or a maternal intervention of protection and victory over enemies, of Our Lady in the life of a nation.** For example, John Paul II told us during this same homily at the shrines of Egypt: *"these shrines have a very special significance, because they are linked, according to ancient traditions, to the memory of the passage of the Holy Family, according to the references found in the Gospel of Matthew."* (cf. Mt: 2, 14-15; 19-21)*

John Paul II called himself *"The Pilgrim Pope"*...For John Paul II, to go on pilgrimage was to go with the entire Church to the *"meeting tent,"* to *"places of prayer,"* to *"fountains of grace and mercy ceaselessly open"*...to places that are *"lighthouses in the geography of the world, the Church, and nations."* These holy places are places of encounter with the *Living God in the Eucharist,* of listening to the Word of God, of reconciliation and forgiveness, of conversion and new life, of communion and disinterested service...places of catechesis and formation, of healing for the soul and body, holy places...sacred places that are the living memory of the presence of God, Our Lady, and the saints...places that are the memory of a salvific event, of an intervention of the Mother of God...places that have been touched by God's grace...where you must go on pilgrimage in an itinerary of prayer, conversion, formation and Christian maturity, where you have to go...walk...pilgrimage to search for the particular graces that are granted to us in a particular way in those holy places...where the wine that we lack, through the maternal mediation of Mary, is miraculously given to us in abundance, even better than before. On September 24, 2000, the Jubilee of Shrines, JPII told us at the end of the Angelus: *"I would like to be present in a special way in those sacred places, to entrust the Church and the whole world to the Blessed Virgin's motherly protection. Mary, Mother of Christ and the Church, pray for us!"*

The entire Church pilgrimages throughout history (RM 25)

The Church, the People of God *in all of the nations on earth,* *"The Church 'like a pilgrim in a foreign land, presses forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God, announcing the Cross and Death of the Lord until he comes."* (cf. 1 Co 11, 26) The Second Vatican Council, LG 8, speaks of the *pilgrim Church,* establishing an analogy with the Israel of the Old Covenant journeying through the desert. *The journey also has an external character, visible in the time and space in which it historically takes place. For the Church*

*"is destined to extend to all regions of the earth and so to enter into the history of mankind," but at the same time "she transcends all limits of time and of space."*⁵⁵ *And yet the essential character of her pilgrimage is interior."* This deals with a pilgrimage of faith, along the paths through which the Spirit leads us, as He did with the Apostles. *"Moving forward through trial and tribulation,"*(LG 9) the Church opens the way to the Kingdom; She extends it, carries it, proclaims it throughout history, in history, and for the transformation of history, all within the story of salvation history.

In this path—in this ecclesial pilgrimage—through the geography of time and space, and even more importantly, *through the story of souls,* Mary is present as the star who walks ahead of us, showing us the way, leading us by the fidelity of her own pilgrimage of faith, to make a pilgrimage of our own personal, ecclesial, familiar, communal, and historic path. She is the star that goes before us in every pilgrimage. *"From that moment there also begins that journey of faith, the Church's pilgrimage through the history of individuals and peoples. We know that at the beginning of this journey Mary is present. We see her in the midst of the Apostles in the Upper Room, "prayerfully imploring the gift of the Spirit" (RM 26). She prayed for the strength which impelled them to go forward...and to walk with hope, with promptitude, with determination and generosity, the paths of the world. She asked the Holy Spirit that, with strength and enthusiasm, they might be able to set out on the way with limber legs.*

The Apostles began their pilgrimage of faith from the Upper Room on Pentecost, while Our Lady had begun her pilgrimage of faith ever since she was a little girl, and more clearly, since Nazareth, since the Annunciation: with her assent of the obedience of faith. She began to walk much earlier than they did; therefore, her path of faith is, in a certain way, longer than that of the Apostles. For this reason, She must go ahead as the star, preceding every pilgrimage: *Mary "precedes" them, "walks ahead" of them, and is also in the midst of them..*and it will remain this way...wherever the Church may be, wherever the Church will walk, *Mary will be in the midst of us, she will walk ahead of us, she will go with us...like the cloud that cared for the Israelites in the desert, going before them to accompany them during their journey through the desert: like a column of fire, because it was luminous at night* (cf. Exodus 14:19, 20, 24; Num. 9:21-22). *The name*

"column" must be the form which it commonly assumed. It was a manifestation of the presence of God among His people (Ex. 14:24, 33:9; Num. 11:25, 12:5; Deut. 31:15; Ps. 99:7). During their times of camping, it rested above the Ark of the Covenant; after it was built, and before that, probably in the center of the camp. It was raised as a sign that would lift up the camp, and during their march, it preceded the people, holding them back when they needed to fortify their tents (Ex. 40:34-35; Num. 9:17; Deut. 1:33). When they crossed the Red Sea, it placed itself between them and the Egyptians, brilliant and bright on side of the first and dark on the other (Ex. 14:19-20). During the march, it would light the path at night, and by day, it would protect them from the heat of the sun (Num. 10:34; Deut. 1:33; Neh. 9:12; Wis. 10:17, 18:3; Ps. 105:39).

A Geography of Faith...A Marian Geography (RM 25-28)

The Church who journeys through history, in the midst of nations and generations, pilgrims through the nations...lives always sheltered beneath the shadow of the Most High, to conceive, communicate, and give birth to Christ in the world, in history, and in the hearts of all peoples. We can say that the

Church makes her pilgrimage by the power of the Spirit, constantly living the mystery of Pentecost. "At the same time, the Lord's apostles and disciples, in all the nations of the earth, 'devote themselves to prayer together with Mary, the mother of Jesus'" (cf. Acts 1:14) (RM 28).

In this time while the Church keeps vigil, attentive to the voice of Her Lord, pilgrimaging throughout the whole earth, Mary "is present in the Church's mission, present in the Church's work of introducing into the world the Kingdom of her Son (RM 28). This presence of Mary finds many different expressions in our day, just as it did throughout the Church's history. It also has a wide field of action. Through the faith and piety of individual believers; through Marian movements, Marian apparitions, Marian saints, and "through the radiance and attraction of the great shrines where not only individuals or local groups, but sometimes whole nations and societies, even whole continents, seek to meet the Mother of the Lord[. . .] This is the message of the Land of Palestine, the spiritual homeland of all Christians because it was the homeland of the Savior of the world and of his Mother [. . .] This is the message of centers like Guadalupe, Lourdes, Fatima and the others situated in the various countries. Among them how could I fail to mention the one in my own native land, Jasna Gora? One could perhaps speak of a specific "geography" of faith and Marian devotion, which includes all these special places of pilgrimage where the People of God seek to meet the Mother of God in order to find, within the radius of the maternal presence of her "who believed," a strengthening of their own faith." (RM 28)

The Pilgrim Pope, from the Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe

Before the image of Our Lady, Bl. John Paul heard Her maternal voice: "you must be a pilgrim pope": "At a time when the whole Church has become newly aware of being the People of God, a People sharing in the mission of Christ, a People that goes through history with that mission, a "pilgrim" People, the Pope could no longer remain a "prisoner of the Vatican". He had to become again the pilgrim Peter, like the first Peter, who from Jerusalem, through Antioch, reached Rome to give witness there to Christ and seal his witness with his blood." (Warsaw, June 2, 1979)



The Pilgrim Pope, who wanted to go across history, peoples, nations and continents visiting, in a particular way, their Marian shrines, the living sanctuary of the Church of that nation, he taught us in his encyclical "Mother of the Redeemer" that a geography of faith exists, a Marian geography, made up of pilgrimages to Marian shrines, one of the greatest and most eloquent gestures of his Marian pontificate. So many gestures from this Marian Pope, this Totus Tuus Pope, this Pope of Marian Consecration, of filial love for Mary...this Pope of the Shrines. Pilgrimages constituted an inextricable part of the program for his apostolic trips. The fact that he made pilgrimages to so many Marian shrines was a singular gesture that the geography, but also the history, of nations is singularly marked by the presence of Mary so strongly and vigorously that the cultural and historical identity of those peoples is linked to that Marian presence. For him, the Marian shrines were the heart of countries and

continents. For example, as he told us in Puebla, 1979: "The evangelization of America was, from its very beginnings, marked by the presence of Mary so strongly and vigorously that it is rightly been said that the historic and cultural identity of the Latin American people 'is symbolized very luminously in the mestizo face of Mary of Guadalupe, which was revealed at the beginning of its evangelization.'"

At the Basilica of Guadalupe, the Marian heart of America called to him. It is for this reason that Our Lady appeared in the Heart of the Church in America and left her image engraved as a permanent miracle of her presence...the presence in the Heart of America. "You who have penetrated their hearts...Oh lady and Mother of America! Confirm their faith...Holy Virgin of Guadalupe, Queen of Peace! Save the nations and peoples of this continent." (Basilica of Guadalupe, 1999) In this Basilica of Guadalupe, the Marian Heart of America, we discover the maternal love of Our Lady, so that with that love, we may make our pilgrimage through all difficulties with total trust in her maternity. "Nothing should frighten or grieve you. Let not your heart be disturbed. Do not fear that sickness, nor any other sickness or anguish. Am I not here, who am your Mother? Are you not under my protection? Am I not your health? Are you not happily within my fold? What else do you wish? Do not grieve nor be disturbed by anything." (Our Lady to St. Juan Diego)

In these words, we can appreciate the fully maternal and feminine tenderness with which Our Lady enveloped Jesus in the long years that passed in the house of Nazareth. Christian tradition, above all in the Middle East, frequently used to contemplate Our Lady embracing the Child Jesus. And, with prompt availability, she also became the "servant" and mother of the brothers of Jesus, her children, as the Gospel passages of the Visitation and the Wedding of Cana show us.