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Addresses

Turn the World Toward Christ!

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This is the first of a three-part series based on the archbishop's reflection during Pentecost 2000 at the John Paul II Center, June 11.

I don't think any man fully understands what it's like for a woman to carry an unborn baby in her body for nine months . . . But the labor of getting ready for these talks each month seems to come pretty close. It's painful. And that's been very good, because the image of a woman bearing new life is exactly where I want to begin today.

Some of you will remember back in September that we talked about the language we use in describing God. Jesus was a male, and He called God His Father. That's how Christians think about God, mainly in masculine terms. God is our Father. Jesus is His son, the New Adam; the king, prophet, priest and bridegroom. All these are masculine terms. St. Paul tells us that all of us, both male and female, become sons in the Son, through Baptism. Of course, God isn't literally male. But gender language is part of the way God reveals His identity to us . . . and reveals our own identities to ourselves.

St. Paul also tells us that Christ is the bridegroom, and the Church is His bride. So this means that all of us, both male and female, are the spouse of Christ. The Church is not an "it." The Church is a "she." The Church is feminine. That's why Mary is so important to the Catholic understanding of the world. Mary is the first Christian, the perfect model of the Church and the perfect model for each of us as individual disciples. We're all called to be Mary. And that's as hard for some men to accept as it is for some women to call God "He."

Now here's the point. What did Mary do? She said "yes" to the Holy Spirit. And in that "yes," the Holy Spirit filled her with new life. The Early Church called Mary theotokos, which is Greek for "God-bearer." As a creature, she allowed her Creator to act in her and accomplish great things through her. In giving birth to God's son, Mary gave new life to the whole world. We're called to follow her example, each of us in his or her own way. Hearing the Gospel isn't enough. Talking about our faith isn't enough. We have to do something about it. Each of us, in a personal way, needs to be a kind of theotokos, a God-bearer. The seed of faith has to bear fruit in a life of Christian action, a life of personal Christian witness, or it's just words - and talk is cheap.

That's why this Pentecost celebration is so important. Pentecost is the birthday of the Church. Pentecost is our birthday as a believing people. The Church, like Mary, is about new life. The Holy Spirit filled Mary with new life at the Annunciation, and Mary gave birth to Jesus. The Holy Spirit filled the Apostles with new life at Pentecost, and they immediately gave birth to a new era through their preaching and example. God is a God of abundance, not sterility; confidence, not fear. God relentlessly creates new life through each of us - if we allow Him to. We're meant to be fertile. We're meant to bring others to new life in Jesus Christ. The "Acts of the Apostles" should continue today in the witness of our own lives.

Anonymous Christians?

God doesn't need "anonymous" Christians, Christians who blend in, Christians who don't make waves. We're here to rock the boat. That's what it means to be leaven. The Epistle of James says that faith without works is a dead faith. John Paul II says the same thing with a slightly different twist: Faith which does not become culture is dead faith. By "culture" he means the entire environment of our lives. Our culture reflects who we are and what we value. If we really believe in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, it will be obvious in our families, our work, our laws, art, music, architecture - everything.

Faith should impregnate everything we do. It should bear fruit every day in beauty and new life. And that's why God doesn't need "nice" Christians, Christians who are personally opposed to sin, but too polite to do anything about it publicly. Mother Teresa was a good and holy woman . . . but she was not necessarily "nice."

Real discipleship should be loving and generous, just and merciful, honest and wise - but also tough and zealous . . . and determined to turn the world toward Christ. When Jesus told us, "Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19), He not only gave us the missionary mandate to convert the world, He also gave us the reason to have confidence in accomplishing it. The last thing He told the Apostles before returning to His Father in heaven was, "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28:20). In that one simple verse is the key to the life of the Church and the meaning of the Great Jubilee.

The Holy Father explained it this way in his 1986 encyclical *Lord and Giver of Life*: The "new `coming' of Christ, this continuous coming of [the Lord] in order to be with His Apostles [and] with the Church, this `I am with you to the close of the age' . . . occurs by the power of the Holy Spirit, who makes it possible for Christ, who has gone away, to come now and forever in a new way . . . In [the Eucharist and the other sacraments], Christ, who has gone away in His visible humanity, comes, is present and acts in the Church in such an intimate way as to make it His own body. As such, the Church lives, works and grows `to the close of the age.' All this happens through the power of the Holy Spirit" (61).

Pentecost is not just the birthday of the Church. It's also the feast day of the Holy Spirit, who set the Apostles on fire with zeal in the Upper Room . . . who opened the minds in the crowd which first heard them preach . . . and who has guided and renewed the life of the Church for 2,000 years. We can only celebrate the Great Jubilee because the Holy Spirit first conceived Jesus in the womb of Mary. We can only celebrate the Great Jubilee because the Holy Spirit has never stopped sustaining the mission of the Church. And just as He strengthened and encouraged the first Apostles, so too He will strengthen and encourage each of us - if we let Him.

Understanding one's vocation

So this is the first point I want to make today: We begin to understand our vocation as Christians when we acknowledge that God alone is the "Lord and giver of life," and we are His creatures. We become who we really are - we experience reality most vividly - when we allow the Holy Spirit to transform us, and to work through us to renew the face of the earth. Each of us is called to share in God's creative and procreative power to give life. That's the meaning of the prayer we all learned as children: Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and enkindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, and we will be created, and You will renew the face of the earth.