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THE FULLNESS OF TIME ARRIVES IN JESUS THROUGH MARY

Holy Mary, Mother of God
31 December 1978

Numbers 6:22-27

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:16-21

I wish you all, dear sisters and brothers and esteemed radio listeners, a very Happy New Year! God himself has inspired the very best greeting the church has to offer in these days; it is the one that was heard in the first reading: «This is how you will call my name down on my people: “May the Lord bless you and protect you. May the Lord let his face shine on you and be gracious to you. May the Lord look kindly on you and bring you peace”» (Num 6:23-26). It is God’s greeting to humanity, to those who are willing to accept his word.

At the end of the year it is good to stop a while and reflect sincerely on what God has told us in the course of the year that is coming to an end. God has been a gracious Father concerned with blessing and leading his children and giving us his peace. From our hearts arises a sentiment of gratitude: «Thank you, Father, because you have truly been our Father. You have been the source of our peace. From you proceeds no misfortune. You alone have the words of eternal life».

God, the source of all goodness

In the light of this first reading, our thoughts are first of all directed toward God, the source of all goodness. To him we commend the mystery of the new year that will begin in a few hours. What will it bring us? We don’t know. But we do know that a kind hand is guiding the ship, and it is the hand of our Father. As children who feel enveloped in the love, the omnipotence, the tenderness, and the wisdom of God, we say that the coming year will be a good one, owing to God. From God we can expect nothing that is bad. Everything he has for us is contained in that formula we adopt at the beginning of the year: «The Lord bless you and protect you. May his face shine on you» (Num 6:24-25).

And when the Bible says, «They will call my name down on the people of Israel» (Num 6:27), this is not just an invocation. The words in the Bible have a fuller sense than what our translation communicates. Invoking God’s name on a people meant actualizing the covenant; it meant renewing the commitment made when God said, «I will be your God and you will be my people» (Lev 26:12). It’s like a new baptism. God seals his covenant with us in baptism, by which he grants us divine adoption so that we become God’s people. So every time the Lord’s name is invoked over this people of the covenant, the covenant becomes actualized again. This very night, at this very hour, here in this cathedral, as we celebrate the Eucharist, we are invoking God’s name over the people, and the people are ratifying their covenant with God.

Coming to Mass isn't just a matter of pious devotion; it means that we come to ratify, to reaffirm, to make present, to make real, on this last day of December 1978, our firm resolution to belong to God. And on God's part, there is a reaffirmation of his divine resolve: «I will be your God». Let us be confident, brothers and sisters.

As we look back over the year, we see God offended by so much neglect, perhaps by all the sins I've personally committed. Perhaps also, in our solidarity with our people we feel sorry for the sins *they* have committed against God. When we beg for his protection and blessing, we feel that forgiveness is ready at hand: «You are a God of goodness, and the aim of your covenant is precisely to remove our sins and give us your grace».

Christ, the fullness of time

And so I suggest a second thought. Let us examine closely this expression in the second reading: «When the fullness time had come» (Gal 4:4). As each year dies and another is born, time moves forward. This is the concept we humans have, but from the Bible's perspective God creates time in accordance with his will for us. That is why the Bible talks about the «time» of God's visitation, the «time» of God's anger, the «time» of God's blessings, and so on. When speaking of human beings, the Bible says that «there is a time for weeping and a time for laughing» (Eccl 3:4). With regard to nature, it speaks of «the hour of the breeze», «the hour of sunshine», or «the hour of nocturnal shadows» (Gen 1:14-17). It's as though all the natural things God has created have been made with that biblical conception of time; they are created for the purpose of engaging human beings in the dialogue and the project that we call the history of salvation. That's why God created the world; only then did time begin; only then did the years begin to pass. God's project was there at the beginning of creation, and it will culminate with the Day of the Lord, the end of time that Jesus announced. That day will see the final coming, the return of the Lord, the *parousia*, the new appearance of Jesus as Redeemer of humankind.

World history flows between that beginning of time and that end of time, but in the course of that history there is a moment which God conceives as «the fullness of time». It is the moment that Saint Paul speaks of today when he says, «The fullness time had come» (Gal 4:4). In this conception, time began to flow toward its fullness from the moment God created nature, history, and human beings. What, then, is the fullness of time? In God's project, it is the moment when he comes to save humankind; it is his incarnation, the incarnation of Christ: «The Son of God became flesh and dwelt among us» (John 1:14).

At that precise moment when history reaches its fullness, we find the virginal figure of Mary. That moment came only after long centuries of waiting, after many years filled with hopes, longings, and desires for the one who was to come, because the prophets had long been announcing him. That's why at the beginning of the year, on the first of January, we celebrate—as we're doing in this Mass—the feast of the motherhood of Mary, that is, the feast of Holy Mary, Mother of God. Blessed is this woman who was found worthy in that precise moment of history! God made her immaculately holy, like a new paradise, like a new fount of humanity from which his Son could take human flesh in order to bring to pass what had been promised during long centuries of expectation. From Mary was born Jesus, as the apostle Saint Paul says tonight: «When the fullness time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman» (Gal 4:4). Never has the name of woman had such a sublime meaning as on that Christmas night when a

woman gave birth to a Son who at the same time was God made man. It was the night of the fullness of time. The fullness of time arrived in Jesus through Mary.

In Christ, therefore, are fulfilled all the promises of God. That's how Saint Paul describes it tonight: «Through Christ God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying "Abba, Father!" So you are no longer slaves, you are children; and if children, then also heirs by God's will» (Gal 4:6-7). In this consists the fullness of time: that humanity attain the height of its history by means of Christ who brings the fullness of time, and that human beings become children of God and heirs of heaven. How marvelous it is to walk in these times now that Christ has entered history and brought it to its fullness! We now walk as children, shouting from all corners of our earth: «Father! *Abba!*» We are not simply creatures. For us time is now almost eternity. The years pass, but whoever lives through the years by the grace of God lives in the fullness of time.

That's why, sisters and brothers, at beginning of this new 1979, there should be one great joy for us. It doesn't matter that the years pass by; what matters is that they bring the fullness of God's grace. They say that Saint Francis de Sales used to greet the new year with these words: «Happy New Year! May you spend it in God's grace». I think that's a most beautiful evangelical greeting: «May you spend it in the fullness of time! May your days be loaded with the grace of the Lord! May the years not make you old and load you down with sins, but rather may your sins be wiped clean!» In the fullness of time there should be no more sin. In the fullness of time we should hear only the loving cries of men and women who in their innocence call out to the Father: «We are your heirs. We have your life in my heart. You have given us your Christ. We want to be his brothers and sisters». Anyone who does not live the fleeting years in this spirit is not living in the fullness of time. Anyone who lives in sin is unaware that the fullness of time arrived twenty centuries ago. Those who live in sin do not try to gain the grace of God and the joy of being a child of God; they do not know that they are called to be heirs of heaven after death, and so they never learn how to savor the loveliness of life. And so I truly wish you all a Happy New Year, one in which you will experience the beauty of the fullness of Christ who has come to us born of Mary.

Mary, Mother of God

And so let us end with this third thought, about Mary. On this feast of the divine motherhood, Mary is the model soul who conceived Christ in her mind and in her heart before conceiving him in her womb. That's why, when a woman in the crowd cried out enthusiastically to Christ, «Blessed is the woman who bore you in her womb and gave you her breasts to suckle», Christ responded, «Even more blessed are those who hear the word of God and put it into practice» (Luke 11:27-28). This was no disrespect for his mother but rather praise for her, as if to say, «My mother is not blessed because she has the womb and breasts of a woman; in that regard, my mother is like any woman in the world. The greatness of this woman is that she heard God's word and was holy. So that is why I, the Son of God, felt so much at home in her womb and at her breasts. Much more than taking in a woman's milk, in her I experienced all the warmth of Christian love, all the holiness of a creature who understood the fullness of time and lived only for God».

That's why Mary's motherhood is so great. It's because she knew how to listen to God's word and put it into practice. It's explained right there in tonight's gospel: after the shepherds

left, what did Mary do? Saint Luke captures this intimate scene: «Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart» (Luke 2:19). This was Mary's main concern. She humbly recognized that on her own she could never live up to all the greatness of God's plan of salvation, so what she felt was precisely this: «Behold this smallest servant. He has looked upon my smallness, but despite my smallness, I will offer him all the emptiness of my humility so that he can fill it with the fullness of God» (Luke 1:38). This is what God hopes that we will do. Therefore, even if we can't aspire to the perfection of Mary, let us at least imitate the poverty and humility of the shepherds: «They went back glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen; it was just as they had been told» (Luke 2:20).

In other words, dear brothers and sisters, the New Year begins in the ambience of Christmas, as Sacred Scripture reminds us: «When the fullness time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman» (Gal 4:4). The year begins in this ambience so as to tell us that time is not simply a measure of life—that is the Greek philosophical concept of quantitative time. Time in the biblical sense is experience, it is a gift of God, it is God's encounter with humankind. The days of 1979 are not just for us to count, to see how many have passed and how many are left till the next year. The days of 1979 should help us savor the fullness that Christ has brought to us. How many days have passed is not so important; what *is* important is experiencing them in the fullness of God's love.

And so, dear brothers and sisters, in the light of these three readings I exercise my priestly ministry by command of the Lord, who sends me to invoke his name over the people and to remind you of the covenant and the love that he has for us. Therefore, as the year begins, instead of wishing you a profane «Happy New Year», I speak to you these biblical words: «May the Lord bless you and protect you. May the Lord let his face shine on you and be gracious to you. May the Lord look kindly on you and grant you peace» (Num 6:24-26). Happy New Year! (Applause)