

**Homily for the Mass of Thanksgiving for the
Beatification of John Paul II**

Feast of Our Lady of Fatima

13 May 2011

(Readings: Acts 9:1-20; Ps 117; John 6:52-59)

On May 13th, 1917, Lucia dos Santos and her two younger cousins, Francisco and Jacinta, were tending their sheep close to the tiny village of Fatima in Portugal. Suddenly, at around noon, their attention was caught by a flash of lightening. Appearing over them they saw a “lady”, shining brilliantly. She asked the three children to pray for the conversion of sinners and an end to the First World War. This “lady” also asked the trio to return on the 13th of each month. This they did, except when they were prevented from doing so in September when they experienced an apparition on the 19th instead.

Finally, on October 13th, the woman revealed herself as “Our Lady of the Rosary”. On that date the crowd which had gathered, estimated at 30,000, witnessed the sun apparently tumble from the sky to earth.

On this day, May 13th, thirty years ago, in St Peter’s Square, Mehemit Ali Agca tried to assassinate Pope John Paul II. John Paul attributed his survival to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary. One year later he made a pilgrimage to Fatima to thank Our Lady for saving his life and to consecrate the world anew to her immaculate heart. At the Mass of Thanksgiving on May 13th, 1982 he spoke of Our Lady’s message at Fatima firmly within her Son’s Gospel call: “Repent and believe.”

The brilliant light of the Fatima apparitions is a beacon of hope inviting even the most hardened heart to welcome new life. It is a reflection of the light who is the Son, come down from heaven to earth, forming a bridge from earth to heaven; it is that light which so dazzled Saul, transforming him from persecutor of Jesus to fearless preacher of him as Son of God and Son of Mary: and this light of Fatima implores us to turn to Mary so that our hearts be opened to the love and life her Son alone can offer.

This month of May is Mary's month. It is so fitting that Pope John Paul was beatified at its beginning. With Blessed Pope John Paul II may we be inspired by the words of Saint Louis Marie de Montfort and say to Mary: "I am totally yours."

For from Bl. John Paul we have learnt that is the simplest way to belong completely to her Son. Yes, he teaches us that when we are close to Mary, who trusted the Angel's message not to fear, then we will never lack the courage to open wide the door to Christ when he himself says to us: "Do not be afraid!"

The life of Bl. John Paul was such a powerful witness to this truth. We know that he enjoyed the most intimate relationship with Mary, a bond nurtured especially through praying the Rosary, which inspired his teaching on her role in our salvation. In his encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, he developed our understanding of Mary's motherhood of the Church. In heaven Mary's motherly love for us continues.

Indeed she is our mother in the Spirit, caring for all the brothers and sisters of her Son “who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and difficulties, until they are led to their happy homeland..’.”¹ Precisely because Mary is Mother of the Redeemer, and hence our Mother too, she shares in our struggle against the powers of darkness, radiating into our lives the brilliant light who is her Son. She “helps all her children, wherever they be and whatever their condition, to find in Christ the path to the Father’s house”.²

So we know that Mary helped Bl. Pope John Paul to reach the Father’s house; and from there he still prays for us that we will let her do the same. There is much in the past life of Pope John Paul for which we rightly thank God.

¹ *Redemptoris Mater*, 40, citing *Lumen Gentium* 62.

² *Redemptoris Mater* 47

Yet at this Mass of Thanksgiving for his Beatification we express our gratitude that he continues to help us now. As Pope Benedict XVI has written: “The lives of the saints are not limited by their earthly biography but also include their being and working in God after death.”³ Bl. John Paul now knows the truth of what he always believed: that those who have been drawn close to God do not withdraw from us; but rather become truly close to us, helping us all the more effectively. The wonderful multitude of the blessed, enjoying seeing God as He is, do not lose sight of us! Nor do they stop hearing us. Rather they are “ever turning listening ears to our prayers”.⁴ Their communion of life and love, in and with the Most Holy Trinity, is a communion open outwards by their unceasing prayer.

³ *Deus Caritas Est*, 42

⁴ Pope Paul VI's *Professio*, 26

This is a great help to us in our weakness. Through their union with Christ, the saints and the blessed form part of that bridge between heaven and earth, proving that the bonds of love are never obliterated by death.

Blessed John Paul II, then, continues to help us not to be afraid to have faith, to be called Christian, to belong to the Church, to respond to the call addressed to each one of us: “Be holy!” He helps us to cross the threshold of hope no matter our struggle and sense of inadequacy, to desire more than anything else the happiness of the Kingdom of heaven. He holds up for us the Mother of the Redeemer as an image and model of holiness in whom we find the strength to believe in her Son. He is our Redeemer! Trusting in Christ’s grace, we can live, even now, in the light of eternity.

In this Mass, and in every Mass, the light of eternity shines into our lives. Here we are in the presence of the Bread come down from heaven; here we partake of the flesh and blood that promises eternal life. In this communion with Christ through the Eucharistic Sacrifice we feel closer than ever to the Church in heaven, “sharing as it were in the liturgy of heaven,”⁵ participating in the celebration which Blessed John Paul is enjoying.

Yet in the Eucharist there is also a promise of a future yet to come present which Blessed John Paul does not yet fully enjoy: the resurrection of the body – the fulfilment of Jesus’ promise that he will raise up on the last day those who eat his flesh and drink his blood.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI’s Homily at John Paul II’s beatification.

The Eucharist is already the Lord's coming but it is also a yearning for his glorious return. Then there will be the redemption of our bodies as heaven finally forms the canopy of a new earth.⁶

This we understand a little in the glorious assumption of Our Lady. In her we glimpse our future, her body renewed in love, assumed into heaven, a promise of the new heaven and new earth that will be achieved with the second coming of Christ. The Eucharist is the pledge of that future glory, for which the body of Pope John Paul, in which he suffered so much, now lies in waiting.

At the Mass of Beatification, Pope Benedict spoke movingly of his own friendship with Blessed John Paul II.

⁶ An idea taken from Joseph Ratzinger's *Eschatology*, see p. 203.

May his words be ours also: “Blessed are you, beloved Pope John Paul II, because you believed! Continue we implore you, to sustain from heaven the faith [and the hope] of God’s people...Bless us, [still] Holy Father! Amen.”

✠Vincent Nichols