

## Holy Mary Mother of God “Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI Points Us to Mary”

Bishop Frank Schuster

Here we are again, my friends, we have finished one year, and we now welcome a new year. This past year ends on a tender note with the passing of our Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. Even though he had retired many years ago, and succeeded by our Holy Father Pope Francis, one cannot help but take a moment to reflect on Pope Benedict’s life and ministry. Having read so much of his writings over the years, when I heard the news, it felt like I lost a spiritual grandfather. I will miss him while at the same time feel grateful for the gift God has given us in his life and personal witness.

In fact, Pope Francis beautifully summarized what I feel right now in his homily for this feast day we celebrate this weekend, the Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Mother of God. During his homily, while focusing on the theme of “kindness”, Pope Francis said this: “And speaking of kindness, my thoughts naturally go to dear Pope emeritus Benedict XVI who left us this morning. We are moved as we recall him as such a noble person, so kind. And we feel such gratitude in our hearts: gratitude to God for having given him to the Church and to the world; gratitude to him for all the good he accomplished, and above all, for his witness of faith and prayer, especially in the last years of his recollected life. Only God knows the value and the power of his intercession, of the sacrifices he offered for the good of the Church.” Those are profound words from Pope Francis that summarize how I feel right now.

However, entering a new year also gives me, indeed gives us all, an opportunity to start anew in a spirit of hope. We can all take a moment and examine our hearts this weekend to see where we are at. If things are good right now, count your blessings. If things haven’t been so good, consider what the Gospel has to tell us.

What does the feast day today of Mary Mother of God have to say about any troubles we are facing or may have to confront this year? What does this day have to say about God’s response? What the Gospel has to say is this: when times could not get darker, God became human for the sake of our salvation. The omnipotent one decided to be birthed. The eternal one now has a mother. The feast day of Mary the Mother of God reminds us that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son for the sake of our salvation. He walked with us. He ate with us. He healed our wounds from within our nature. He remained loyal to us even when we weren’t.

My friends, we begin the New Year with the Christmas message that God decided to have a mother, to enter our history with all its blessings and hurts. The solemnity this weekend gives a message to humanity, and it is this: "I am one of you, I love you, I will not abandon you". We would be well served if we followed

Mary's example in our Gospel reading today and kept God's word in our hearts, reflecting upon it.

Indeed, we would be well served by reflecting more on God's activity in our lives because everything we experience or suffer in this life can help us on the path to salvation or potentially hinder us depending on our response. Mary understood this. Mary had a choice. Mary could have said yes or no to God. She said yes and the Second Person of the Holy Trinity is gifted his human nature from her. By assuming our humanity into his divinity and redeeming us from the inside out through his passion, death and resurrection, Jesus made us adopted children of our Father in Heaven. In a remarkable circle of events, Mary has become our mother in faith now. No human person is closer to God than Mary. She is therefore the first of all the saints and our intercessor in time of need. What better way to begin 2023 than by celebrating Mary, our model of discipleship and promise of our future?

My friends, as you lift up your prayers and your hopes for this coming year, consider an insight I received from Archbishop Sartain several years ago, which I believe he took from St. John of the Cross from his Ascent of Mount Carmel<sup>1</sup>. Whenever we lift up a prayer to God asking for this, that or whatever, when God answers back with a single word, the name of his Son Jesus, with just that one word, he has answered our prayers completely because in Jesus his Son, the Father has given us his everything. In the same way, when we turn to Mary our Mother in faith with the matters that concern us for her intercession, when she responds with the name of her Son, Jesus, she also has answered all of our prayers because by giving us Jesus, by giving us her "yes", she gave us her everything too. It is instructive that the last words we hear from Mary in the bible are from the Gospel of John, at the wedding at Cana, when she says, "Do whatever Jesus tells you to do." Very good advice from our loving spiritual Mother!

Again, like Mary, we have a choice. We can say yes or no to this invitation, can't we? Imagine if we said yes! If we say yes to Mary's invitation, no matter what happens in 2023 God will be right there with us, to love us and to lead us ever closer to the Kingdom he has prepared for us through Christ our Lord. To underscore this, I end with the conclusion of a prayer of Pope Benedict from my most favorite encyclical of his, "Spe Salve" (In Hope We Are Saved). In this prayer, he points us to Mary. He prays, "Holy Mary, Mother of God, our Mother, teach us to believe, to hope, to love with you. Show us the way to [your Son's] Kingdom! Star of the Sea, shine upon us and guide us on our way!" Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Office of Readings: Second Monday of Advent