

Signum Magnum, "Great Sign"

June 26, 2014

INTRODUCTION

On May 13th 1967, in Fatima, Portugal, Venerable Pope Paul VI—who shall be proclaimed blessed on October 19, 2014 by Pope Francis—presented the Apostolic Exhortation, *Signum Magnum*, translated “Great Sign” in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the Fatima apparitions (SM, 1967). (The pope gives an “Apostolic Exhortation” as a series of conclusions he has reached, often after a Synod of Bishops) (EWTN) The exhortation marked the visit of the first Pope who came as a pilgrim to the shrine. (Miravalle, 1992) This historical visit and the exhortation underline the modern popes’ honor to the apparitions and messages of Our Lady of Fatima.

Why the name “Great Sign?” The Pope begins and includes Mary, the “Great Sign” as the “woman clothed with the sun,” a quote from Rev. 12:1. This image of Our Lady adds to the chapter on the Blessed Virgin in chapter 8 of the Vatican II document, *Lumen Gentium*, since this document does not include Rev. 12:1. Mary stands as the Great Sign of the Church in the contemporary world, for she is a Great Sign fully consecrated to Christ and participant in his work of redemption. She also represents the “Great Sign” at Fatima, Portugal, coming from heaven in 1917 to give hope to the modern world. However, Venerable Pope Paul VI not only refers to her as a sign, but in reality a Mother forming her children. The thesis of the document in fact revolves around the new title the Pope gave her, Mother of the Church, and specifically on venerating and imitating Mary, Model of All Virtues.

Venerable Pope Paul VI mentions that he composed this document out of “pastoral concerns”. “Pastoral concerns?” What did he mean? The date: 1967. What do the sixties

mean to you, who may at that time existed in the mind of God that is, a person not yet born, or a baby, a child, a teen, or adult? Was it a time of peacefulness and clarity? For most who lived through the sixties, either as children, teens or adults, or those who have studied the sixties, that era may bring to mind Sonny & Cher, hippies, bandanas around the forehead, revolt against the “establishment” and, sadly, dissidence from two sides in the Catholic Church.

A young priest who survived this epoch in New York later labeled the era as “the holocaust of the sixties.” Pope Paul VI told Venerable Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen that he goes to bed with a crown of thorns each night, during this confusing time of post-Vatican II. As was already mentioned, there seemed to be two groups of dissidents: those who believed Vatican II meant complete freedom from Church authority and those who believed that the Council and the Pope were heretical.

Both were just as wrong as the other. One Sister recalls, when she was a young laywoman, a priest stepping on a rosary as a sign of his rejection of the Marian devotion. Another Sister, as a teenager, heard a priest call the then Pope Paul VI a “great man in white”, laughing sarcastically at the Pope

The other side of dissidents protested Pope Paul. Among other modes of ultra-traditional dissent, some traveled to Rome, waving signs labeling the Pontiff a heretic. Actually, these misguided people seemed to be reacting to the abuses they saw all around them: irreverent Masses, priests and religious leaving their sacred vocations in droves, disdain of devotion to Our Lady, the saints and so forth. The Catholics who remained faithful to the Church also became

confused. Many priests and Catholic religious educators taught Vatican II had dropped devotion to Mary. Tragically, more Catholics left the Catholic Church out of confusion and yearning for doctrinal content.

What was the Pope to do? Why not consecrate the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and show by his own example his trust in Our Lady and desperate need for her help? In addition, why not implore his bishops, those who can best reach the priests, religious and lay faithful, to implement clear teaching on Mary? This is precisely what Blessed Paul VI did: he taught clearly what the title “Mother of the Church” means: Her imitation of Christ, and the consequent veneration and Imitation of the Blessed Virgin which should follow.

What does the actual document teach? Venerable Pope Paul VI begins with a trip down memory lane. He recalls to his bishops the enthusiasm many of them experienced when, after writing the section on Mary, the 8th chapter of the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, the Pope proclaimed a new title for her: “Mother of the Church.”

For some reason, the Pope’s declaration caused uproar by some as an unnecessary going back to medieval times, while many of the Council Fathers expressed gratitude. Fr. John Sherlock, the Wichita Diocesan Cathedral rector, once recalled his own memories: as a young seminarian, he was permitted to watch the Council. He reminisced that when the topic of Mary came up; extreme verbal exchanges took place among some of the Council Fathers. The Pope at this time simply solved the problem by entitling her “Mother of the Church”, to the joy of many and the chagrin of some.

The eminent theologian Fr. William Most began his explanation of the proceedings of the Sessions on Mary:
“ . . . the feelings were so strong that only one representative of a state could make an

intervention.” (This occurred among the bishops and cardinals of the Church!) After much argumentation or arguing, and after the 3rd Session, Pope Paul VI, stating that many of the Council Fathers wished for an explicit declaration during the Council of the status of the Virgin Mother, gave Mary the title of “Mother of the Church”, a title suggested by various parts of the Catholic world. To this presentation, Venerable Pope Paul received a standing ovation; applause interrupted the Pope seven times during the entire address. It seemed as if most of the Council Fathers wanted Mary honored.

The next memory takes a vivid imagination, for none of us existed, except in God’s mind. The date: 431 and the place: Ephesus. Like Vatican II, both east and west church fathers participated at this Council. In these days, fighting did not take place merely in words. The excitement became high-pitched, when Mary was proclaimed as *Theotokos*, a Greek word meaning, “Mother of God”. This title actually protected the divinity of her Son. She gave birth not just to Jesus the man, but to Jesus as God. The Christian faithful of Ephesus jubilantly marched with the Church Fathers and carried torchlights to guide and perhaps protect these bishops home. This remembrance specifically points to the early Christian reception of Mary as “Mother of God”.

The next celebration the Pope recalls took place at the time of the presentation of *Signum Magnum*, on the fiftieth anniversary of Fatima, Portugal. It seems that Mary and celebration go together! Mary herself sang a song of the blessings God showered upon her: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord...for all generations shall call me blessed.” () We can all envision the motherly joy of Our Lady at these historical mirrors of her own song of praise.

Venerable Pope Paul VI continues, now having set the scene of Mary’s glory and beauty in the Church. He will teach two truths: first, we

call Mary Mother of the Church because of her virtues, and second, we must imitate Mary in her virtues. As the saintly pope pleaded to his bishops in 1967, Venerable Pope Paul still appeals to us today. Let us be open!

PART ONE

Like any good mother, Mary does not confine herself to giving birth, as great as this act is.

Good mothers, ever on the watch for danger, feed, form and protect their children. A good Catholic mama will see to it that her child knows how to pray to Jesus, Mary, the guardian angel, the patron saint, as well as to dress himself, develop good manners, and so forth. A loving mother, with whom we can all identify in some woman, whether it be our own mothers or not, does everything she can to mold her children into holy, happy and healthy men and women. Moreover, she is available for the child throughout its life, even in adult years. Does this description sound familiar?

If our own mothers, good as they are but marred with original sin effects could love sacrificially and constantly, how much more the Mother of the Church in her heavenly glory, not scarred with any sin?

Specifically how does Mary help us? First, she prays unceasingly for each of us, ignited by ardent and personal love. Why are you here at this Web site? Perhaps there is someone you love for whom you are praying fervently and you trust in Mary's intercession. If we as sinners can plead for those we love, how much more the Mother of the Church does! Mary ever intercedes for us, but wants to help us more. Our Blessed Mother wants us to ask for graces. She told St. Catherine Laboure that she wears rings with beautiful rays going out, symbolizing graces for which no one asks. (You can see an image of this on any Miraculous Medal.)

Mary, Mother of the Church, forms us also by her example. There is an old saying: "Words move, example attracts." We know that parents' teachings become far more effective when backed by their own genuine virtues. Similarly, our heavenly Mother's virtues exude sweetness and enchantment that attract us irresistibly to Jesus.

One may think, "Mary had it made. She is the Immaculate Conception, after all." However, Pope Paul VI tells us that Mary generously cooperated continually with grace. Though her struggles were not like ours, she still struggled. She had the power, like Eve, to say no to God. (Recall that Eve had no original sin, either.) As Mother Joanne, our first General Superior and Foundress used to say, "Let us not deny Our Lady virtue." The implication of effort in virtue is what Mother Joanne meant, and Mary exerted determination in following her Son. The Pope describes Mary's entire life as one of loving service. It was not just at her "Yes" to Gabriel; rather, she continuously cooperated with God's Will for

VI listed Mary's beautiful virtues: "firm faith, ready obedience, simple humility, joyful praising of the Lord, ardent charity her life.

Venerable Paul, strong and constant fulfillment of the mission God gave her." As we gaze upon Mary's merits, what is God calling us to do? Venerable Pope Paul VI concludes Part One by asserting it is our duty --- note the word "duty", --- not option, not a nice devotion of choice, but our duty to thank God for giving us Mary.

Then, just as in the 4th commandment we are obliged (not suggested) to honor (the Hebrew word for "honor" means pay homage, respect, praise) to our own mothers, so we must honor, respect, & praise & thank Mary for her free

consent in helping to save us from the devil. Do we?

PART TWO

What is our second duty to Mary that the Pope spells out for us? Besides honoring Our Lady in prayer, we must imitate her virtues. Let us now apply Mary's qualities to ourselves: firm faith, ready obedience, simply humility, joyful praising of the Lord, ardent charity, strong and constant fulfillment of the mission God gives us (Each of us reading this article has a God-given mission, whether we know it or not.) In regard to these virtues, Vatican II warns us to avoid passing emotion and superficial belief; rather, true faith ignites us to emulate Mary with conviction. By the way, it is wise to pray for these virtues. Our Lady will then inspire and show us how to practice them in daily living.

You may ask, "Does not this imitating of Mary detract from imitating of Christ?" I will answer with another question. Who first imitated Mary? Her Son did! We see in children, to our delight, many good qualities they have absorbed from their mamas. The Pope teaches that Jesus certainly mirrored his Mother's virtues.

Moreover, the Church calls Our Lady the "first disciple of Christ." She stands as the exemplar of following Christ. To follow her is to imitate Christ. Christ himself praised her by describing his mother, "...anyone who does the will of God is my mother, sister and brother." (Mt 12:80) Mary, since she was only human like us, (Christ is God made man) just makes it more pleasant and easy to follow the Lord. Jesus gave us a gift in his mother. She makes it simpler, as any good mother would in trying to help her child. It would be rude to refuse Our Lord this precious gift. Mary, a human, not a divine person as is her Son, always exemplifies "I do the things that please my Father," (Jn 8:20) a statement Christ

himself frequently repeats in the Bible. Our Lady's shining example can help, not hinder us to be more intimate with her Son. This is all she desires: Mary only wants to bring us to Jesus.

Often we think Mary's greatest privilege is her divine maternity, her being the Mother of God. As magnificent as this reality is, St. Augustine, the foremost of church fathers, tells us Mary's higher blessing consists in receiving the Faith in Christ rather than in conceiving his flesh. In fact, Augustine writes Mary felt joy more keenly in having Jesus in her heart than in her womb. None of us can conceive Christ's flesh, certainly, but we call all receive the Faith. Receiving faith is true imitation of Mary.

St. Paul once said, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." (1 Cor. 4:16) If St. Paul, as holy as he was, but marred with original sin's effects can write this, why cannot we imagine Mary saying this to us: "Be imitators of me, as I am of My Son." And she really does, through the Church, the Pope and the Councils, with their infallible teaching authority.

The Catholic Church has always upheld these teachings on Mary and her presence has ever illumined those who trust in her. However, in the last 250 years or so, Popes have written many new documents and Mary herself has appeared in church-approved apparitions more than in any time in history.

For example, in the 19th century Pius IX wrote 25 documents and Leo XIII 56. In the twentieth century Pius X 37, Benedict XV 30, Pius XI 309, Pius XII 470, John XXIII 501, Paul VI 315 and John Paul II, 1, 600! Pope Paul VI calls this the "Marian Age" for obvious reasons.

In addition, Our Lady has appeared more in the last 250 years than in any other epoch: Paris and Lourdes, France; Knock, Ireland; Kibeho, Rwanda, Africa; Akita, Japan; and even in our own country, Campion, Wisconsin, USA,, San Nicolas, Argentine and our IHM favorite, Fatima,

Portugal. These apparitions are just a few of many that can be mentioned. By the way, the Church has approved Marian apparitions in seven continents, teaches Pope Paul VI.

Mary appears to us, pleading for more prayer, penance and love for her as Mother, so she can intercede for our world, our country, and our families. As we look around our sin-infested world, Mary reminds us of the Scriptural saying, "Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more." (Rom)

CONCLUSION

Venerable Pope Paul VI stated in "Great Sign" that "piety stands as an indisputable and unbreakable duty to the Mother of the Son of God." As a motif in this document he pointed to the People of God on a "Pilgrimage of Faith". Just as in Marian processions we walk together to a church or similar destination, with a statue or image of Mary leading us, so in life Mary shows us the way, guiding us, warning us if we go astray, inspiring us with more faith, obedience and above all the greatest of all virtues, love, as each of us travels to our heavenly destination.

As IHM Sisters we conduct a mini-pilgrimage -- a procession to our Fatima Shrine, duplicated on the very replica of the original Fatima Shrine on each May 13th and October 13th at our

Colwich, KS farm. With Venerable Pope Paul VI and now our own Pope Francis, please consider not only consecrating yourself to Our Heavenly Mother, but **renewing** your consecration and honoring Our Lady of Fatima, whose Immaculate Heart in the end will triumph.

Was Venerable Pope Paul VI successful? I don't know. All I know is that now, we have many bishops who love Our Lady, and we in the Wichita Diocese see this affection especially in our own Bishop Kemme who loves the Immaculate Heart of Mary and seems to exemplify Marian virtues. Our priests, when they celebrate their first Mass, dedicate their priesthood to Mary; at the death of a priest, the other priests sing the *Salve Regina* for his soul. Our present Pope has re-consecrated the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary on October 13, 2013. Fervent religious orders bear her name and are growing. Families are once again saying the rosary and teaching their children about Our Lady.

A fire has been set in the present church, perhaps sown by the sufferings of Venerable Pope Paul VI. I pray that you will be part of the blaze.

Venerable Pope Paul VI, pray for us!

Mother of the Church, pray for us!

