

Mary Icon of the Church

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A very easy question to ask, but a difficult one to answer is, what is the Church? Even more difficult is, what is the Church for? Try answering the first one, by completing the sentence, “The Church is...” What did you come up with? It is relatively effortless to come up with a name for the Church, such as the People of God/the Body of Christ. It is much more difficult to come up with a statement that locks into the heart of the Church.

That is bad enough, but today many people would say, why bother? The Church has in some ways a bad name: there are divisions and scandals; people are drifting away because what the Church offers no longer seems important to them; some people find the Church too authoritarian for the values of our society, whilst others feel that it has given up on its birthright; others will find the Church deficient in upholding or promoting what they consider to be critical rights and values.

I would like to approach the Church today from the perspective of Mary. I speak of Mary as the icon of the Church. An icon is a sacred image that draws us into the mystery of God and his love. To speak of Mary as an icon is to come to reflect in calm and peace. An icon is not penetrated with the casual glance we give to a newspaper heading, or a seaside photo. To appreciate an icon takes time; we must ponder before the icon so that it can speak to us. My contention is that to reflect before Mary in prayerful contemplation is to be drawn into what is most central about the Church. Mary is a figure of beauty and repose; she is a symbol that is calm and serene; she is a woman at once tender and strong. We cannot contemplate Mary aright if we come with a loveless ideology, with anger and recrimination against other members of the Church. Today we come to Mary so that she can teach us the most profound truths about the Church.

But what is the Church we come to learn about from Mary? Remember the sentence: “The Church is...” When we hear the word “Church,” do we think of our parish, about the pope, about the sacraments, about catechists, about teaching or handing on the faith? Unfortunately today not many people think of the Holy Trinity when they hear the word “Church.” Yet it is in the Trinity that the Church has its deepest roots. In fact if we want to think rightly about the Church, we should start with the Trinity. To grasp the heart of the Church we need to begin with Trinitarian love. I would put it to you that the most important things about the Church can be summed up in four short phrases: The Church is quite simply: “Trinitarian love poured out on the world; manifested in the Paschal Mystery; celebrated in the Eucharist; shared with the world.” Four short phrases, but very dense ones. What I propose to do is to reflect on these four little phrases, but to do so looking on the figure of Mary. Above all she is the one who knows the love of the Trinity that has been poured out over the world; she experienced in the depths of her being the Paschal Mystery of her Son; she can teach us about the Eucharist; she is the model of the Church sent forth in service and evangelization. It is Mary then that can help us to ponder and to tease out the meaning of the definition I have given of the Church: Trinitarian love poured out; manifested in the Paschal Mystery; celebrated in the Eucharist; shared with the world. It will be obvious that this vision of the Church is far removed from what interests the media about the Church. It is also far above the things that preoccupy people about the Church like papal teaching, the level of consultation in the parish, the personality of the bishop, parish priest or Eucharistic minister. Though faith is of course one, and we cannot neglect any revealed truth without imperilling the whole, nevertheless we have become engulfed in secondary truths of the faith, rather than what is primary. There is surely something wrong when people get worked up by questions of authority and never marvel at the wonder of the Trinity; there is

something quite odd surely about the number of right-wing groups in this century which have invoked the patronage of the Virgin Mary. I think, for example, of the Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, a group in Boston in the 1940s who believed that everyone who was not a Roman Catholic was destined for hell. Its leader was excommunicated by Pius XII. Again, we have allowed ourselves to a rather serious extent to have become bogged down, if not in trifles, at least in what is peripheral. Our vision of the Church is too often pragmatic, dreary and angry. We need to lift up our eyes to the beauty which is at the heart of the Church. And Mary, who is supremely the beautiful one, is a sure guide.

Trinitarian Love Poured Out

One of the loveliest passages of the New Testament, a text used by the Church in the Liturgy of the Hours in Monday Evening Prayer, is the opening of the letter to the Ephesians (1:3-14). The present pope used the same passage to open his major encyclical letter on Mary, *Redemptoris Mater* (1987). It is a majestic sweep from eternity to eternity, the whole divine plan of the Father, manifested in the Son and brought to fruition by the Spirit. It is called quite simply “the mystery” (Ephesians 1:9; 3:9). This great plan is brought into our world by creation, but especially by re-creation in the Son through the Spirit. This plan begins to unfold in the apparently simple story of the annunciation as told by Luke (1:26-38); rather more than unfold, it is all there in kernel. We approach this text with Mary; indeed it is a daily prayer in the Church which we pray in the Angelus which recalls the central truths of this event.

We ponder the Annunciation with Mary; she leads us into Trinitarian love. There was an apparition in Rome in 1947 which is little-known outside Italy. It occurred at Tre Fontane, the place of the martyrdom of St. Paul, where three fountains were said to have sprung up at the three places where his head hopped at his martyrdom. Bruno Carnacchiola was a militant seventh-day Adventist. He was plotting to assassinate Pius XII and was preparing an article against the Mother of God. The Virgin appeared to him and on the first occasion said one word, “basta!” (enough!). She subsequently gave her name as “Sono colei chi habita nella Trinità” (I am the one who dwells in the Trinity). We can find a not dissimilar idea in Irish devotion about Mary. Irish culture in some ways is much more matriarchal than British society. When in Irish Mary is called *Bean tí na Tríonóide* (The Housewife of the Trinity), it is implied that she is a servant of the Trinity in caring for all on behalf of the Trinity; she, as it were, sets the tone in heaven and earth. The Church, moreover, must continually and ever more deeply be patterned on Mary.

We look for a moment at the Annunciation story to see what it might tell us about the Church, about Trinitarian love poured out. To begin with we should notice the small scale of the event: the angel comes to Nazareth which was a village of a few hundred people. Quite simply God does not think in our way; we would surely have the angel come to a major metropolis like Rome, Corinth or to one of the centres of civilization like Athens. Already we are learning something about God’s ways and about what the Church must be. It is not great in the eyes of the world, but small, weak, almost insignificant, but of immense importance from God’s perspective. The angel brings a word from the Father: Gabriel greets Mary with two mysterious words, *chaire kecharitômané* instead of the normal Hebrew salutation, “peace Mary.” The angel’s address gives as it were a new name for Mary, “Rejoice O Graced One” (Luke 1:28). These are God’s continual words also to the Church: despite its weakness and constant failures, the Church is the graced one, and is called

upon to rejoice. That call is particularly apposite today I spoke recently with a theology professor at one of the leading Roman universities there who remarked about the sheer heaviness and gloom that one senses about the Vatican despite the fact that the Pope himself frequently speaks about hope and the renewal for the coming millennium. But rejoicing cannot be turned on at command. We only exult if we have a reason. If we are to rejoice, if we are to be light-hearted and at peace, we need to look to the deepest ground of the Church. Like Mary, the Church is graced and it is covered with God's love. All is well, we can indeed celebrate.

But there are difficulties. Mary sensed problems too. Luke indeed is careful to tell us that Mary was deeply disturbed at greeting at the angel's greeting (Luke 1:29). In fact Mary not knowing or being disturbed is a theme in the first two chapters of Luke's gospel (see 1:29.34; 2:19.33.48.49.50). Mary receives reassurance from the angel, "You have found favour with God." If instead of looking at the problems of the Church, we too were to listen to the word of God, we also would be reassured by the hope and promise of the great mystery which is the divine plan.

The angel goes on to proclaim the future destiny of the child:

He will be great, and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end (Luke 1:32-33).

She is told therefore that the glorious, royal messianic prophecies are now to be fulfilled. Her Son will be Lord of all. We will see later how he will be king and how these triumphant prophecies will be fulfilled through the words on the Cross, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" (Luke 23:3.37-38). Again we see reasons for raising our eyes in hope and rejoicing. Instead of the pessimism and depression afflicting the Church, we are to contemplate its Lord, Jesus. We become pessimistic when we look at ourselves; we can be optimistic and confident when we look at the Lord. So too with the Church. With Mary we are being invited to look to the lordship of Jesus as the ground of our hope. Jesus is Lord; evil will not have the last word; the gates of hell will not triumph over the Church, weak as it may appear to be at times.

But Mary is still confused, "How can this be?" (Luke 1:34). We can easily grasp her perplexity. She is engaged to Joseph and there is a wedding in the offing. She asks equivalently therefore, "What am I to do? Mary - Joseph? Break off the engagement?..." She is given the only answer that will ultimately satisfy:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you (Luke 1:35).

Mary is to be enveloped by the Holy Spirit: it is God who ensures that God's plans are fulfilled. We are invited to look in the same direction. The tasks facing the Church are indeed immense, and when we look around us, we are struck by weakness. We will not solve problems by condemnation or harsh invective. It is the gentle Spirit, the One whom St. Catherine of Siena loved to call "Clemency" or Mercy, that will support us.

Even though Mary was all-holy and perfect in the virtues of faith and hope, God still looked on her weakness as a human and gave her a sign to sustain her faith and hope: her elderly cousin Elizabeth is now pregnant. It is not just any sign, but a miracle; a wonder moreover to make Mary rejoice in the good fortune of her cousin. The Church is given great

promises and reassurances. But we are not left without signs and wonders to strengthen our weak faith, and to console us in difficulties. I wonder what is the great sign that God gives us today? It is not in great rallies, or impressive buildings, nor indeed primarily in remarkable Church leaders. The great sign, the only convincing sign is love. When we look at the Church with unjaundiced eye, we see so much love, the sheer goodness of people, their generosity in family and social life. We see too so much heroic love of God in ordinary people. As long as such love is being produced by the Holy Spirit, we need never be pessimistic about the Church. And in case there is any doubt, we are given the word of the angel to Mary, “Nothing is impossible with God.” This statement is found several times in the Bible when there is some situation of human impossibility (e.g. Genesis 18:14; Jeremiah 32:27; Job 42:2; Matthew 19:26). Again we are being told to look towards God and not to be focused on the problems that surround us.

After this Trinitarian revelation of God’s promises and invitation, Mary pronounces herself *doulê*, a slave or servant, “Here am I, the servant, or rather slave, of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Here is her complete act of faith in the word, the command, the promise of God. The Church is nothing if it is not a Church of faith. Faith here is not a narrow presentation of dogmas or truths, but a total commitment which of course involves belief, but also demands hope and commitment. If it is to be modelled on Mary, the Church must constantly say a complete “yes” to what God says, commends and promises. Once again, a Trinitarian vision of the Church lifts up our minds to God and the wonders of his plan. Already in the first phrase of our definition of the Church, “Trinitarian love poured out,” we have an answer to much of the pessimism and despondency which surrounds the Church today.

Manifested in the Paschal Mystery

In the Annunciation we have the revelation of God’s promise of an outpouring of Trinitarian love and Mary’s response. The implementation of this revelation and promise was the Paschal Mystery of the eternal Son of God. The term “Paschal Mystery” became common after Vatican II to speak about the redemption, the Eucharist and about our life in Christ. It is the mystery enacted at the Christian Passover. The word “Passover” comes from the two interconnected incidents in the Old Testament: the blood of the Paschal Lamb on the doorposts of the Israelites saved them from the destroying angel; the people could then “pass over” from the slavery of Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land (Exodus, chapter 12). Jesus is our Passover: his blood saves us from sin; in him we pass from the slavery of sin to freedom and life. Jesus, our Passover Lamb, saves us through the sacred mysteries of his death, resurrection and ascension whereby he “passed over” to the Father in order to send the Pentecostal Spirit on the Church. We ponder the Paschal Mystery with Mary.

In the gospel of John we have two key incidents related on Calvary. The first is the word of Jesus to his Mother and the beloved Disciple:

Meanwhile, standing near the Cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” and from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. After this, Jesus knew that all was now finished (John 19:25-28a).

The second passage is after the death of Jesus:

When they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out (John 19:33-34).

Neither of these passages are to be found in the earlier synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark or Luke. In their present form these first witnesses probably date from the 60s or 70s. John's gospel is a good deal later, and belongs to the end of the century. The community from which it arose had long pondered the Paschal Mystery of Jesus and concluded that the commitment of Mary to the beloved Disciple, and of the beloved Disciple to Mary was not merely an act of filial piety, by which Jesus saw to the future care of his mother. Seen in this way, it would have been a private act and not central to the Calvary story; as such it was not recorded by the synoptic gospels. But the community of John's Gospel saw that a deeper truth was involved. Mary is more than the physical Mother of Jesus; she is the New Eve, and in a much more significant way than was Eve "Mother of all who live" (see Genesis 3:20). The address of Jesus, "Woman" looks to the universal significance of Mary. Moreover, in case we missed the point, the evangelist tells us, "After this, Jesus knew that all was now finished." Mary and the beloved Disciple are both said to stand at the foot of the Cross. They are both present when the Church is born from the side of Jesus. The evangelist is pointedly recalling the origin of Eve: she was formed from the side of Adam as he slept (see Genesis 2:21-22). So too from the side of Jesus, the New Adam asleep on the Cross, the Church is formed; it comes through blood and water to signify the heart of the Church, the Eucharist and baptism. It was Mary who gave Jesus his body from which the Church came forth. She is in this profound sense Mother of the Church on Calvary.

When we look on the Church, we must never forget its origins on Calvary. On the Cross Jesus bore all the sins of humanity. Indeed he was so crushed for our sins (see Isaiah 53:4-6) that Paul could write: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2Corinthians 5:21). Calvary is the place where God's anger collides with the awfulness of sin; Jesus is broken in the impact. But at a still deeper level there is his unfailing love for his Father and for us, so that he triumphs through the Cross. If we are to see the Church aright, we shall never be surprised at its sin and failure; only the Head and the Mother of the Church are sinless. The Church bears the scars of sin, and must constantly surrender to the healing of the Cross. Anyone who is surprised at sin and failure in the Church at any level has not even begun to see the real Church; more seriously they have missed the essential connection between the Church and Calvary. The Church must continually act out the Paschal Mystery: it must constantly die to sin and rise to new life; the Church bears sin in the hope of resurrection. With its Lord it moves from death to glory. It is therefore essential that we be taught by Mary the deepest reality of the Church, the truth which must be sought on Calvary.

Celebrated in the Eucharist

Where is the heart of the Church? It is not in its institutions, however prestigious, even necessary. Vatican II teaches us that the "source and the summit" of the entire Christian life, and hence of the Church is the Eucharist (see Church 11). In the Eucharist we have all that is essential to the Church: we come to acknowledge that we are sinners; we hear the Word of God and respond to it; we make intercession; we share in the Paschal Mystery of the Lord's

death and glorification; we enter into intimate union with him; we are sent out to proclaim the good news and to share the love we have received.

We look to Mary in the gathering of the Church that awaits the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14). The community assembled after the ascension, and are waiting for the Lord's promise of the Holy Spirit. They are in prayer; they keep recalling the events of the death and glorification of the Lord. Once they have received the Spirit they preach, celebrate the Eucharist and gather others into the company of believers (Acts 2:42-47). Mary is present in their midst, just as she is present in every Eucharist and is named in its most sacred part, the Eucharist Prayer. She is the perfect worshipper of the Paschal Mystery (see Paul VI, Exhortation (1974) *Marialis cultus – To Honour Mary*, n. 20). Through the Eucharist she wishes to conform us to the image of her Son. In the Eucharist we will find her as Mother, Patroness, Sister and Companion.

There are any number of ways in which we can as it were get the Church wrong. The great Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar who died a few years ago, and is the favourite theologian of the present Pope, speaks of four dimensions of the Church, each one associated with a key figure. There is the Pauline dimension of preaching, theologizing and evangelization; there is the Petrine dimension of structures and authority; there is the Johannine contemplative element. But undergirding all these is the Marian dimension. The Church is most authentic when it is patterned on her. One of the contemporary problems of the Church, one that in fact goes back several hundred years, is a tendency to give too much emphasis to the institutional or Petrine aspect, to the detriment of the receptive or Marian aspect. With this deformation all sorts of distortions follow. We look to what is effective and efficient rather than to what is beautiful and mysterious. When we think too much in terms of the Petrine dimension of the Church, rather than in a Marian key everything goes awry. I am not dismissing the Petrine or institution dimension of the Church or denying its importance; but I am insisting that though the Petrine aspect of the Church is indeed essential, it is secondary to its Marian features. We could develop this important insight in a number of ways. Each one shows both the Eucharistic heart of the Church and the primacy of its Marian characteristics.

Firstly, grace is more important than structures. We have structures in order to provide and support the work of grace at every level. Thus the sacraments are to bring us to new life; institutions such as the parish or diocese are to provide a zone in which people can come to healing and love. In the case of Mary, God chose her from all eternity, filled her with grace from the first moment of her being, and brought her into Trinitarian life. It was only then that she became the Mother of the Lord.

Secondly, faith is more important than teaching. The whole point of teaching is to engender the response of faith. And faith is more than belief, or the ability to make accurate statements about divine revelation; it includes the whole response of the individual and the community. Teaching is only a service of the faith of the Church. Mary's yes in faith is the pattern of the whole life of the Church.

Thirdly, receiving is more important than giving. The initiative in all things holy is not ours but God's. His love touches us first before we can give. Mary is most blessed not so much by what she did, but by what she received: the great mysteries of her Immaculate Conception, Divine Motherhood, Perpetual Virginity and Assumption are all gifts that Mary received; she is par excellence the receptive one. Too often we look to what the Church does, rather than to what the Church receives.

Fourthly, service is much more important than power. One of the hard lessons that Jesus had to teach his disciples was that greatness in his kingdom comes from being a servant, even a slave, rather than from power (Matt 20:25-28). Mary who proclaims herself servant *I* slave is the perfect model for the Church. There is indeed power in the Church, but it must always be employed as service to build up.

Fifthly, therefore love is more important than authority. The Church was, as we have seen, born out of love on Calvary. Love will always be its highest norm, the supreme law of the Church. We must, of course, be careful not to fall into the trap of pleasing rather than serving. The idea is in wide circulation that we must satisfy people, answer their felt needs, offer them what they regard as fulfilling. Love, however, is not always easy, and it may not be immediately satisfying. There is a role for authority, even for an authority that will teach hard truths. But authority still must serve love, though it may not answer popular demands or immediate gratification. Calvary is clearly proof that love at times can be most difficult and painful.

Sixthly, poverty is more important than sufficiency. The whole Paschal Mystery is a celebration of poverty: Christ though rich, became poor for our sakes that we might become rich (2Corinthians 8:9); he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave (Philippians 2:7). God's plan in the weakness of the Cross is the highest wisdom, but a wisdom that could not be grasped by Jews or Greeks (1Corinthians 1:18-2:5). Luke presents Mary as one of the poor of Jahweh, the *anawim*. Whenever the Church is rich and self-sufficient, it is already interiorly decayed. The lesson of poverty is a hard one for the Church to learn at every level.

Seventhly, adoration is more important than intercession. Mary teaches us to celebrate the greatness of God. It is important that we pray for the needs of the Church and the world, and the Mass is a privileged place for such prayer. But we come into fullness of life as we enter into the mystery of the Trinity in adoration and surrender.

Eighthly, therefore contemplation is more important than action. There is a long tradition in the Church that takes seriously the saying of the Lord to Martha: "Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42). Action is of course important, but to be fruitful, it needs some basis in contemplation. To serve my brothers or sisters generously and without selfishness, I need to contemplate them in the heart of Trinitarian love. If I do not see them with God's eyes, I will inevitably fail in my love.

Ninthly, obedience is more important than commands. The Church has been infiltrated by many values of the world in our time. Obedience is quite out of favour in a society that values freedom and the worship of the self. Commands are resented. But we need obedience if we are to be modelled on Christ, who passionately sought the will of his Father (John 4:31 – a major theme throughout John).

Finally, we can sum up what we have been saying about the Marian and the Petrine dimensions by indicating that in some profound sense the feminine is more important in the Church than the masculine. This is a difficult area to speak about: one runs the risk of being beaten down by both feminist and patriarchal wings in the Church and society. It is hard too to avoid stereotyping, but there is some value in the insight of the predominant importance of the feminine in the Church. Of course there is a complementarity of the sexes and the Church needs both. But at this present time it would seem clear that we need much more of what are often called feminine traits; these are not exclusively feminine, but they are more feminine. In some modern psychologies we tend to associate more with the masculine what is aggressive, rational, dominant; we associate more with the feminine traits like compassion,

affectivity, receptivity. It would be my contention that the Church does not need more dominance and manipulation; the Church would not be better if all its women strove to model themselves after Baroness Thatcher, the former English Prime Minister. The urgent task is that all, especially men, pattern themselves on Mary. I would very strongly resist a division in the Church or spirituality which would point men towards Christ and women towards Mary. Mary is the perfect model for both men and women in the discipleship of Christ by both men and women. It is my contention that what we find is a Church in which almost everything that is faulty and in need of renewal tends to be masculine rather than feminine. Men and women need to look much more carefully at the Marian paradigm of the Church.

Shared with the Church

Finally, we come to that dimension of the Church which is outreach. The Church has a mission to all, so that as Pope Paul VI could state that evangelization belongs to the very nature of the Church. Indeed, as we have already seen, we are sent forth at each Mass in love, service and evangelization. Here too Mary is our icon. The story of the Visitation shows both dimensions (Luke 1:39-55). After the annunciation Mary sets out immediately, St Luke tells us “with haste” to visit her cousin, Elizabeth whom she has just learned is pregnant. Now just as there was a remarkable greeting from Gabriel to Mary, so Mary’s greeting to Elizabeth is even more extraordinary: as soon as she greets Elizabeth, the older woman feels the child leaping in her womb, and Elizabeth herself is filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:40-41). Mary brings Jesus; Mary’s greeting is grace filled and brings the Spirit. The task of the Church is continually to bring Jesus, and to bring the Spirit into people’s lives. Here in the visitation Mary is the supreme model for the apostolate and mission of the Church in each of its members. But Mary goes on to proclaim God’s plan and to extol God’s mighty works in the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). The text is so familiar to all that I would only wish to highlight a few themes.

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour;

Mary’s celebration looks firstly upon God; her innermost being focuses on him as Lord and as Saviour.

for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

As her eyes turn to herself, she celebrates his greatness in her weakness; her situation is lowliness, more accurately “humiliation” (*tapeinôsin*); she repeats the self-description she used at the Annunciation, she is a slave (*doulê*).

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things, and has sent the rich away empty.

Here Mary takes up the reversal theme: what the world values is to be cast down; what is weak will be exalted. This is a message not only to the proud of the secular society, but it is a warning to each member of the Church. Pope, bishops, clergy, laity, religious all need to hear

that God's way is not the way of power, dominance or manipulation. It is only if we accept our poverty before God that we will know his favour. The problem is that so often we embrace God's way of humility and weakness only when we have tried and failed by our own efforts, by following the ways of the world. The Church is never free of this temptation.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

Finally Mary celebrates God's faithful love, his rocklike fidelity. God has made many promises to his Church, most memorably in the promises of the Holy Spirit at the Last Supper (John 14:16-17; 14:26 = 16:13-15; 15:26 = 16:7-11) and just before the Ascension (Luke 24:46; Acts 1:6) and the promises to Peter as he constitutes him the foundation of his Church: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Matt 16:18). Whenever we see darkness surrounding the Church, we need to celebrate with Mary God's promises.

Conclusion

Vatican II in the Constitution on the Liturgy (SC 103) gave a succinct account of the role of Mary for the Church:

In celebrating this annual cycle of the mysteries of Christ, Holy Church honours the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, with a special love. She is inseparably linked with her Son's saving work. In her the Church admires and exalts the most excellent fruit of redemption, and joyfully contemplates, as in a faultless image, that which she herself desires and hopes wholly to be.

It is as we celebrate the mysteries of Christ that Mary is properly honoured. This honour is described as "with special love." The Council then notes that Mary is inseparably linked with her Son's saving work, that she is truly redeemed, and that she is the flawless image of all that the Church desires and hopes wholly to be.

It is my contention that our vision of the Church has darkened in the past decade, and that we need to raise up our eyes. If we look to Mary we shall rediscover the true meaning of the Church, in which we can see her radiant beauty despite sin, failure and infidelity. She is therefore an icon in which we see the Church, and are drawn to its full Trinitarian reality. The Church has been presented by Vatican II in three memorable images: it is People, Body and Temple. We need Mary to lead us into her experience of Trinitarian love that has been poured out on the world, and which is offered to the Church whose weakness is often too evident:

The Father chooses the People of God in which is resplendent the Daughter of Sion. The Son is united to his Body, whose Mother is Mary. The Spirit gives life to the Church, whose Temple Mary is. We are People, Body and Temp Je, illumined by Mary, Mother and Icon of the Church.