

Pope John Paul II
General Audience Talk — Wednesday, February 7, 2001
Church Is God's Caress for Humanity

1. As in the Old Testament, in which the Holy City was called with a feminine image, "the daughter of Zion," so in John's Apocalypse the heavenly Jerusalem is described "as a bride adorned for her husband" (Apocalypse 21:2). The feminine symbol presents the Church's face in her different aspects as betrothed, spouse, mother, thus emphasizing a dimension of love and fruitfulness.

Our thoughts run to the words of the Apostle Paul who, in a very intense page of the Letter to the Ephesians, traces the features of the Church "in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish," loved by Christ and model of all Christian nuptials (see Ephesians 5:25-32). The ecclesial community, "promised to one spouse" as a chaste virgin (see 2 Corinthians 11:2), is in line with the concept that arises in the Old Testament, in difficult pages like those of the prophet Hosea (Chapters 1-3) or Ezekiel (Chapter 16), or through the joyous brightness of the Cantic of Canticles.

2. To be loved by Christ and to love Him with a spousal love is constitutive of the mystery of the Church. At the source is a free act of love that flows from the Father through Christ and the Holy Spirit. This love molds the Church, radiating on all creatures. In this light it may be said that the Church is a sign raised among peoples to witness to the intensity of divine love revealed in Christ, especially in the gift that He makes of His own life (see John 10:11-15). Because of this, "all human beings -- both women and men -- are called through the Church, to be the "Bride" of Christ, the Redeemer of the world" (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 25).

The Church must let this supreme love shine through, reminding humanity -- which often feels alone and abandoned in the desolate moors of history -- that it will never be forgotten and deprived of the warmth of divine tenderness. Isaiah affirms this in a touching way: "Can a woman forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you" (Isaiah 49:15).

3. Precisely because she is generated from love, the Church spreads love. She does it proclaiming the commandment to love one another as Christ has loved us (see John 15:12), namely, to the point of giving one's life: "He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16). That God who "first loved us" (1 John 4:19) and did not hesitate to deliver His Son out of love (see John 3:16) impels the Church to go "all the way" (see John 13:1) in love. And she is called to do so with the freshness of two spouses who love each other in the joy of giving themselves without reserve and in daily generosity, both when the sky of life is springlike and calm, as well as when night and the clouds of the winter of the spirit descend.

In this connection, it can be understood why the Apocalypse, despite its dramatic representation of history, is constantly suffused with songs, music, joyful liturgy. In the panorama of the spirit, love is like the sun that illuminates and transfigures nature which, without its radiance, would be gray and uniform.

4. Another fundamental dimension in the ecclesial nuptials is that of fruitfulness. Love received and given is not closed in on itself in the spousal relation, but becomes creative and generating. In Genesis, which presents humanity made in the "image and likeness of God," there is significant reference to being "masculine and feminine": "God created man in His image; to the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (1:27).

The distinction and reciprocity in the human couple are a sign of the love of God, not only as foundation of a vocation to communion, but also as directed to generative fruitfulness. It is not accidental that the Book of Genesis scans the genealogies, which are the fruit of generation and give origin to the history within which God reveals Him-