

chapter three

OBSTACLES TO FREEDOM

Opening Prayer

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful
and kindle in them the fire of your love.
Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created.
And You shall renew the face of the earth.

O, God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit,
did instruct the hearts of the faithful,
grant that by the same Holy Spirit
we may be truly wise and ever enjoy His consolations.
Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Our Lady, Seat of Wisdom, pray for us.

I. REAL EQUALITY

And what shall we say of the obstacles which in so many parts of the world still keep women from being fully integrated into social, political and economic life? We need only think of how the gift of motherhood is often penalized rather than rewarded, even though humanity owes its very survival to this gift. Certainly, much remains to be done to prevent discrimination against those who have chosen to be wives and mothers. As far as personal rights are concerned, there is an urgent need to achieve real equality in every area: equal pay for equal work, protection for working mothers, fairness in career advancements, equality of spouses with regard to family rights and the recognition of everything that is part of the rights and duties of citizens in a democratic State.

This is a matter of justice but also of necessity. Women will increasingly play a part in the solution of the serious problems of the future: leisure time, the quality of life, migration, social services, euthanasia, drugs, health care, the ecology, etc. In all these areas a greater presence of women in society will prove most valuable, for it will help to manifest the contradictions present when society is organized solely according to the criteria of efficiency and productivity, and it will force systems to be redesigned in a way which favours the processes of humanization which mark the “civilization of love.”

— Saint John Paul II, “Letter to Women,” 4.1–4.7

Key Points

The Church desires true freedom for women.

For decades, the culture has pitted motherhood against women’s professional success. Many see motherhood as an obstacle to women’s self-fulfillment—something we must reject if we want to succeed. Others argue that biological motherhood is the only path to women’s self-fulfillment—that we belong in the home, not the office, and have no need of higher education or professional development.

The Church rejects both those extremes. She wants to see women encouraged and supported as we do the work that only we can do: conceive, bear, and nurture new life. The Church also recognizes that God has given women intellectual, professional, and artistic gifts, and believes the failure to develop those gifts harms society as a whole.

In 2004, while still head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (the future Pope Benedict XVI) summed up the Church’s balanced view on the question, writing:

[Here] what John Paul II has termed the genius of women becomes very clear. It implies first of all that women be significantly and actively present in the family . . . since it is here above all that the features of a people take shape. . . . They learn to love inasmuch as they are unconditionally loved, they learn respect for others inasmuch as they are respected, they learn to know the face of God inasmuch as they receive a first revelation of it from a father and a mother full of attention in their regard. Whenever these fundamental experiences are lacking, society as a whole suffers violence and becomes in turn the progenitor of more violence. It means also that women should be present in the world of work and in the organization of society, and that women should have access to positions of responsibility, which allow them to inspire the policies of nations and to promote innovative solutions to economic and social problems.¹⁸

The Church's concern for women's rights is rooted not in politics, but in Catholic Social Teaching.

Often, when we hear phrases such as “equal pay for equal work” or “protection for working mothers” we think of American political debates and issues that fall on the right or left side of the political spectrum. In his “Letter to Women,” however, John Paul II isn’t taking sides with any political party. Instead, he’s looking at obstacles to women serving God and others through the lens of Catholic Social Teaching.

Catholic social teaching, at its most basic, is an anthropology—a moral theology that addresses the origin, nature, and destiny of human beings. It helps us make sense of the complex problems in the world today and guides us as we apply the Church’s moral vision to those problems.

“The right anthropology will sort out how the various principles apply at any given moment,” said Dr. Jonathan Reyes, executive director of the Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. “Only if you have

¹⁸ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World,” May 31, 2004. Available at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html.

the right understanding of the human person as created by God in community, only if you understand the fullness of that vision, can you start building a just society.”¹⁹

When it comes to applying Catholic social teaching, there are three basic requirements: 1) Whatever Catholics do in the social order must serve the good of the human person; 2) Charity and justice oblige all men and women to serve the common good; 3) That service should be a way of proclaiming the Gospel.²⁰

When seen through this lens, it becomes more understandable why John Paul II devoted so much time to combating discrimination against women. Social movements that seek to deny the importance of motherhood or that limit women’s professional contributions inhibit the full flourishing of the feminine genius. These social movements are bad for both individual women and society, not simply politically or economically, but also spiritually. They prevent us from giving the witness we were made to give, at home and in the world.

The feminine genius is a necessary counterbalance to a society that overvalues “efficiency and productivity.”

Efficiency is good. It helps us get the most important things done in a timely manner. Productivity is good. God expects us to fulfill our responsibilities and carry out our duties at work and home.

But efficiency and productivity, isolated from the good of the person, the family, and the human community, can do more harm than good. Elevating those goods above the person can lead us to make decisions at work that might improve our bottom line, but at the expense of a worker losing their job. At home, such priorities can result in the housework getting done, but at the expense of quality time with our family or friends.

¹⁹ Emily Stimpson, “What Exactly Is Catholic Social Teaching?” *Our Sunday Visitor*, February 5, 2014. Available at: www.osv.com/OSVNewsweekly/Story/TabId/2672/ArtMID/13567/ArticleID/14033/What-Exactly-is-Catholic-Social-Teaching.aspx.

²⁰ See *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church*. Available at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html.

Those same priorities, whether at home or work, can lead us to focus so much on the task at hand, that we fail to see the struggles of the person next to us. Even worse, in our attempts to be productive and efficient, we can be insensitive to the needs, feelings, and gifts of other.

Although women can be as guilty of these offenses as men, in general, our feminine genius serves to counteract such tendencies. More than men, women gravitate towards prioritizing the personal and particular. That gravitation starts early, with studies showing that infant girls prefer looking at one face over a crowd of faces and prefer human voices over other noises. Infant girls are also more attuned to their mother's emotions and establish eye contact earlier than boys do.²¹ Those differences don't change drastically over time, with women, across age groups, outperforming men on tests that ask them to identify emotions or relationships between people.²²

This orientation to the person is essential at home and in the culture. It helps us prioritize persons over profits, which is a prerequisite for building what John Paul II often described as a "civilization of love."

²¹ Anita Sethi, "The Real Difference Between Boys and Girls," *Parenting* (Nov. 9, 2011). Available at: <http://www.parenting.com/article/real-difference-between-boys-and-girls>.

²² Lise Elliot, "Girl Brain, Boy Brain," *Scientific American* (Sept. 8, 2009). Available at <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/girl-brain-boy-brain>.

Bringing It Home

When it comes to guilt trips, the culture does a better job than any Catholic mother ever could.

Thanks to mixed messages from the culture, those of us who stay home with our children often feel guilty for not putting our talents to sufficient use or not contributing to the family income. Conversely, those of us who work outside the home often feel guilty for the time we spend away, while those of us who find ourselves single longer than we planned wonder if pursuing a career might cost us a husband.

With this culture, there is no winning. But what John Paul II tells us here is that we don't have to feel guilty. Being a stay-at-home mom is a noble endeavor. Bringing our feminine genius to bear in the professional world is also a noble endeavor. And so too is using our single years to serve God and society. It's not the culture's job to tell us where we should be. God knows what's best for us and where He needs us. As long as we're listening to His voice, prioritizing His will over all else, we're in exactly the right place.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever experienced the consequences of a society organized according to "efficiency and productivity"? Describe one. How could a greater emphasis on the person have changed that scenario?
2. What are some practical measures you can take, wherever you spend your days, to counteract a culture that prioritizes profits over people?
3. How do you balanced the competing demands of life? How has your faith helped you do that?

*Woman naturally seeks to embrace that which
is living, personal, and whole. To cherish,
guard, protect, nourish and advance growth
is her natural, maternal yearning.*

— Saint Edith Stein

II. COMBATING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Then too, when we look at one of the most sensitive aspects of the situation of women in the world, how can we not mention the long and degrading history, albeit often an "underground" history, of violence against women in the area of sexuality? At the threshold of the Third Millennium we cannot remain indifferent and resigned before this phenomenon. The time has come to condemn vigorously the types of sexual violence which frequently have women for their object and to pass laws which effectively defend them from such violence. Nor can we fail, in the name of the respect due to the human person, to condemn the widespread hedonistic and commercial culture which encourages the systematic exploitation of sexuality and corrupts even very young girls into letting their bodies be used for profit.

— Saint John Paul II, "Letter to Women," 5.1–5.4

Key Points

Sexual violence hurts the body and the soul.

The culture is of two minds about the human body. On the one hand, we're told that the body is *everything*. It's all that matters. Which is why we have to "eat clean," and run hard. The message we're given is that if we're not thin, if we're not healthy, if we're not beautiful, then we're not "good."

On the other hand, we're also told that the body is *nothing*. It's just matter, so we can do with it whatever we want. We can misuse it and abuse it. We can give it away to whomever we want, whenever we want. And we can hormonally and surgically alter it so it better reveals "who we really are."

Neither perspective, however, reflects the Catholic understanding of the body. Catholics believe that the human person is an integral union of body and soul. The soul animates the body, and the body "expresses the person"; it "reveals the living soul."²³

In this lifetime, there is no separating the two. "Spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united," explains the *Catechism*, "but rather their union forms a single nature" (365). That is to say, while we walk this earth, our bodies are us. They express who we are. They image God, just as our souls do and give flesh to invisible truths about the reality of our inner lives. Then, at the end of days, our bodies will be us once more. They will be resurrected and glorified, revealing us more perfectly and truly than they ever did on earth (CCC, 1016).

²³ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 14:4.

Bodies aren't everything. But they aren't nothing either.

This is why sexual violence is such a grave sin. It wounds the body and the soul. It robs a person of their God-given ability to give themselves away—freely and exclusively—in love, and it hurts the body that images God and expresses who we are.

The commercialization of sex is a grave injustice.

Our ability to give ourselves—body and soul—to another is a great gift. It is one of the most complete and beautiful ways we image God, who is a communion of life-giving Love. "God in his deepest mystery is not a solitude but a family," explained John Paul II, "because He has within Himself Fatherhood, Sonship, and the essence of the Family, which is Love."²⁴

Conversely, to turn that gift into a business, to profit off our sexuality or another's, rejects God's gift. It is beneath human dignity and a betrayal of the One whom we image.

Sexual trafficking, prostitution, pornography, strip clubs, and the commercial sexual exploitation of models and actors are all ways in which people profit off sexuality. Each is a tragedy in its own way, and the Church teaches that laws which allow such practices to flourish are unjust.

Laws, however, aren't the only problem. As John Paul II explains here, the culture that gives rise to widespread sexual exploitation is a problem too. Sexual practices reflect culture. And a culture that separates sex from love and marriage, that sees pleasure, not love and new life, as the end of the sexual act, and that identifies a person's value with their sexual desirability is a culture that encourages, rather than discourages, sexual exploitation.

We are our brother's (and sister's) keepers.

Many of those caught up in the sex industry are there through no fault of their own. They are victims, too—sometimes forced into prostitution, at other times taken advantage of in their most vulnerable moments. The Church teaches that, as Catholics, we have a duty to protect and defend these victims.

²⁴ John Paul II, *Puebla: A Pilgrimage of Faith* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1979) 86.

When we turn a blind eye to efforts to stop sex trafficking or when we don't support organizations seeking to help pull women out of prostitution (or help them ourselves), we fail our brothers and sisters. We do the same when we use pornography, read books such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* or even watch movies like *Sex Tape*. When we do those things, we encourage and contribute to a culture that objectifies men and women, that exploits sex for profit, and that separates human sexuality from reverent self-gift.

"It is precisely on this level that we need to make a good examination of conscience," noted Pope Francis in 2013. "How many times have we permitted a human being to be seen as an object, to be put on show in order to sell a product or to satisfy an immoral desire? . . . Whoever uses human persons in this way and exploits them, even if indirectly, becomes an accomplice of this injustice."²⁵

²⁵ Pope Francis, "Message of Pope Francis for the Lenten Brotherhood Campaign in Brazil," February 25, 2014. Available at: https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140225_messaggio-fraternita.pdf.

Bringing It Home

Believing and living the Church's teachings about the body and sexuality is one of the great challenges of our age. Some of us have bought into the lie that what makes us valuable is the shape of our body. We've starved ourselves, abused ourselves with punishing exercise, and spent hours staring hatefully at ourselves in the mirror.

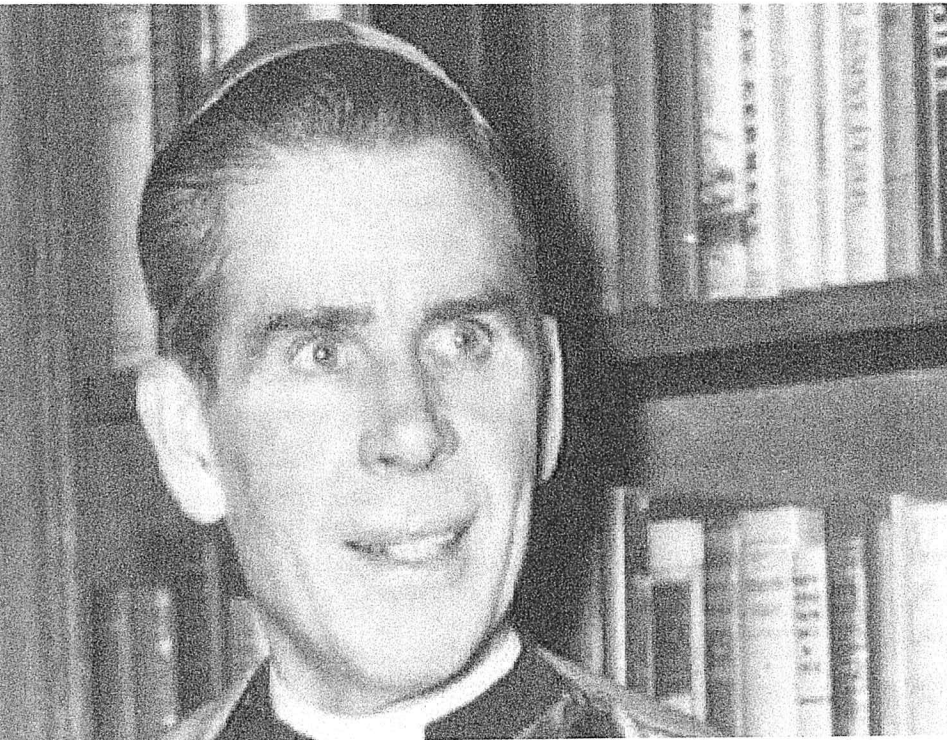
Others among us have given our bodies to others in the wrong ways and wrong times. We've found our value in a man's desire for us. We've let people take advantage of us, or we've taken advantage of others. We've used contraception and denied God the chance to give us the gift of new life.

Those struggles have wounded us deeply, whether we realize it or not. And true healing from those wounds doesn't come easily. It requires seeing the truth of what we've done. It requires forgiving ourselves and others. It requires breaking old habits and developing new ones.

Fortunately, God stands ready to help us. He is always waiting for us in the confessional. He is always ready to give himself to us in the Eucharist. The healing power of His grace is stronger than any sin of ours.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you ever find yourself believing the culture's lies about the body—that the body is *everything* or *nothing*? What helps you counter those lies?
2. What are some of the subtle ways our society encourages a culture of sexual exploitation? Where and how do you see these messages communicated on a daily basis?
3. How can we protect ourselves and others in our lives from the attitudes that give rise to a culture of sexual exploitation?



To a great extent the level of any civilization is the level of its womanhood. When a man loves a woman, he has to become worthy of her. The higher her virtue, the more noble her character, the more devoted she is to truth, justice, goodness, the more a man has to aspire to be worthy of her. The history of civilization could actually be written in terms of the level of its women.

LIFE IS WORTH LIVING
**Venerable Archbishop
Fulton J. Sheen**

III. COMBATTING VIOLENCE AGAINST OURSELVES

In contrast to these sorts of perversion, what great appreciation must be shown to those women who, with a heroic love for the child they have conceived, proceed with a pregnancy resulting from the injustice of rape. Here we are thinking of atrocities perpetrated not only in situations of war, still so common in the world, but also in societies which are blessed by prosperity and peace and yet are often corrupted by a culture of hedonistic permissiveness which aggravates tendencies to aggressive male behaviour. In these cases the choice to have an abortion always remains a grave sin. But before being something to blame on the woman, it is a crime for which guilt needs to be attributed to men and to the complicity of the general social environment.

— Saint John Paul II, “Letter to Women,” 5.5–5.8

Key Points

The Church opposes abortion and contraception because she wants to help women, not because she wants to oppress them.

John Paul II’s vigorous defense of women’s equality, in this letter and elsewhere, surprised many secular feminists. They saw his (and the Church’s) opposition to abortion and contraception as “anti-woman” and couldn’t reconcile the two. As they understood it, women could never take their equal place in the world without contraception and abortion: both were essential tools for woman’s advancement.

What many feminists have failed to see, however, is that the Church isn’t undervaluing women in opposing abortion and contraception. She is acknowledging women’s immense value in God’s divine plan.

God entrusted women with the immeasurably important task of bringing new life into the world and nurturing that new life in its most vulnerable years. He also gave women the equally important task of nourishing and nurturing life in others. “Motherhood can never become for woman the special task of a certain time,” wrote Gertrude von lef Fort. “For it is her very own task.”²⁶

When understood in that light, abortion and contraception don’t make it possible for women to “be all they can be.” They do the opposite. They prevent women from flourishing according to God’s design—a design in which “the mystery of femininity manifests and reveals itself in its full depth through motherhood.”²⁷

²⁶ Gertrude von le Fort, *The Eternal Woman* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1961) 64.

²⁷ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 2:12.

Every human life is a gift.

The Church's opposition to abortion in cases of rape is one of her hardest teachings for many to understand. Why, some ask, should a woman have to carry for nine long months such a painful reminder of the violence done to her? Why should a woman be "punished" for something that wasn't her fault?

Those questions, however, only make sense when we think of babies as a punishment. As the Church sees it, babies are never a punishment. They're always a gift (CCC, 2378).

The Church teaches that it doesn't matter how children are conceived. It doesn't matter who their parents are or how those parents felt about each other at the moment of conception. The lives of children conceived in rape are every bit as precious as the lives of the children conceived in the most loving marriages. All children exist because God wants them to exist. He created them. He loves them. And He wants the world to welcome them.

That doesn't mean welcoming a child conceived in rape is always easy. John Paul II acknowledges here that it requires great heroism on the part of the mother. But in God's plan, that kind of heroism is always rewarded. The love of that small child can become a healing balm for the mother and others, bringing joy where there was once only pain.

As pro-life activist Rebecca Wasser-Kiessling, who was herself conceived in a rape, explained, "I believe that God rewarded my birth mother for the suffering she endured, and that I am a gift to her. The serial rapist is not my creator; God is."²⁸

We must not blame the victim for sexual crimes.

Blaming women for the sins of men is a bad habit as old as humanity itself. In the Garden, Adam blamed Eve for his decision to eat the forbidden fruit: "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate" (Gen. 3:12). Later, in Daniel 13,

when two wicked men attempted to rape the beautiful Susannah and were caught, they tried to fix the blame on her and pass her off as an adulteress.

Today, when a woman is raped or harassed, our society often does something similar. We blame the woman. We say she dressed too provocatively or put herself in a dangerous situation. We also often give a pass to the attackers, saying it was just a case of boys being boys or that they were led on, drunk, or didn't know what they were doing.

Justice, however, requires fixing the blame where blame belongs. Ultimately we are all responsible for our actions, and the men who commit acts of sexual violence against women must be held accountable. So, too, must a culture that encourages men to dominate women or encourages women to act in a way that doesn't reflect their God-given dignity. As John Paul II explains here, the problem isn't just male perpetrators; it's a society that glorifies sex, lust, and the abuse of power.

²⁸ Samuel A. Nigro, *The Soul of the Earth* (St. Louis: Xlibris, 2012) 78.

Bringing It Home

God hates abortion. God hates rape. But God does not hate the women who chose abortion or suffered the horror of rape. God loves all His children, no matter what choices they've made or what sufferings they've endured. He wants to heal us. He wants to pour out His mercy upon us and make us whole again. In His eyes, no matter what we've done, we are always precious. We are always beloved.

Unfortunately, for those of us who made the painful decision to take the life of our child or who endured rape, believing in God's love can sometimes seem impossible. Forgiving ourselves or those involved in the situation can seem even more impossible.

But there is help. There are the sacraments and all the graces they bring. There also are organizations like Rachel's Vineyard that help post-abortive women find peace and healing. If you or someone you love is struggling with the emotional consequences of a past abortion, consider reaching out to them.

Consider also John Paul II's words, personally addressed to all women who've suffered the sorrows of abortion:

The Church is aware of the many factors, which may have influenced your decision, and she does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly, what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. To the same Father and his mercy you can with sure hope entrust your child. With the friendly and expert help and advice of other people, and, as a result of your own painful experience, you can be among the most eloquent defenders of everyone's right to life.

Through your commitment to life, whether by accepting the birth of other children or by welcoming and caring for those most in need of someone to be close to them, you will become promoters of a new way of looking at human life.²⁹

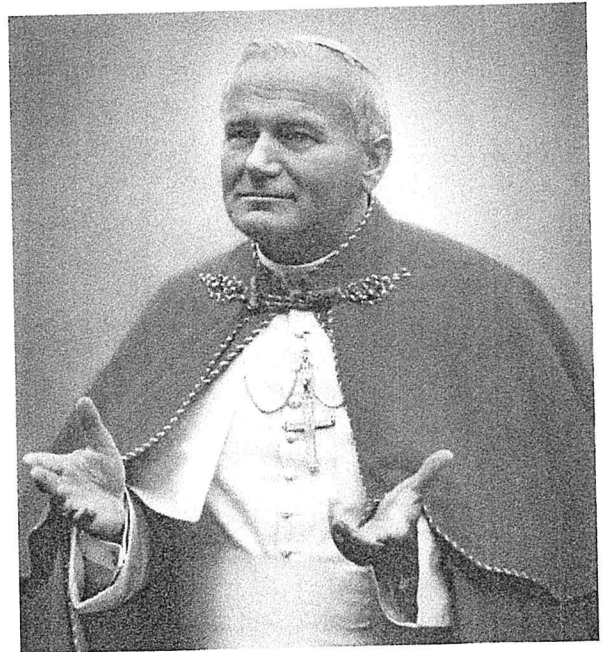
Discussion Questions

1. Do you think of every life as a gift?
2. What are some ways you can support mothers in your community, especially those in crisis? How does abortion let men off the hook?
3. What are some of the ways our society contributes to violence against women? How, by the choices we make every day, can we counter the attitudes underlying such violence?

²⁸ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life), March 25, 1999. Available at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html.

In firmly rejecting "pro-choice" it is necessary to become courageously "pro-woman," promoting a choice that is truly in favor of women.

— Pope Saint John Paul II



Closing Prayer

THE MEMORARE

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary,
that never was it known
that anyone who fled to thy protection,
implored thy help, or sought thine intercession
was left unaided.

Inspired by this confidence, I fly unto thee,
O Virgin of virgins, my mother; to thee do I come,
before thee I stand, sinful and sorrowful.
O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my
petitions, but in thy mercy hear and answer me.

Amen.

Saint John Paul II, pray for us.