

## **Mary as the Woman of Revelation 12:1–6 in Papal Teaching**

*I am indebted to Robert Fastiggi, my friend and colleague at Sacred Heart Major Seminary, for this collection of papal quotations taken from the Vatican website (w2.vatican.va).*

*The interpretation of my commentary Revelation (pp. 205-211) is that the woman of Rev 12 represents both Mary, the woman who gives birth to the Messiah (12:5), and the faithful people of God of the Old and New Testaments (Israel and the Church), of which Mary is a symbol and type. While the commentary and the various papal statements below differ from one another in focus, they are essentially harmonious.*

### **St. Pius X, encyclical *Ad Diem Illum* (1904)**

24. Leaving aside charity towards God, who can contemplate the Immaculate Virgin without feeling moved to fulfill that precept which Christ called peculiarly His own, namely that of loving one another as He loved us? “A great sign,” thus the Apostle St. John describes a vision divinely sent him, appears in the heavens: “A woman clothed with the sun, and with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars upon her head” (Rev 12:1). Everyone knows that this woman signified the Virgin Mary, the stainless one who brought forth our Head. The Apostle continues: “And, being with child, she cried travailing in birth, and was in pain to be delivered” (Rev 12:1). John therefore saw the Most Holy Mother of God already in eternal happiness, yet travailing in a mysterious childbirth. What birth was it? Surely it was the birth of us who, still in exile, are yet to be generated to the perfect charity of God, and to eternal happiness. And the birth pains show the love and desire with which the Virgin from heaven above watches over us, and strives with unwearying prayer to bring about the fulfillment of the number of the elect.

### **Pius XII, apostolic constitution, *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950), proclaiming the dogma of the Assumption**

27. Moreover, the scholastic Doctors have recognized the Assumption of the Virgin Mother of God as something signified, not only in various figures of the Old Testament, but also in that woman clothed with the sun whom John the Apostle contemplated on the Island of Patmos.

### **Bl. Paul VI, apostolic exhortation, *Signum Magnum* (1967)**

The great sign which the Apostle John saw in heaven, “a woman clothed with the sun,” is interpreted by the sacred Liturgy, not without foundation, as referring to the most blessed Mary, the mother of all men by the grace of Christ the Redeemer.

### **St. John Paul II, encyclical, *Redemptoris Mater* (1987)**

11. In the salvific design of the Most Holy Trinity, the mystery of the Incarnation constitutes the superabundant fulfillment of the promise made by God to man after original sin, after that first sin whose effects oppress the whole earthly history of man (cf. Gen. 3:15). And so, there comes into the world a Son, “the seed of the woman” who will crush the evil of sin in its very origins: “he will crush the head of the serpent.” As we see from the words of the Protogospel, the victory of the woman’s Son will not take place without a hard struggle, a struggle that is to extend through the whole of human history. The “enmity,” foretold at the beginning, is confirmed in the Apocalypse (the book of the final events of the

Church and the world), in which there recurs the sign of the “woman,” this time “clothed with the sun” (Rev. 12:1).

47 ...Thanks to this special bond linking the Mother of Christ with the Church, there is further clarified the mystery of that “woman” who, from the first chapters of the Book of Genesis until the Book of Revelation, accompanies the revelation of God's salvific plan for humanity. For Mary, present in the Church as the Mother of the Redeemer, takes part, as a mother, in that monumental struggle; against the “powers of darkness” which continues throughout human history. And by her ecclesial identification as the “woman clothed with the sun” (Rev. 12:1), it can be said that “in the Most Holy Virgin the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she exists without spot or wrinkle.” Hence, as Christians raise their eyes with faith to Mary in the course of their earthly pilgrimage, they “strive to increase in holiness.” Mary, the exalted Daughter of Sion, helps all her children, wherever they may be and whatever their condition, to find in Christ the path to the Father's house.

**St. John Paul II, apostolic letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988)**

30 ... From the “beginning,” woman—like man—was created and “placed” by God in this order of love. The sin of the first parents did not destroy this order, nor irreversibly cancel it out. This is proved by the words of the Proto-evangelium (cf. *Gen* 3:15). Our reflections have focused on *the particular place occupied by the “woman”* in this key text of revelation. It is also to be noted how the same Woman, who attains the position of a biblical “exemplar,” also appears within the eschatological perspective of the world and of humanity given in the Book of Revelation. She is “a woman clothed with the sun,” with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of stars (cf. *Rev* 12:1). One can say she is a Woman of cosmic scale, on a scale with the whole work of creation. At the same time she is “suffering the pangs and anguish of childbirth” (*Rev* 12:2) like Eve “the mother of all the living” (*Gen* 3:20). She also suffers because “before the woman who is about to give birth” (cf. *Rev* 12:4) there stands “the great dragon ... that ancient serpent” (*Rev* 12:9), already known from the Proto-evangelium: the Evil One, the “father of lies” and of sin (cf. *Jn* 8:44). The “ancient serpent” wishes to devour “the child.” While we see in this text an echo of the Infancy Narrative (cf. *Mt* 2:13,16), we can also see that the struggle with evil and the Evil One marks the biblical exemplar of the “woman” from the beginning to the end of history. It is also *a struggle for man, for his true good, for his salvation*. Is not the Bible trying to tell us that it is precisely in the “woman”—Eve-Mary—that history witnesses a dramatic struggle for every human being, the struggle for his or her fundamental “yes” or “no” to God and God's eternal plan for humanity?

**St. John Paul II, encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995)**

103. The mutual relationship between the mystery of the Church and Mary appears clearly in the “great portent” described in the Book of Revelation: “A great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars” (12:1). In this sign the Church recognizes an image of her own mystery: present in history, she knows that she transcends history, inasmuch as she constitutes on earth the “seed and beginning” of the Kingdom of God. The Church sees this mystery fulfilled in complete and exemplary fashion in Mary. She is the woman of glory in whom God's plan could be carried out with supreme perfection.

The “woman clothed with the sun”—the Book of Revelation tells us—“was with child” (12:2). The

Church is fully aware that she bears within herself the Saviour of the world, Christ the Lord. She is aware that she is called to offer Christ to the world, giving men and women new birth into God's own life. But the Church cannot forget that her mission was made possible by the motherhood of Mary, who conceived and bore the One who is "God from God." "true God from true God." Mary is truly the Mother of God, the Theotokos, in whose motherhood the vocation to motherhood bestowed by God on every woman is raised to its highest level. Thus Mary becomes the model of the Church, called to be the "new Eve," the mother of believers, the mother of the "living" (cf. Gen 3:20).

The Church's spiritual motherhood is only achieved—the Church knows this too—through the pangs and "the labor" of childbirth (cf. Rev 12:2), that is to say, in constant tension with the forces of evil which still roam the world and affect human hearts, offering resistance to Christ: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:4-5). ...

104. In the Book of Revelation, the "great portent" of the "woman" (12:1) is accompanied by "another portent which appeared in heaven": "a great red dragon" (Rev 12:3), which represents Satan, the personal power of evil, as well as all the powers of evil at work in history and opposing the Church's mission.

Here too Mary sheds light on the Community of Believers. The hostility of the powers of evil is, in fact, an insidious opposition which, before affecting the disciples of Jesus, is directed against his mother. To save the life of her Son from those who fear him as a dangerous threat, Mary has to flee with Joseph and the Child into Egypt (cf. Mt 2:13-15).

Mary thus helps the Church to realize that life is always at the centre of a great struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness. The dragon wishes to devour "the child brought forth" (cf. Rev 12:4), a figure of Christ, whom Mary brought forth "in the fullness of time" (Gal 4:4) and whom the Church must unceasingly offer to people in every age. But in a way that child is also a figure of every person, every child, especially every helpless baby whose life is threatened, because—as the Council reminds us—"by his Incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every person."

### **Benedict XVI, Homily during the Torchlight Procession at Lourdes, Sept. 11, 2008**

Let us now look at this "woman clothed with the sun" (Rev 12:1) as she is described for us in Scripture. The Most Holy Virgin Mary, the glorious woman of the Apocalypse, wears on her head a crown of twelve stars which represent the twelve tribes of Israel, the entire people of God, the whole communion of saints, while at her feet is the moon, image of death and mortality. Mary left death behind her; she is entirely re-clothed with life, the life of her Son, the risen Christ. She is thus the sign of the victory of love, of good and of God, giving our world the hope that it needs. This evening, let us turn our gaze towards Mary, so glorious and so human, allowing her to lead us towards God who is the victor.

### **Benedict XVI Address at the Piazza di Spagna, Dec. 8, 2011**

Mary is portrayed, on the top of the pillar around which we have gathered, by a statue which, in part, recalls the passage from the Book of Revelation that has just been proclaimed: “And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars” (Rev 12:1). What is the meaning of this image? It represents at the same time Our Lady and the Church.

First of all the “woman” of the Book of Revelation is Mary herself. She appears “clothed with the sun,” that is, clothed with God: the Virgin Mary in fact is wholly surrounded by God’s light and lives in God. This symbol of her luminous garment clearly expresses a condition that concerns Mary’s whole being: she is “full of grace,” filled with God’s love. And “God is light,” St. John says further (1 Jn 1:5). Here, therefore, the One who is “full of grace,” “the Immaculate One,” reflects in her whole person the light of the “sun” which is God.

This woman has under her feet the moon, a symbol of death and of mortality. Indeed Mary is fully associated with the victory of Jesus Christ, her Son, over sin and death; she is free from any shadow of death and totally filled with life. Just as death no longer has power over the risen Jesus (cf. Rom 6:9), so, through a grace and a rare privilege of Almighty God, Mary has left it behind her and gone beyond it. And this is manifest in the two great mysteries of her life: in the beginning, having been conceived without original sin, which is the mystery that we are celebrating today; and, at the end, being taken up body and soul into Heaven, into God’s glory. However, the whole of her earthly life was also a victory over death, because it was spent entirely at God’s service, in the unreserved sacrifice of herself to him and to her neighbor. For this reason Mary is in herself a hymn to life; she is the creature in whom Christ’s words have already come true: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10).

In the vision of the Book of Revelation there is a further detail: upon the head of the woman clothed with the sun there is “a crown of twelve stars.” This sign symbolizes the 12 tribes of Israel and means that the Virgin Mary is at the centre of the People of God, of the entire communion of saints. And thus this image of the crown of 12 stars ushers us into the second great interpretation of the heavenly portent of the “woman clothed with the sun”: as well as representing Our Lady, this sign personifies the Church, the Christian community of all time. She is with child, in the sense that she is carrying Christ in her womb and must give birth to him in the world. This is the travail of the pilgrim Church on earth which, amidst the consolations of God and the persecution of the world, must bring Jesus to men and women.

### **Pope Francis, homily for Feast of Our lady of Guadalupe, Dec. 12, 2014**

On this Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, let us first of all gratefully remember her visit and maternal closeness; let us sing her *Magnificat* with Her; and let us entrust the life of our peoples and the continental mission of the Church to her. When she appeared to St Juan Diego on the Hill of Tepeyac, she presented herself as the “ever perfect Holy Virgin Mary, Mother of the true God” (*Nican Mopohua*); and so made a new “visitation.” She also hastened attentively to embrace the new American peoples, at their dramatic birth. It was as though a “great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet” (Rev 12:1), taking upon herself the cultural and religious symbolism of the indigenous peoples, she proclaimed and gave her Son to all these new peoples lacerated by their mixed origin.

**Pope Francis, encyclical letter, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, May 24, 2015**

241. Mary, the Mother who cared for Jesus, now cares with maternal affection and pain for this wounded world. Just as her pierced heart mourned the death of Jesus, so now she grieves for the sufferings of the crucified poor and for the creatures of this world laid waste by human power. Completely transfigured, she now lives with Jesus, and all creatures sing of her fairness. She is the Woman, “clothed in the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars” (*Rev* 12:1). Carried up into heaven, she is the Mother and Queen of all creation. In her glorified body, together with the Risen Christ, part of creation has reached the fullness of its beauty. She treasures the entire life of Jesus in her heart (cf. *Lk* 2:19,51), and now understands the meaning of all things. Hence, we can ask her to enable us to look at this world with eyes of wisdom.