

**ADDRESS OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CITRSTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
UNVEILING OF THE SCULPTURE "MATERNAL BOND" BY TIMOTHY SCHMALZ
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2019
MUSEUM OF THE BIBLE, WASHINGTON, DC**

My Dear Friends,

It is with great joy that I gather with you on this Sunday for the special opening of Timothy Schmalz's "Maternal Bond". I thank Ms. Christina Cox for her kind invitation, as well as the Board of Trustees of the National Museum of Catholic Art and Library and the Museum of the Bible for their gracious hospitality. As the representative of Pope Francis to the United States, I greet you in his name. It is quite fitting that we dedicate and bless this statue during this Advent Season as we prepare to celebrate the Birth of Jesus, the Son of God and the Son of Mary.

The final canto of Dante's *Paradiso* opens with:

*"Virgin Mother, daughter of your son
Humbler and higher than any other creature...
You are she who so ennobled human nature
That nature's very maker did not disdain
To himself be made by you."*

These words of Dante convey the elevated status of Mary as a handmaiden of the Lord, whom God Himself has exalted by Divine Favor. Mary is a model disciple and an icon of God's mercy. Christians have depicted her in art in different eras and different cultures; her innocence and beauty always seem to come forth.

On the first day of this year, Pope Francis, standing before an image of the Madonna and Child, said, and we could say the same standing before this work:

"Today is a day to be amazed by the Mother of God. God appears as a little child, held in the arms of a woman who feeds her Creator. The statue before our eyes depicts the Mother and Child so close as to appear one. That is the mystery we celebrate today, which gives rise to boundless amazement: God has become one with humanity forever. God and man, always together ... God is no distant lord, dwelling in splendid isolation above the heavens, but love incarnate, born like us of a mother, in order to become a brother to each of us, to be close to us: the God of closeness. He rests on the lap of his mother, who is also our mother, and from there he pours out upon humanity a new tenderness." (Pope Francis, Homily, Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, 1 January 20 19)

If we listen closely to the Pope's words, we gain insight into what religious or sacred art ought to do. It depicts a scene that draws together the natural and supernatural. We see grace building upon nature and perfecting it rather than destroying it. An event that happened so long ago suddenly is no longer something merely historical, but it comes to life, especially in our hearts, and has a lasting impact on us.

Art opens us to mystery and evokes in us a sense of awe and wonder. Sometimes mysteries can be terrifying, but in the depiction of the Madonna and Child, we discover peace. Just as the magi who journeyed from the East were greatly overjoyed when they saw the star and the Mother and Child, so too

we, during this holy season, are filled with joy and serenity that we do not find in government offices or sterile buildings. Through this art, we do not feel isolated or alone, but we feel the closeness of God, not the God of wrath, but of tenderness. Before our eyes, the Mighty God has become a tender little child and is cherished by His Mother.

While we often reflect on the protective and watchful gaze of God upon us, in this work we also see the gaze of Mary upon her child. Pope Francis invites us to reflect on the gaze of Mary upon us; she sees us, not so much as sinners, but as her children. He says:

"This maternal gaze, which instills confidence and trust, helps us to grow in faith. Faith is a bond with God that engages the whole person; to be preserved, it needs the Mother of God. Her maternal gaze helps us to see ourselves as beloved children in God's faithful people, and to love one another regardless of our individual limitations and approaches... she encourages us to care for one another. Mary's gaze reminds us that faith demands a tenderness that can save us from becoming lukewarm. ... Tenderness is a word that today many want to remove from the dictionary. When faith makes room for the Mother of God, we never lose sight of the center: The Lord, for Mary never points to herself, but Jesus; and our brothers and sisters, for Mary is Mother." (Ibid.)

In the Catholic tradition, we see something truly beautiful in the encounter between the Mother and the Child. That is because, beauty is inseparable from truth and goodness, and the Child is Truth in the Flesh. He is the Supreme Good incarnate. True beauty as the attractiveness of the truly good motivates us to strive for excellence. Certain things attract and inspire us. Beauty motivates us to explore, inquire, reflect, understand, judge, and act. In a mysterious way, beauty helps us hear the call of God to that which is truly good for us.

Saint John says that the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us, and yet the world refused to acknowledge Him as the Truth. It closed its eyes to His Beauty and Goodness. We see in the person of Christ, held tenderly in the arms of His Mother, the One who attracts us and motivates us by the beauty of His love.

Plato wrote that "Beauty has descended from heaven to save us." Dostoevsky confirmed this intuition, writing that "Beauty will save the world." More recently, the Russian theologian Pavel Evdokimov asked: "Who will free beauty from those who want to pursue for themselves power, wealth, and dominion over others?" Answering his own question, he suggests that only the experience of beauty in its absolute form - that is, only the unspeakable experience of God - can restore to beauty its original splendor and the yearning that comes from it.

The beauty of an encounter with God - which is often so powerful and profound that it cannot be put into words and images - can be truly liberating. The beauty of Christ, known through such an encounter, draws us to be His disciples in words and action. Beauty, in art or in life, evokes wonder. I conclude with the words of Pope Francis:

"Without amazement, life becomes dull and routine, and so it is with faith. The Church too needs to renew her amazement at being the dwelling place of the living God, the Bride of the Lord. Otherwise, she risks turning into a beautiful museum of the past. A 'Church museum'. Our Lady

instead gives the Church the feel of a home, a home in which the God of newness dwells." (Pope Francis, Homily, Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, 1 January 2019)

Therefore, let us contemplate this sculpture - the Maternal Bond - by Timothy Schmalz. Let us gaze upon it with the eyes of faith, open to the newness and wonder that God wishes to evoke in our lives, so that through us those who feel distant from the Lord, might experience the tenderness of the God of closeness.