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TO THE VERY ROOTS OF OUR CHARISM

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The «Legend of the Origin»

by Regnum Mariae

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PREFACE

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We all believe on the power of the Holy Spirit that, through the Word, always works marvels in the Church and in the Servite Family, going ahead and fostering us to discover the greatness of our vocation. We are convinced that these texts translate the word that the Lord gives us as a gift making us able to spread it to all those who will have the opportunity to share with us, being sure it will give praise and thanks aiding one's own growth.

I bless the Lord and his Holy Mother, Mary the Virgin, for the love He continues transmitting to his children so that salvation, tenderness and beauty will be witness in the world.

Which is the origin of this collection? During the years 2002-2006, as Family of *Regnum Mariae* we decided to deepen our charisma of Servants of Mary consecrated lay women. We asked Fr. Pier Giorgio Di Domenico, friar OSM, to help us better understand the very roots of our own spirituality, for improving the following-up formation during the first stages and the long-life one, considering what is essential to all us.

At the end of the four-year period, and also thanks to many brothers and sisters who during these years used this biblical theological material prepared by Fr. Pier Giorgio, we were able to better appreciate the great value of these texts for formation of all Servants of Mary in general.

Eagerly encouraged by various friends, we decided to print in four volumes all the material used during this period and already published in *FIF* (pages for RM's Information and Formation).

The author, with the typical simplicity that distinguishes him, wasn't so enthusiastic with this proposal, but due to our insistence and with the conviction that all what the Spirit works on us is not our exclusive property, he gave his consensus.

The collection follows a four-year programme:

1. ***The «Legend of the Origin»*** (2002-2003): «Let's praise those 'illustrious men' ... our Fathers, who watched over us... and took in hand our upbringing in knowledge, art and science...».
2. ***Saint Augustine's Rule*** (2003-2004): «No one shall perform any task for his own benefit but all your work shall be done for the common good...and with more promptness and interest than if made for oneself. Love (...) never seeks its own advantage...».
3. ***The Mother of Jesus*** (2004-2005): «Take your inspiration from the service which Mary has rendered and still gives to the world, and act with peace in your heart without the anxiety characteristic of those who trust only in their own efforts».
4. ***Secular Dimension*** (2005-2006): «Our apostolate of witness is to live in Christ all of life's situations and to carry out our social mandate with responsibility and competence in a spirit of service».

Each volume has been developed in 8 different sections with biblical references, basic texts of our own spirituality, documents of the Magisterium of the Church, and the *Rule of Life of Regnum Mariae*. We consider that the latter reference, sober and always present in the last part of each section, could favour focus and deepen the secular origin of the Servite Spirituality fostering and strengthening communion and co-operation among all Servants of Mary as Family.

Anna Blasi
RM's Elder Iter

INTRODUCTION

These four volumes are the result of a four-year time of study and research in deepening what «secular vocation» means; that is, being called by the Lord to live the Gospel in a hidden way inside the world's core, with the desire and the hope of becoming yeast for making possible a new reality to be born. A four-year period characterised by a progressive communion and sharing experience among the sisters of *Regnum Mariae* and the author. The knowledge and friendship that goes back more than thirty years ago, were now strengthened by the discovery, made together, of this spiritual treasure that is inside the Servite Family, and from which we are the heirs, with the hope of being also the followers.

We tried to fraternally offer all the sisters a help for acquiring consciousness and deep knowledge of the very roots of their own call. It was centred-placed the Word of God, to which our own life is devoted; then, the texts of the origins of the Order, the *Legenda de Origine Ordinis* and Saint Augustine's Rule, which guided us coming back to our very roots. A constant reference was made to Our Lady, the one who believes and keeps inside herself the Word; the servant and true companion of her Son; the sister who prays with and for us.

From the sisters, through the reading and analysis of their *Rule of Life*, we gather in turn, important principles for our own Servite life. For instance, how to be in the world without belonging to it? What does «loving the world as the same Christ loves it» mean? How not to become strangers to «all concrete situations of daily life»? With which kind of loyalty and realism to love poverty making us «share it with thus the fatigue and insecurity that is the lot of most human beings», and «give preference for those you recognize as very poor, [and] to be at their side in the laborious march towards freedom»?

If this work has simply been able to make us understand how important is to exchange all richness inside every and all expressions of life-styles present in those who share the common vocation of the Servants of Mary, then we can be grateful to the Lord and hope the Servite Family continues to be a small light for this world of us.

Fr. Pier Giorgio M. Di Domenico

REGNUM MARIAE

The Secular Institute Regnum Mariae was born in 1959 in Ancona inside the youth group of the Third Order OSM.

In 1976 was joined to the Order of the Servants of Mary as Institute, seeking, since its origins, to live the same Servite Spirituality in a secular way.

On 29 June 1983 was approved as Secular Institute of Diocesan Right by the Archbishop of Ancona, Mons. Carlo Maccari.

The predominant characteristics are: absolute secular life-style, Marian Servite priestly spirituality. Great importance is given also to the dimension of fraternity among its members and with all people. The Institute does not have specific working sectors or proper works.

At present the members of Regnum Mariae are in Italy, Spain, Canada, Mexico and The Philippines.

GENERAL OUTLINE

1. *The “Legend of the Origin”*

1. God’s Primacy
2. Obedience in Faith
3. Into the world, but without belonging to the world
4. Echoing Christ
5. The new city
6. Communion and sharing
7. Poverty
8. Friendship

2. *St Augustine’s Rule*

1. The Temple of God
2. The poor’s community
3. Prayer
4. Listening
5. Fraternal Correction
6. Work
7. Forgiveness
8. Freedom

3. *The Mother of Jesus*

1. Walking towards Christ
2. Blessings of Faith
3. At the service of the world
4. Near the cross
5. Hope of Unity
6. Sign of unity
7. The woman robed with the sun
8. Voice giving praise to God

4. *Secular Dimension*

1. «Everything has been made for a purpose» (Si 39:21)
2. In the image and likeness of God
3. Teach us to count up the days that are ours
4. Loyalty to the world
5. Loyal to Christ and his mission
6. Witnesses of hope and charity
7. Made free to love
8. «Look, I am making the whole of creation new» (Rv 21:5a)
A community gathered in faith and in love

1. GOD'S PRIMACY

Lectio Divina: «Our homeland is in Heaven» (Ph 3:20)

Legend III, 20: Contemplation and prophecy

Rule of Life RM: 28

This year our meditation will deal with the Legend of Origin, as RM's charisma rests on that very foundation. The text starts with a basic truth: God comes first ('*precedente Domino*', cf. Si 1:3, Latin Vulgate); and to Him the 'illustrious men' who are our Fathers and of whom we are the offspring offered each and every of their thoughts, words and deeds with a humble heart¹. This thorough offer was their very own kind of divine worship: 'While these pious men [...] were living in this world, they had already been united to God by their love for the perfect life; and performed the first and foremost act of divine worship: to love God above everything else, to order everything one does according to His law, to honour Him by all their thoughts, words and deeds.' (21)² This passage echoes St. Paul's exhortation to the Romans: 'I urge you, then, brothers, remembering the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, dedicated and acceptable to God; that is the kind of worship for you, as sensible people'. (Rm 12:1) The Shema prayer, the heart of the Biblical revelation, was therefore our Fathers' own prayer: 'Listen Israel: ... you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength'. (Dt 6:5)³

Before moving on to paragraph 20 – on which our Lectio will focus – it may be useful to call to mind some basic information on both the origin and compiling of the Legend.

The 'notebook about the start of the Order'

Thus the Legend of the Origin codex is called in the account-book of Our Lady of the Annunciation's convent, where and entry of its copying was made in 1375.⁴

The title – History to be read (Legend) about the origin of the Order of the Friars Servants of Mary – is not original, but added by the copyist at the end of the text.

The work was presumably compiled shortly after 1317 by an unknown editor (perhaps the prior general Pietro da Todi). In it three sections can be easily detected:

1. An introduction, including the preface and chapters 1 and 2 (paragraphs 1-14), focussing on St. Philip Benizi and the Order which was founded by Our Lady in person.
2. The core, including chapters 3-12 (paragraphs 15-49), dealing with the spiritual path the original group of Servants of Mary trod, and also with the group's growth, but with no reference to people and dates.
3. Conclusion (chapters 13-15, paragraphs 50-62), mainly historical, resuming the story left off at the end of chapter 2, and highlighting St. Peter of Verona's role within the original Servite group (1244-45), then dealing with the stages of its progressive development into an established community up to 1267, when St. Philip Benizi was elected prior general.

According to thorough study, the 'core' (chapters 3-12) is earlier than the rest of the Legend: it dates back to around 1250, shortly after the Seven Fathers had moved to Monte Senario and started

¹ Cf. *Sources for the History and Spirituality of the Servants of St. Mary*, I, Servitium, Sotto il Monte BG 2000, p.191.

² Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 215-216.

³ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁴ Cf. *Fonti storico-spirituali dei Servi di santa Maria* (Sources for the History and Spirituality of the Servants of St. Mary) [not yet translated], II, Servitium, Gorle BG 2002, p. 46, n. 75.

their community, and tells their story from the very beginning, i.e. starting from the time when they were still living in the world. It deals with their friendship and their decision to retire from the world, then dwells at length on their common life outside Florence's walls and at Monte Senario, and ends with their decision to welcome new brothers and found new monasteries.

This earlier section differs, in many ways, from its 14th century frame: it shows both a different language and theology. God is its focus as the original group's constant inspiration, and also for their penitential as well as contemplative path, which starts from their self-commitment to 'the Queen of Heaven, the Most Glorious Virgin Mary, [...] so that she could – as mediatrix and advocate – reconcile them with and entrust them to her Son.' (18) Then the original Servite community found Monte Senario to be the ideal place for their chosen lifestyle, as it resembled the holy mount where Abraham met the Lord. Please note that Monte Senario is mentioned in this earlier section only. The writer is familiar with the many different names Monte Senario was called at the time and with the place itself: '[Our Fathers] saw the mountain God showed them from afar: it towered above the neighbouring mountains. They got closer to it so that they could see what it looked like. They reached its summit and discovered a very beautiful little clearing: on one side there was a spring of excellent water, all around it a wood, as tidy as if it had been planted by man. This was indeed the mountain God had prepared for them.' (41)

One of the earlier section's features is its constant referring to Holy Scripture. It is true that Scriptural quotations were the norm in contemporary literary as well as religious documents. Still, from them we can get a glimpse of Monte Senario's atmosphere.

The 14th century frame – including the proem, chapters 1-2, part or chapter 3, and chapters 4-5, 7 and 13-14 – highlights Our Lady's role and the main events of St. Philip's life. By inserting the first generation of Servants' material into this frame, the 14th century author meant to combine into a whole the original ideals of contemplation and poverty as well as the newly acquired – and increasingly stronger – Marian character of the Order.

The pearl of great value

Chapter 3 deals with the Seven Fathers' state of life and lifestyle while they were still living in this world. Its contents are mainly archaic but very often, as far as paragraphs 15-19 are concerned, they have been revised by the compiler, who either edited or made additions to the original text⁵.

Both language and theology of paragraphs 20-21, dealing with the Fathers' contemplation and divine worship, show that they certainly belong to the earlier section.⁶ In paragraph 19 the Legend remarks that 'our illustrious forefathers and founders of the Order were perfect even before they gathered together. The fact that the Legend draws noteworthy, may be a reminder for us that the common life requires a sound faith, and searching for God only, as all the rest is worthless. When the Fathers became aware of the virtue of faith, 'they chose it as they wished they could adorn themselves with it as if it were a very precious pearl, the pearl of great value they had found. And they sold everything they owned, including their own selves, in order to buy it. 'In fact, this renunciation is the foundation of both faith and life in common.

Contemplation

Faith, as an exclusive love for God, rejoices when it can 'contemplate life eternal'. In paragraph 20 a vivid picture of the Fathers' contemplative life can be found. They were absorbed in God. That is

⁵ Cf. F.A. DAL PINO, *I frati Servi di S. Maria dalle origini all'approvazione* (1233 ca.-1304) [The Servants of Mary from the origin to the approval of the Order], I, *History – Sources, Historiography*, Lovain 1972, p. 287-288.

⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 290.

why ‘they could honestly say with the Apostle, “Our homeland is in Heaven”.’ The quote from Philippians 3:20 reminds us that, as our homeland is in heaven, this world should not be regarded as our definite dwelling; and we should wish to burst our earthly bonds as soon as possible. The Legend adds: ‘So deep was their love bond with God that not only did they fear being separated from Him (which they regarded as the greatest torture of all), but also felt life in this world as a burden and joyfully looked forward to dying in order to be with Him.’ Incidentally, I believe this dichotomy of heaven and earth often prevented believers from being ‘salt for the earth’.

‘Homeland’ is the translation of the Latin term ‘*conversatio*’, i.e. ‘conduct’⁷, that we find in the Vulgate (the Latin translation of the Bible quoted in the Legend). The term can be found also in Acts 23:1 when Paul, appearing before the Sanhedrin, thus starts his defence: ‘My brothers, to his day I have conducted myself before God with a perfectly clear conscience.’ ‘Conduct’, or ‘behaviour’, should be used instead of ‘homeland’. Our conduct as citizens of this world should be ‘heavenly’, as opposed to ‘worldly’. We are indeed living in this world, but the way we do things should not be worldly: we should not be slaves of this world and of its idols or ideologies, but should live in perfect unity with our own selves and with others in the one love of God. My opinion is that St. Paul’s statement (Ph 3:20), often quoted to uphold the thesis of the Fathers’ contemplation, in fact does not justify withdrawing from the world; on the contrary, it should be the basis of a better and deeper taking part in the world’s affairs. As citizens of the world we should not comply with this world’s views; we should shine out like bright stars in the world, proffering to it the Word of life (Ph 2: 15-16) which is the one and only focus of our activity in the world. Contemplation does not mean to lose ourselves in God: but to welcome the Word that can change our life and make of it the sign that a different lifestyle is possible. Thus contemplation becomes prophecy. A prophet is first of all God’s friend: he listens attentively to and takes pleasure in His Word, then he reveals it to the world with God’s very own power: there seems to be a fire burning in his heart, (Jr 20:9) God Himself, all encompassing with His fire.

Paragraph 20 ends with a second quotation from the Letter to the Philippians: ‘I want to be gone and to be with Christ’. (1:23) The Legend refers this sentence to the Fathers’ wish to be freed from this world, felt as a burden. My opinion is that St. Paul did not mean to pass judgement on this world (according to the Bible, the world was originally good, when God created it), but to express his wish to depart⁸ (see also 2Tm 4:6) (such is the meaning of the Greek verb, translated by the Vulgate with ‘*dissolvi*’) and reach his wished-for heaven, i.e. God.

That is the very same wish nourishing our own prayer as well as action: were it lacking, our prayer would be fruitless, our action aimless and we consequently disheartened. Our longing come to and end, our love would cool down, and our faith go downhill.

Our Fathers’ commitment to the Gospel started with this contemplative choice. When writing paragraph 20 of the Legend, its author had in mind Mary of Bethany writing down at Jesus’ feet: (Lk 10:38-42) ‘The genuine Christian faith the Fathers were clothed in, inclined them to contemplate all things divine at all times: and this disposition had turned into a habit. Once they had chosen the better part (contemplation), they did not worry and fret about earthly things any longer; they just wanted to know and earn all things divine.’⁹ This longing for mystical union with the Lord is dealt with also in paragraph 30, focussing on the Seven Fathers’ preparations for common life. Here the recurring phrase – common in Medieval spirituality but meaningful even for today – is: *VARCARE CONTEMPLATIONI*, that is, to free oneself from everything that may hinder his contemplation of the Lord.¹⁰

⁷ The new CEI translation cites “citizenship”, getting closest to the Greek term, *politeuma*, meaning the involvement of common life in a city, the way a citizen behaves.

⁸ Cf. also 2Tm 4:6.

⁹ Cf. *Sources for the History and Spirituality of the Servants of St. Mary*, I, p. 214.

¹⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 228: «They draw themselves to churches or isolated and lonely places, for praising the Lord much more freely in contemplation».

Thirst for God

Chapter 5 of RM's RoL is consistent with Paragraph 20 of the Legend. It focuses on prayer, and Psalm 42:2 is its epigraph: 'My soul is thirsting for God, the living God'. Prayer and thirst for God are one and the same thing.

Please note the following points:

- Consecrated life is 'a deep and constant communion with the Lord', (art. 28) and implies 'living in a constant spirit of prayer'. (art. 30) Contemplation, i.e. a tireless search for the Father's face, is one of the main features of consecrated life in the world; it is the root supporting the whole tree with its branches, the soul of our activity in this world.
- To choose God as the supreme good does not mean to leave the world alone, but to love it as Christ Himself loves it. (art. 28) We should love the world without conforming to it, indeed bringing it Christ's new life.
- Prayer is a service of love. By our prayer we can entrust the world into God's hands and, hopefully, it will become more and more the place where God's will is carried out. (arts. 29 and 33)
- Prayer needs discipline and detachment from our daily work. It may be useful 'to set aside some time in [our] daily routine and in [our life] to dedicate exclusively to an encounter with God.' (art. 30) This ascetic exercise is suitable to those who are absorbed in their worldly activities.
- Prayer is conducive to a better use of our time. Time should never be our master; we should make use of it in order to become better people, capable of genuinely welcoming our own selves and others, with love and liberty. To draw up a daily schedule, and to pray at a fixed time every day, may help us to be faithful to our commitment to prayer. (art. 32)

2. OBEDIENCE IN FAITH

Lectio Divina: «I love You, Lord, my strength» (Ps 18:1)

Legend VIII, 39: The path to love.

Rule of Life RM: 21

Our journey to the very roots of RM's charisma is following the Legend of the Origin's track. As we have seen in the first unit of this essay, that text states at its very beginning that God comes first: He is the foundation of our activity in this world, as our whole life is thirsting for God, looking for His face, becoming contemplation and prayer. All this does not imply fleeing from the world; indeed, it is our own way to taking part in the life of the world, our own way of being prophets.

This exclusive love is the foundation-stone of our obedience, that is, of our willingness to listen to what the world itself or the events in our won lives are telling us, so that we may find in them God's very own words and faithfully put them into practice. Faith, as Scripture says, is in itself obedience (cf Rm 1:5 and marginal references, in the New Jerusalem Bible, Study Edition): of course this kind of obedience is not easy, but it does not make us sad, as it allows us to joyfully experience communion with God, that we love above all else.

The first commandment

In this unit we will be focussing on Paragraph 39 of the Legend. It is placed at the very end of Chapter 8, which is part of the earlier section¹¹ and deals with the spiritual life of the Seven in their temporary Florentine retreat, a kind of training for community life, before they ascended Monte Senario. (LO 31). Augustinian well-ordered charity¹² (love) is the paragraph's key idea. Love, to be genuine, should be directed towards God first, towards oneself in the second place, and lastly towards one's neighbour. That love towards oneself should come second may be puzzling: but one cannot love one's neighbour unless he/she is at peace with himself/herself.

'Now that [the Seven] were together, their immediate goal was to set their priorities in fulfilling the commandment of well-ordered love'. (LO 35)

God comes first, and must be loved with all one's heart, soul and understanding. The Shema spirituality (Dt 6:5) is always the very core of the Fathers' experience (LO 21). God's love is the source of any other kind of love.

Love towards oneself finds its proper expression in the spirit's battle against the flesh, and in keeping the body well-disciplined. (LO 36)

Love towards one's neighbour takes shape in becoming aware of their needs, in sharing their sorrows, in being merciful and forgiving, in exhorting them to do good. (LO 37)

Paragraph 38 summarizes their life-style, a life-style whose first and foremost rule is love: 'In the face of injuries, they never flagged in patience and endured everything in a spirit of resignation. When an easy life lured them, they practiced strict continence, shunning the comforts

¹¹ Cf. Charter 1 *God's Primacy*.

¹² We could consider what St. Augustine says in *La dottrina Cristiana [Christian Doctrine]* 1, 22-41, in *Works of St. Augustine*, VIII, Città Nuova, Rome 1992, p. 32-55.

of flesh and world. They never permitted themselves any laziness but were consumed in a fire of suffering that would not let their spirits grow lukewarm. Seeing ignorance all around them, they gave their goods generously to help others in time of need. While others may have been immersed in things of this world, they were careful and prudent, not seeking honours nor wanting to go back to what they used to own. Surrounded by inconstancy, they remained steadfast and persevering, convinced that separation from Christ's love would be the worst thing that could happen to them'.¹³

Love's steps

Separation from Christ caused them real sorrow. The Legend deals with joy and sorrow in Paragraph 19. Joy and sorrow are the signs that genuine faith has become a 'habit', that is, a vital and stable orientation of the person¹⁴. Our faith in Christ becomes 'the' moral criterion of all our actions: each and every of our actions causes joy or grief in the process of being performed, as it brings us either closer or farther from Christ.

Joyful obedience is based on asceticism, which is dealt with in Paragraph 39: its first step is humility, the last one such a perfect charity that it does not shrink from suffering. Each step, marking a higher degree of love, is characterized by a biblical quotation. In the same way our own lectio will not be confined to the very first line of Psalm 18, but it will make use of all the references the Fathers – while they were living on Monte Senario – found out in the rest of Scripture. Obviously, each line should not be read separately, but according to its context. The following notes may be useful for a more thorough study, that can be done either individually or in common.

The Fathers' chosen lifestyle was based solely on love. It was only love that drove us to become the yeast of the world, through a thorough commitment to God, brotherly communion, and service to the world. At the very beginning of our path there could have been other motivations too, as not always our choices are wholly transparent. Yet, the more we advance on our path of purification, the more we become aware that love is the very foundation of our choice, the more we become able to repeat with the Fathers the first line of Psalm 18: 'I love You, Lord, my strength'.

A parallel version of Psalm 18 is given in 2 Samuel 22:2-51 and is attributed to David. It inspired also the first part of Psalm 144 (1-11), but in both the former and the latter the verb 'to love' is missing. This protestation of love, that the faithful addresses to God, cannot be found elsewhere in the Book of Psalms. The base form of the verb implies that it is a deep-rooted love, as it is connected to 'bowels' and 'womb'. It is the same love that a mother gives to the child of her womb, together with her devotion. This verb occurs many times in the Bible and it is always attributed to God (cf. Hos 2:2; 11:8c; Is 49: 10; 54:8, 10; 55:7; Jer 12:15; Lm 3:32; Mi 7:19; Zc 10:6; Mk 6:34 and parallel versions). In Psalm 18 the faithful places his whole trust in God: he is aware that victory comes from Him only. God is everything: his strength, his rock, his deliverer, his fortress, his refuge, his shield, his stronghold and salvation.

The second step on love's path is willingness to submit in hope to life's trials. In this case the biblical quotation is Job 13:15: 'Let [my Creator] kill me if He will; I have no other hope than to justify my conduct in His eyes.' 'My Creator' (factor) has been inserted in the original text by the Legend's author, who probably had in mind other passages of the Book of Job where the term occurs (4:17; 32:22). The passage is quoted according to the Vulgate edition¹⁵ of the Bible, that

¹³ *Sources for the History and Spirituality*, I, p. 234.

¹⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 212-214.

¹⁵ In the biblical quotations the *Legend of Origin* follows the Vulgate edition published by the University of Paris. During medieval times the copies of Vulgate increased a lot, and as a result, variations among them. The University of Paris tried to rewrite the original text, putting aside all the list of the different corrections made. That edition will be imposed and adapted by a great number of Bibles, just beginning with the famous first edition of the Bible of Gutenberg in 1452-1455.

makes use of the Hebrew term ‘*qerê*’¹⁶. The gap between Job and his friends becomes wider and wider: they defend the traditional thesis of retribution on earth, as they think it may justify God’s conduct. Job opposes it, as he believes it is deceitful. In his view it provides only a superficial answer to fundamental questions. Now Job would like to judge his friends, instead of being judged by them (1\2:1-13, 12) and, above all, he himself would like to cross-examine God, whom he sees as his opponent (13:13-28). ‘Be quiet,’ Job says. ‘Kindly let me do the talking, happen to me what may. I am putting my flesh between my teeth, I am talking my life in my hands.’ (13: 13-14). To vindicate his innocence before God is so important that he is prepared to take the consequences, even if that would mean death. Job is no fatalist: he justifies his conduct in God’s eyes, as he knows that the courage to face God as an equal is the proof of his innocence, ‘for the wicked would not dare to appear before Him.’ The Hebrew text says, ‘I shall confide in Him’. This is not a passive surrender into the hands of Him who is the strongest, but an act of faith in the One who renews us by His love. This act of faith, hope and trust needs great courage too.

The utmost degree of love is reached when one is glad to have the honour of suffering for the sake of Christ. In order to expound this experience, the Fathers made use of Acts 5:41. The Apostles led by Peter, after their arrest and miraculous deliverance from gaol, went back into the temple and began to preach. Then they were taken by the Captain of the Temple and his men to face the Sanhedrin, that had already given them a strong warning not to preach in the name of Jesus before. But Peter and the Apostles were brave enough to declare: ‘Obedience to God comes before obedience to men.’ (Ac 5:29) The Sanhedrin listened to Gamaliel’s advice, who suggested they should take care not to find themselves fighting against God. So they gave orders for them to be flogged, warned them not to speak in the name of Jesus and released them. ‘And so they left the presence of the Sanhedrin, glad to have had the honour of suffering humiliation for the sake of the Name’. (Ac 5:41) Suffering for the sake of the Gospel is an honour, as St. Peter wrote in his first letter to all those living as aliens in the Dispersion, ‘who have been chosen to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with His blood’ (cf. 1Pt 1:1-2): ‘In so far as you share in the sufferings of Christ, be glad, so that you may enjoy a much greater gladness when His glory is revealed. If you are insulted for bearing Christ’s name, blessed are you, for on you rests the Spirit of God, the Spirit of glory. None of you should ever deserve to suffer for being a murderer, a thief, a criminal or an informer; but if any of you should suffer for being a Christian, than there must be no shame but thanksgiving to <god for bearing this name.’ (1Pt 4:13-16)

Tears / light

The joy deriving from obedience to the Gospel – and consequent suffering too – pervades the second part of Paragraph 39, which is, thanks to its ‘exceptional mystical quality’¹⁷, one of the highest passages of Mediaeval religious literature. In it, Matthew 25:1-10 and Luke 12:35-36 have been combined: in it we find both the wise virgins waiting for the Bridegroom and the servants ready to open the door as soon as their Master returns from the wedding feast. ‘Again, they were like the prudent virgins with their lamps already prepared in their hands. The vessel was polished in that they kept their heart pure and ready to receive the beloved Guest; then they filled it with oil,

¹⁶ The “masoreti” (scholars of tradition), beginning in the II Century, established and spread the sacred text in an official and ruled way to all Hebrew communities, that also realised the need, to make some corrections, even though for them we don’t know the exact reasons. As written word (*ketib*) couldn’t be modified, they marked the term they wanted to change with a (°) symbol, rewriting it with (*qerê*). Gb’s 13, 15 *ketib* says: “‘Let Him kill me if He will; I shall not wait for Him in silence’, but the Jewish scholars changed “lo” (not) into “lô” (for him) and read “qerê”: ‘I shall wait for Him (confide in Him)... “I will wait (wait in him)”’.

¹⁷ D.M. MONTAGNA, *Echi di esperienza monastica a Monte Senario nel Duecento* [Echoes of monastical life at Monte Senario during XIII Century], in “Studi Storici OSM”, 29 (1979) p. 239.

that is, with a devout heart they joyfully awaited the coming of the Beloved; they lit the lamp with fire when, with eagerness and fervour, they went out to meet Christ coming into their heart; and finally, they held up their lamp to shed light, the light which was their good example to others and their contemplation of divine truth. Christ was at the door knocking. With tear-filled eyes they opened and received Him into their heart, conscious of the great grace He was giving them and rejoicing in the presence of so great a Bridegroom. In a word, they were an example of holiness to everyone. This example kindled the fire of love in others and drew them to the love of Christ.’¹⁸

The passage is quoted again in Paragraph 46, which insistently deals with the spreading of the Fathers’ simple and transparent witness. The biblical passages it draws on (Sg 2:8-10; 3: 1-4; 5:1-2; Rm 8:26-27; Rv 3:20) expound their passionate longing for Christ, the Beloved, the Friend, the Bridegroom. Christ was standing at the door, knocking. The Fathers were ready to open the door ‘with tear-filled eyes’ (the same phrase can be found both in numbers 39 and 46): the Beloved was their most precious treasure, the One they devoted their lives to, was at the same time absent and present.

Called to freedom

Let us finally deal with RM’s RoL, and focus on the quote from the Gospel which is the key to the whole Chapter 4. There the theme is ‘obedience’: ‘The world must recognise that I love the Father and that I act just as the Father commanded.’ (Jn 14:31) What comes after the conjunction ‘AND’ explains what Jesus’ love for the Father consists in: I love the Father, that is I do what the Father commanded. Jesus’ obedience makes His love real.

Art. 21 highlights that we must follow the example of Jesus Christ, and ‘give ourselves totally to the constant search for God’s will, so that we can faithfully carry our God’s loving and salvific design in our lives.’ This article ends with the concept of freedom. Freedom derives from love, and is the ultimate step in our journey of faith and fraternity. We answered Christ’s call and chose to enter a family bigger than ours, so that we could find true freedom from the selfishness that makes slaves of us all. The Virgin Mary who accepted God’s will (art. 26) is our very companion and teacher. This awareness comes from meditation on the Word of God, from fidelity to our RoL, and from sincere and patient dialogue with everyone, even when misunderstandings and differences between us may cause sufferings. (art. 22)

Art. 23 mentions that real obedience means ‘accepting with love... the various situations which life sets before [us].’ Events that compel us to change everything in our lives, or our own plans, and that determine our choices, may occur. To be able to obey to all that is a grace from God. To submit to life’s trials in hope may help the hopeless too.

Art. 27 specifies the obligations deriving from our Vow of Obedience. It also reminds us that by now our horizon can no longer be narrowed down to our very self. All personal choices, regarding our own work, or a new job, or apostolic and social commitments, or changes of residence, must be examined with our leader. Obedience is our daily labour: we must lose our life and give it as a gift to our neighbour.

¹⁸ *Sources for the History and Spirituality of the Servants of St. Mary*, I, p. 235.

3. INTO THE WORLD, BUT WITHOUT BELONGING TO THE WORLD

Lectio divina: «Leave your country... for a country which I shall show you» (Gn 12:1)
Legend IX, 40; X, 42: the inner ascent
Rule of Life RM: 46

Chapters 9 and 10 of the Legend¹⁹ focus on the Fathers' ascent to Mt Senario. Their wish for a greater solitude justified their leaving Florence: they were exclusively longing for contemplation and for a community centred on brotherly love and unity.

Far from the world

The Fathers' ascent to Mt Senario is described following the line of Abraham's story: he leaves his country, his kindred and his father's house for a country which God will show him. (Gn 12:1) The Fathers repeated Abram's first departure: they "had separated themselves from family after considerable efforts to overcome their hesitations and other obstacles"(LO 40)²⁰. Their lifestyle outside Florence city (LO 31) walls drew crowds: "... both men and women visited them daily, seeking their help or looking for instruction in their words or example, asking of them prayers or spiritual direction. These visits and requests became so frequent and time-consuming that they became a great distraction and a constant hindrance to the contemplative style of life they wanted" (LO 40).

It was therefore necessary for them to leave the 'house of their fathers'. This was their second departure. "These crowds of people were causing them concern: were they displeasing God by all these distractions? But the same God who had led them in love to come together, to leave lands and family, and to be such an inspiration to the people, now inspired them with a single will to leave even their father's house, that is, to withdraw from the secular environment."

Of course the aim of this second and more radical departure was God and God only. They wanted to purify their minds and souls, in order for them not to be pursuing their own self-satisfaction, or success, or fame, but the pure and free love of their Lord. It is this very kind of love we must tend to, as the quotation from St Paul's Letter to the Ephesians suggests: "Then we shall no longer be children, or tossed one way and another, and carried hither and thither by every new gust of teaching, at the mercy of all the tricks people play and their unscrupulousness in deliberate deception. If we live by the truth and in love, we shall grow completely into Christ who is the head..." (Ep 4:14-15)

Given that the Fathers were earnestly longing for God, their prayers were granted: "At last God, who always provides for those who love Him, intervened and inspired them to want the very thing that was for their welfare. He who fulfils the desire of those who fear Him when they confide in Him alone, went even beyond the desire of these fathers of ours; for He not only inspired the very desire in them, but He fulfilled it as well, like the provident Father He is. He pointed out to them a place which accorded with their desire and which He had long had in mind; and then He gave them the means by which they would be able to live there" (LO 40).

¹⁹ Cf. *Sources for the History and Spirituality of the Servants of St. Mary*, I, p. 235-241.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

Mt Senario was the place where they could carry out their giving themselves totally to God. The description of Mt Senario recalls the Old Testament mountains where God revealed Himself (LO 41) it is similar to Mount Moriah, where Abraham offered his sacrifice of obedience to the Lord; (Gn 22:2) and also to Mount Zion, as unshakeable as the one who trusts in the Lord: “Whoever trusts in the Lord is like Mount Zion: unshakeable, it stands for ever. Jerusalem! The mountains encircle her: so the Lord encircles His people, henceforth and for ever.” (Ps 125:1-2) Again, it is similar to the mountain of the Lord’s House, the Holy Temple all the peoples go up to, so that the Lord may teach them His ways of peace and reconciliation. (Is 2:2-5)

The Legend evokes also the hills Lot and his family had to flee to, if they wanted not to be swept away together with Sodom and Gomorrah. “When dawn broke the angels urged Lot on, ‘To your feet! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away in the punishment of the city.’ And as he hesitated, the men seized his hand and the hands of his wife and his two daughters – the Lord being merciful to him – and led him out and left him outside the city. When they had brought him outside, he was told, ‘Flee for your life. Do not look behind you or stop anywhere on the plain. Flee to the hills or you will be swept away.’ (Gn 19:15-17) The Fathers had to leave Florence without looking back, mercilessly breaking every tie with this world. Mind you, we should not be misled by this kind of language: life in Christ is indeed completely different from escapism, and never implies contempt for the world. But it may require leaving the world behind, in order to become aware of one’s own personal identity, the identity of someone who has utterly given himself / herself as a gift to the one and only Lord of his / her life. Thus the Fathers were able to go back to the world as the hidden yeast that makes the world ‘leaven’ towards a new awareness.

A journey to the core of one’s own being

The Fathers’ ascent from Florence to Mt Senario was marked by an inner growth too. That is why chapters 9 and 10 of the Legend – while highlighting the monastic ideals of detachment and solitude – are in fact relevant to those who live in the world too.

The inner spiritual ascent must start from a deep and sorrowful conversion. “In the beginning,” the Legend says (42), “they had been in the valley of tears: there they were cleansed through contrition, made clean and fit for the ascent.” And it quotes Psalm 84 (83): “As they pass through the Bitter Valley, they make their way from height to height into their heart.” (7,6) It is through inner purification that we can ascend to our true home, the place where the Lord dwells, the place we are longing for. Saint Augustine, one of the most quoted authorities in the Legend, thus commented on those lines from Psalm 84: “What does the Lord give by His grace to him, whom He calls and leads? The Psalm goes on, ‘...from height to height into their heart.’ The Lord prepares some steps in his heart, for him to go up to Him. The more he loves Him, the higher he can ascend. [...] But where does God performs all this? In the bitter valley. [...] It is indeed in the midst of the bitter valley that He allows him to ascend. There, as Scripture says: “He went off, went off weeping, carrying the seed. He comes back, comes back singing, bringing in his sheaves.” (Ps 126:6) It is therefore necessary for God to make us go up the steps of our heart, by His grace. Let us follow His love path. With His love in our hearts we shall sing the Steps Song.”²¹

Abram’s calling, which our Seven Fathers’ story takes as its model, is the start of an inner ascent within the heart. “Leave your country, your kindred and your father’s house for a country which I shall show you.” (Gn 12:1) The Hebrew term ‘lek leka’ may literally mean ‘go to the core of your being’ (see also Sg 2:10). The core we should go back to is our soul. It is a difficult and long journey, leading us to discover God and neighbour as part of ourselves (see previous unit). There is a very important passage in Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes* highlighting the inner dimension of human beings. It is thanks to people who are re-discovering their soul that life will thrive again in

²¹ *Esposizione sui salmi 83, 10 in Works of St Augustine, II, Città Nuova, Rome 1970, p. 1195-1197.*

the world. “In the depths of his conscience, man finds a law that has not been written by himself. He must obey this law. It is always calling him to love, to do good and to flee evil. [...] This law has been written by God into man’s heart: man’s very dignity derives from obeying this law, and he will be judged accordingly. Conscience is man’s core, where he is alone with God, and God’s voice resounds within it. Through our conscience God makes us understand His law, which finds its fulfilment in the commandment to love God and neighbour. By being faithful to their conscience Christians may be one with other men in the common pursuit of truth and in the struggle to solve moral problems, of both the individual and society, according to truth.” (GS, 16)

In this journey to the core of our own being our freedom is constantly increasing. In fact, one of this journey’s features is autonomy: we become liable for our own choices, we learn to tell the truth with simplicity and love, we live free from society’s conditioning, and contribute to the welfare of society by our own beliefs.

As a consequence of this inner journey we should feel compassion for the whole world, as well as welcome life as a blessing, that is, a gift imparted to everybody as a witness to the love of God, the Creator of everything. “I shall bless you... you are to be a blessing! ... and all clans on earth will bless themselves by you.” (Gn 12:2-3)

Scripture remarks that Abram was seventy-five when he left Haran. (Gn 12:4) We are greatly encouraged by this, as it is a proof that the inner journey may start at any age, even at a time when we feel we are well on in years and, perhaps, have achieved little.

Abram arrived in Canaan, passed through the country as far as the holy place at Shechem, the Oak of Moreh. The Canaanites were in the country at the time. (Gn 12:5-6) But the aim of Abram’s journey is not definitely to own the land. According to Genesis, Abraham built an altar to the Lord three times, in three different places: at the Oak of Moreh, (Gn 12:7) in the mountainous district east of Bethel, (Gn 12:8) and finally at the Oak of Mamre, at Hebron. (Gn 13:18) This fact is meaningful. Abraham does not conquer the country: a people is already living there. He does receive the country from the Lord as the place through which he is temporarily ‘passing’, but he never dwells in it as its legitimate owner. This is why the Bible defines Abraham a ‘Hebrew’, (Gn 14:13) an adjective that certainly comes from his ancestor Eber, (Gn 10:24; 11:16 ff) but whose root comes from the verb ‘to pass through’. In fact, the Greek Bible renders the term with *peràtes*, that is, emigrant. Abraham is an emigrant.

In the end, we must conclude that journeying to the core of one’s own being does not mean ‘self-seeking’; it is rather a ‘dispossession’ of one’s very self, as one has to give him / herself wholly to the Lord. In Abraham’s case, the destination of his journey was Mount Moriah; there he would have been ready to sacrifice his own son, but the Lord decided otherwise.

Away from Babel

Abraham’s calling is closely connected with chapter 11 of Genesis. He had been released from Babel, a dark prison. The plan made in Babel went against man. “‘Come,’ they said, ‘let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top reaching heaven. Let us make a name for ourselves, so that we do not get scattered all over the world.’” (Gn 11:4) This means: let us get rid of all differences, let us make everybody subscribe to our ethos, our kind of civilization, society, economics, politics and religion. They tried to make the world one not through the encounter of different cultures and peoples, but through their own group’s, or caste’s, or nation’s rule over all the rest. God couldn’t agree with such a plan. He went down to confuse their language and called a man, Abram, so that they could realise that God cannot be found in an oppressive and mortifying uniformity; He can be found by him, who is ready to set out on a journey and regards himself in the world as a guest and a pilgrim, and lays no claims.

It may be useful to recall that in the synagogue liturgy for the Sabbath, the reading of Genesis 11:1-9 is immediately followed by the *haftarà*²² of Zp 3:9-17. Zephaniah delivered his message during Josiah's reign, an age characterised by hope and expectation, whose climax was Josiah's famous religious reform of 622 B.C. Zephaniah called people to conversion: "Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth, who obey His commands. Seek uprightness, seek humility..." (Zp 2:3) Spiritual renewal could come true through the remnant of "a humble and lowly people," (Zp 3:12) who, after giving up the arrogance of power, trusted only in the Lord. Zephaniah's lips had been purged and he served the Lord "shoulder to shoulder", (Zp 3:9) that is, helping his 'brothers' and never bullying them.

The 'new man' is not born out of the fake security of a well-built and solid city, but during pilgrimage. The Bible says that when Terah left Ur of the Chaldaeans with his family, they already knew their destination: the land of Canaan. But they settled in Haran. (cf Gn 11:31) In other words, the destination is not really important; what is important is to go on a journey, as that rightly defines our relationship with God and neighbour.

God loves the world

Bearing in mind what we have said so far, here are some brief notes on RM's *Rule of Life*..

Chapter 7 of the RoL – on 'Life in the world' - opens with a quote from St John's gospel: Jn 3:16-17. God Himself went on a pilgrimage, when He gave His own Son up for the sake of all of us. (cf Rm 8:31-32) Given that God gave everything, we in our turn should give everything too, loving the world as God Himself loves it.

Art. 46 reminds us that secularity is genuine only if it derives from our awareness of 'being made new persons by baptism'. The novelty was our own immersion in the death and resurrection of Christ. We were made one with Him. It is this communion with Him that allows us to work 'directly and concretely within the temporal realities in which we live, so that they may be drawn to God through Christ.'

Love for Christ urged our Fathers to choose the monk's life, characterised by contemplation, solitude and silence. But each and every Christian, living in the world, should experience a sort of 'inner monasticism', by responding to Jesus' call and following Him, and giving Him his / her whole life as a gift.

Art. 47 is related to 'inner monasticism' too. Taking inspiration from the service that Our Lady rendered, we should act peacefully 'without the anxiety characteristic of those who trust only in their own skills.' The Monk is someone who does not trust in his own skills, but confides in God's action, resulting from a life of pure faith. This should be everybody's line, even of those who live in the midst of this world. All of us should be more detached, for the meaning of our life should not be identified with what we do.

Art. 51 underlines the importance of 'autonomy' from one's own family. In addition to that, we should become masters of our own thoughts and liable for certain choices; we should contribute to community life by our frank cooperation and, if need be, criticism; we should be freed from the conditioning of society and a worldly mentality.

Art. 52 reminds us that we should welcome the world free from defence mechanisms and prejudice. In particular we should devote our love to the poorest of the poor, and be at their side in their laborious march toward freedom.

So far we have talked about a journey to the core of our own being, a journey aimed at finding our own genuine identity as well as autonomy. This is the end of our journey but also the

²² The name *haftarà* refers to a passage from the books of Prophets that is read after the Pentateuch during Saturdays morning as well as during the most important Feasts. Cf. Lc 4, 16ss, where we have an example of the Saturday readings in the Synagogue. After the reading of the Torah it is read the *haftarà* that in this case is Is 61.

start of a new one, this time outside ourselves, on the path to compassion. We talked about autonomy, not about independence. We are the Servants of the Holy Virgin and, according to our charisma, true autonomy finds its fulfilment in compassion and service.

4. ECHOING CHRIST

Lectio divina: «We are the fragrance of Christ, both among those who are being saved and among those who are on the way to destruction» (2 Co 2:14-15)

Legend X, 43: Everything in our own lives is a reminder of Jesus Christ.

Rule of Life RM: 11

Chapter 10 of the Legend²³ states that there is a symbolical connection between the name Mt Senario and the Fathers' vocation. 'Mount' implies an ascent. It is our inner ascent to the Lord, to the place we belong to and that will fulfil all of our desires. 'Sonaio' ('Senario') calls to mind the genuine experience that will eventually become light to others.

This time we deal with Paragraph 43: its many biblical quotations will form a sort of spiritual path enabling us to grow and teaching us to convey the deep meaning of life to others.

The sweet sound of prompt obedience

We have already pointed out that the Legend deals with this theme at large. In fact, obedience – in the biblical accepted meaning of 'listening to' – is the starting point of any process of growing. God called our Fathers "to know and love Him" and they responded by "the sweet sound of their prompt obedience".

The first biblical quotation is from the First Book of Samuel: "Speak, Lord; for Your servant is listening." (1 S 3:10) Samuel was still a boy: "As yet, Samuel had no knowledge of the Lord and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him." (1 S 3:7) It was difficult for him to grasp the meaning of God's calling. Eli the priest could not grasp it either, in spite of his being of mature years and his long service at God's shrine; and the fact that he could no longer see (cf 1 S 3:2) reveals that he was 'blind' with respect to the Lord's word.

In those days it was rare for the Lord to speak. (cf 1 S 3:1) The adjective 'rare' implies 'preciousness'. The Vulgate edition of the Bible makes use of the term 'precious'. Precious was the stone set in the crown that David took off Milcom's head (cf 2 S 12:30) or the stones the Queen of Sheba gave Solomon as a gift (cf 1 K 10:2). Precious is the moon as it walks the sky (cf Jb 31:26); precious are God's thoughts as they are deep and inscrutable (cf Ps 139:17); and precious is Israel, God's beloved people: "I regard you as precious, since you are honoured and I love you." (Is 43:4) In God's eyes we are all precious and rare. He loves each of us as if he / she were the only one man / woman on earth.

The word of the Lord is 'rare' and of the greatest value. It is something precious God gives us as a gift; we should love it as God Himself loves us. It is also 'rare', given that very few people listen to it and regard it as the pearl of great value. Very few people listened to it in Samuel and

²³ Cf. *Sources for the History and Spirituality of the Servants of St. Mary*, I, p. 239-241.

Eli's times, and very few people listen to it nowadays, as God's word is demanding and must be put into practice.

In fact, very seldom we are prepared to discern God's call from the lures of this world. And God has to call us over and over again, in the hope that sooner or later we may hear Him calling and, after realizing we have been showered with such a great love, we may respond: "Speak, Lord; for Your servant is listening." God expects us to listen to His word and submit to it with our whole being in all freedom.

Holy Scripture's core is the command, "Listen, Israel." (Dt 6:4) The whole of Scripture is meant for being proclaimed. If man did not listen, Scripture would be pointless. "... when all Israel assembles in the presence of the Lord your God in the place chosen by Him, you must proclaim this Law in the hearing of all Israel. Call the people together, men, women, children, and the foreigner residing with you, so that, hearing it, they may learn to fear the Lord your God and keep and observe all the words of this Law. Their children, who as yet do not know it, will hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God..." (Dt 31:11-13)

What we call 'Scripture' is referred to in the Old Testament as "Miqra", a Hebrew term that means 'reading'²⁴, and highlights that the written text should not be interpreted, but handed down from generation to generation. Reading is an activity that implies a meeting between the reader and his listener(s). The reading from Dt 31 we have just quoted was held on the Feast of Shelters, or on the Feast of Weeks (thus according to the Jerusalem Bible notes, cf Dt 31:9-13). Moses addressed three discourses to the people, and the people listened to them. Then the three discourses were committed to writing, (cf Dt 31:9) so that they might be proclaimed again and the people might listen to them. Scripture has a provisional character. What is destined to stay is God's word, the Word proclaimed by His prophets and listened to by the people, who have to put it into practice.

Samuel, the servant who listened to his Lord's word, the first genuine prophet of Israel's history according to the Bible (cf Ac 3:24: "... all the prophets, from Samuel onwards..."), could thus declare: "Is the Lord pleased by burnt offerings and sacrifices or by obedience to the Lord's voice? Truly, obedience is better than sacrifice..." (1 S 15:22) God is not pleased by a perfect rite, soullessly performed. He is pleased by a real human being's listening to His word and responding to it.

The Legend freely quotes 1 S 3:10, "Speak, Lord; for Your servants are listening." [The plural of course refers to the Fathers.] In fact Samuel is not alone either. He needs Eli to understand, or, better, they help each other to understand. God's message must be listened to together. To meet together in order to read the Scriptures is really important. What a community understands of a Scriptural passage cannot be surpassed by any exegetical comment. Of course, two basic rules must be followed: a – each member of the community will prepare him / herself for the meeting by his / her daily reading and listening to the Scriptures; b – at the meeting, he / she will be ready to welcome what the others say, and to convert him / herself accordingly, instead of trying to make the others convert to his / her own views.

"Sweet the sound their fervent devotion echoed back to Him," goes on n° 43 of the Legend, "when the Holy Spirit breathed on them and inspired them to holiness: 'Do not thrust me away from Your presence, do not take away from me Your Spirit of holiness.' (Ps 51:13)" According to Psalm 51, there is a relation between the Holy Spirit of God ["do not take away from me Your Spirit of holiness' (Ps 51:11)] and a clean heart ["God, create in me a clean heart" (Ps 51:10)]. The whole person ('heart') is clean because he / she lives in God's presence. Prayer is of paramount importance: the Holy Spirit of God is a gift that must be begged for humbly and welcomed in a spirit of contrition, conversion and purification.

²⁴ *Miqra* ' in Hebrew, meaning reading, gathering, feast celebration.

David's harp

After listening and prayer, it is time for 'works': "And how delightful to others was the sound their hands made in setting good example and taking up so many holy tasks." (LO, 43) Here the image is a bit weird, but the movement of the hands is a symbol of the exemplary life of the Fathers, now described as a melody bringing joy. It alludes to David who played the harp to alleviate Saul's sadness. The reference can be found in the First Book of Samuel, 16:14-23. King Saul had rejected the Lord's word and an evil spirit from the Lord was afflicting him with terrors. Saul's servants suggested him to look for a skilled harpist. The music would do him good. The king gave the order. "Then one of the servants spoke up and said, 'I have seen one of the sons of Jesse the Bethlehemite: he is a skilled player, a brave man and a fighter, well spoken, good-looking and the Lord is with him.' So Saul sent messengers to Jesse with the order, 'Send me your son David (who is with the sheep).' [...] David went to Saul and entered his service [...]. And whenever the spirit from God came over Saul, David would take a harp and play; Saul would then be soothed; it would do him good, and the evil spirit would leave him."

The allusion to David is relevant in many ways. First of all, it testifies to the Fathers' thorough study of the Bible. We have mentioned before how their *Lectio* was not limited to the most famous passages but wide-ranging. We, who are consecrated people living in the world, should feel 'at home' when reading the Bible too. We should be able to move far and wide in it, and know each and every of its 'corners'.

Furthermore, the allusion to David's harp is relevant as it could introduce us to the 'way of beauty'. Our life should be nourished by all that may help man's spirit to raise itself towards the highest human values. Study and reading should help us broaden our views, as well as free us from the petty worries of everyday life and prompt us to change. An ever deeper understanding of people and events, full of sympathy, should lead us to see them in a new and positive light, and foster hope. Love for arts should help us see the beauty and harmony of creation, and discover beauty and harmony in our own and other people's lives too. Lorin Mazael²⁵, an American conductor, wrote: "To some, playing or listening to music is similar to a renewing balsam. During World War II, while V1 and V2 were landing in London, the famous pianist Clara Haskil used to play the piano in half-destroyed buildings, in front of all those who regarded her rendering of Mozart like an oasis of sanity in a crazy world. She and the music she played were an inspiration to many, in the struggle against everyday difficulties. [...] I am not saying that playing or listening to music will ever prevent anti-social ideas from getting into the human mind. In the same way that a scientific study of the wonders of human life will never prevent doctors and researchers from committing horrible crimes against humanity. [...] I am just saying: let us place a little child in an environment where he will be free to express his creativeness, where all that surrounds him is aesthetically gratifying, where he will listen to music, see no violence, watch no TV – with the exception of educational videos; let no religious or political fanaticism be inculcated in him; let him spend his first five years of life there: it is very likely that that child will later grow into a fair-minded adult, who contributes to the welfare of society. [...] Generally speaking, Art can contribute to liberating the human mind from the yoke of fanaticism. When one listens to a superb rendering of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, the mind is led to surpass its limited horizon. There can be no room for hatred. The free and inquiring mind of an artist will never subscribe to fanaticism."

Going back to David's story, Saul, afflicted by an evil spirit from the Lord, represents the confused, alienated, downcast and sad humanity, that can be cured only by the harmony of a sweet melody: the beauty of a life which reflects God, the Supreme Beauty. We should bring the secret joy that fills our hearts and makes our lives worth living to those men and women who cannot find life's true meaning.

²⁵ *Sole 24 Ore* [Italian paper] – Sunday, December 29, 2002, p. 27.

The fragrance of Christ

The Legend links the 'sweet sound' to fragrance: "Everywhere we are the fragrance of Christ." (cf 2 Co 2:14-15) Both sound and fragrance are symbols of the Fathers' life, and of its new strength.

It has been suggested by some scholars that 2 Co 2:14-15 is the beginning of a completely different letter, later inserted in the present context together with some other minor letters. 2 Co would be "a composite work, including three different texts. Its aim would be to hand down all the stuff by St Paul, whose copious writings were regarded as precious."²⁶

2 Co 2:14 could well be the liturgical opening of a separate letter going as far as chapter 7:4, focussing on the apostolic ministry: a glorious office, aimed at "enlightening everybody with the knowledge of God's glory, the glory on the face of Christ." (cf 2 Co 4:6) This is a God-given 'treasure' that we hold in pots of earthenware, "so that the immensity of the power is God's and not our own. We are subjected to every kind of hardship, but never distressed; we see no way out but we never despair; we are pursued but never cut off; knocked down, but still have some life in us; always we carry with us in our body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus, too, may be visible in our body." (2 Co 4:7-10)

Precious and glorious is God's call to the apostolic ministry. Poor and needy the lives of those God calls. St Paul's liturgical opening states: "Thanks be to God who always gives us in Christ a part in His triumphal procession, and through us is spreading everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Himself." (2 Co 2:14)

This image is taken from the custom familiar to all: a victorious general making his solemn entry into Rome; incense burned before the victor. This imagery derives its true meaning from Christ's victory. We are often vanquished, but Jesus has conquered the world, (cf Jn 16:33; 1 Jn 5:4) and His victory gives us hope: our poor lives may witness to Christ's paschal mystery.

"To God we are the fragrance of Christ." (2 Co 2:15) Here there is a reference to the sacrificial perfume. The whole of our life, service and activity is an offering to God (cf Rm 1:9; 15:16). In Jesus Christ is found the Yes to the Father: it is through Him that Paul can pronounce his self-less Yes. (cf 2 Co 1:19-21)

The term 'fragrance' can be found also in the Song of Songs (cf 1:3,12-13; 2:13,17; 3:6; 4:10-14; 5:13; 8:14) where it is a symbol of the presence of the Lover giving joy to the Beloved, as well as a symbol of God, a reality that man will never be able to fully grasp. Hence the final exhortation of paragraph 43 of the Legend: "House of Jacob, come, let us walk in the Lord's light." (Is 2:5)

Is 2:2-5 is often quoted in the Legend, especially in relation to Mt Senario: this is the mountain God has prepared (Is 2:2; LO 41), the mountain many people will ascend to (Is 2:3; LO 41), the mountain all the nations will stream to (Is 2:2; LO 45), the place where Israel may walk in the Lord's paths (Is 2:3; LO 45). As a new 'Mt Zion', towering above the nations as a beacon, Mt Senario resounds with the echo and is perfumed by the fragrance of the Seven Fathers' common life. Their life prompts everybody to walk in the Lord's light, that is in God's very Word. (cf Ps 119:105; Pr 6:23; Ws 7:10,26) The Word we have listened to is a light on our paths, a lamp for our feet when we risk stumbling. If we walk in the Lord's light, we – in our turn – can become light to the world. "I, the Lord, [...] have made you light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind..." (Is 42:6,7) "I shall make of you a light to the nations, so that my salvation may reach the remotest parts of earth." (Is 49:6) "Then your light will blaze out like the dawn [...]. If you deprive yourself for the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, your light will rise in the darkness, and your darkest hour will be like noon." (Is 58:8,10)

²⁶ U. VANNI, 'Corinzi (II Lettera ai...)', in "Nuovo Dizionario di Teologia Biblica", Ed. Paoline, Cinisello Balsamo, 1988, p. 304.

“... as a silent bearer of Christ”

Article 11 of our Rule of Life has been chosen as a link between the Fathers’ and our own experience. It is part of Chapter 2, that deals with Consecrated Chastity. According to what we gather from paragraph 43 of the Legend, consecrated chastity can be defined as ‘to be transparent to God’s light, in order for Christ to be made flesh in us’.

Article 11 reminds us that we should be “silent bearers of Christ”, contributing towards His birth in the hearts of men. No special words are needed to echo Christ and to be His fragrance in our daily lives.

Only if we are faithful to the epigraph of Chapter 2 – “We have recognised for ourselves, and put our faith in, the love God has for us” (1 Jn 4:16) – we will be able to convey Christ by our lives. Love is the only power that can change the world. To love means to fully entrust ourselves to the One who is the true foundation-stone of our life, who renews and fulfils it.

We would like to help our neighbour to love in the same way, even when to hope may be difficult. Our Lady – “an example of trust in the Lord, [...] a sign of hope... for those who are insecure in our times” (cf. art. 7) – will support us in this difficult task.

Jesus will be brought to others by abandoning ourselves to the Father’s Providence (cf art. 15), that is by being self-less and by helping others to satisfy their needs. “Be aware that you will grow in evangelical freedom in so far as you strive to put off yourself and put on Christ.” (art. 58)

Faithfulness to our daily commitments will bring Christ’s light to everybody. “Make every effort to lead a life of faith: prayer and work will thus become an expression of communion with Christ who, present and working in you, will lead you to God and to your brothers and sisters.” (art. 61)

Within RM, leaders will let themselves be transfigured by Christ’s light. “Our leaders must feel a need to conform themselves to Christ. They should be close to the members with respect, the ability to listen to and to dialogue with them; with simplicity and intelligence, with love and firmness they shall help them to discover and to carry out the will of God.” (art. 66)

Finally, to lead a hidden life in Jesus Christ will be the sign that we have been called to be lay consecrated women in the world. “Those who wish to consecrate themselves to God in the world in accordance with the spirit of Regnum Mariae must perceive:

- a. a personal call from God the Father, the desire for intimacy with Christ and the will to offer themselves totally in the Spirit;
- b. the call to lead a hidden life in the world, while deeply appreciating its authentic human values, and to provide a solitary witness in it.” (art. 68)

The Epilogue of RM’s Rule of Life should never be forgotten: “...so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, with all God’s holy people you will have the strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; so that, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond knowledge, you may be filled with the utter fullness of God.” (Ep 3:17-19) Christ lives indeed in our own hearts, but we may fully understand what Christ’s charity means only in the company of the ‘saints’, with our brothers and sisters.

5. THE NEW CITY

*Lectio divina: «The Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls» (Mt 13:45)
Legend III, 17; VIII, 37: The 'arts and crafts' of the Fathers.
Rule of Life RM: 54*

When we consider the Legend's author's way of thinking, we find out that the parable of the merchant looking for the pearl of great value has been given a very original interpretation. Of course, Mt 13:45 should not be quoted out of its context, as something separate from the rest of Chapter 13 of St Matthew's Gospel. It may therefore be useful to briefly remind what parables mean to Jesus' preaching, as well as to the life of the Church²⁷.

An appeal for decision

Whenever Jesus told a parable, He talked to a specific audience. For instance, the parable of the prodigal son was aimed at the Pharisees, who did not subscribe to Jesus' merciful attitude towards sinners. The early Church then applied the parable in her peculiar context, thus slightly shifting it from its original meaning, but also unearthing new meanings. The Church's interpretation was 'allegorical'. This was not a novelty. Allegory had already been used in the Old Testament as well as in the New: it disclosed a new reality beyond the literal meaning. E.g. In the nuptial allegory of Chapter 16 of the Book of Ezekiel, the story of love, unfaithfulness and forgiveness does not have as protagonists an ordinary husband and wife, but the Lord and His people. Here the main idea underlying the allegory is that the economy of salvation comes true in human history. Allegory can be found in the symbolical visions of the prophets and of the apocalyptic tradition, as well as in the gospels. Jesus explained the parable of the sower in details (Mt 13:18-23): the different kinds of soil represent different kinds of Christians. Again, He explained the parable of the darnel to His disciples. (Mt 13:36) And St Mark writes: "He would not speak to them except in parables, but He explained everything to His disciples when they were by themselves." (Mk 4:34)

Modern scholars tried to distinguish between the original parables as told by Jesus, and their later allegorical development. The first of them was Adolf Jülicher (1857-1938). In his view, Jesus used to tell parables in order to embed His message in real-life circumstances. He did not mean to communicate 'universal' truths, just that particular truth that could help His audience to realize that they had to change their way of thinking as well as living. Later on, the community inferred from Jesus' parables universal teachings and truths. The flaw in Jülicher's argument is that he just took into account the ethical-religious aspect of Jesus' message. In fact, Jesus is much more than a teacher imparting his wise and compassionate teaching in a genial and simple way. Other

²⁷ Cf. any biblical dictionary, i.e. V. FUSCO, *Parabola / parabole*, Nuovo Dizionario di Teologia Biblica. (unknown English translation or similar)

authorities (Dodd, Jeremias) rightly highlighted the eschatological character of Jesus' preaching: not only do His parables convey human wisdom, they also clarify that the Kingdom of God has already been revealed in Jesus and that the time is fulfilled: this is the last phase of history; we are urged to take a decision and to respond to God's appeal.

Jesus did not make use of parables in order to demonstrate His message and truth. It should be underlined that parables always implied a relationship between the speaker and his audience(s). Through them, Jesus' audiences were gradually led to discover new meanings, both within their own selves and in their lives. Through them, Jesus was smoothing away all the obstacles that stood in the way of the gospel, be they narrow-mindedness or prejudices or objections. Through them, Jesus' audiences were led to realize His true identity, as well as to take the decision to follow Him. That is why parables were – and always will be – topical: Jesus addressed them to particular categories of people, in particular times and places, but they will never end to appeal to man, and to rouse him to action.

The pearl of great value

The parable of the merchant looking for the pearl of great value – as well as the parable of the treasure hidden in a field (Mt 13:44) – deals with the incomparable value of the Kingdom of God, in comparison with which all the other goods are worthless: we must sell everything we own in order not to miss that opportunity. The unearthing of the treasure and of the pearl is presented in the gospel as a fortunate circumstance, occurring only once in a lifetime and requiring a prompt decision. “Make the best of the present time,” St Paul says. (Col 4:5) And again: “Now is the real time of favour, now the day of salvation is here.” (2 Co 6:2) The real time of favour is the very time we are living in, as Jesus Christ is present among us. “This text is being fulfilled today even while you are listening,” (Lk 4:21) stated Jesus at the very beginning of His ministry, and concluded it by saying, “I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.” (Mt 28:20)

In order to find out the ultimate meaning of the present time, our faith should always be watchful: “Be very careful about the sort of lives you lead, like intelligent and not like senseless people. Make the best of the present time...” (Ep 5:15-16) Only if our faith never tires of searching, we can find out the hidden treasure and the pearl of great value: “Ask, and it will be given to you... everyone who searches finds.” (Mt 7:7-8) Jesus Himself is looking for us all the time: His joy exactly consists in finding us again after we have strayed. “Suppose a man has a hundred sheep and one of them strays; will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hillside and go in search of the stray? In truth I tell you, if he finds it, it gives him more joy than do the ninety-nine that did not stray at all.” (Mt 18:12-13) God will not cease from going after the missing ones till He finds them. (cf Lk 15:4) This is God's incessant search for us, this is our salvation: “The Son of Man has come to seek out and save what was lost.” (Lk 19:10) Even before man starts looking for God, He has already gone in search of him. Unfortunately, God's search is not always successful. (cf Ezk 22:30) God goes in search of man – an orphan and foundling in the desert – as He guards him as the pupil of His eye, (cf Dt 32:10) He regards him as precious, (cf Is 43:4) and did not spare His own Son in order to win him back. (cf Rm 8:32) The whole of Scripture tells how God goes out of Himself in order to go in search of man and to bring him back on the right path. Should He stop searching for him, man would be lost. This is why Psalm 119 ends with the invocation: “I am wandering like a lost sheep, come and look for Your servant...” (Ps 119:176)

God is the merchant looking for fine pearls. We are the pearl of great value. Jesus gave His life away for us. He did it out of love. The parable prompts us to do the same. Anyone who finds his life will lose it; anyone who loses his life for the sake of Christ will find it. (cf Mt 10:39)

A new task

The image of the merchant looking for fine pearls is well suited to describe the experience of the Seven, who were merchants themselves and whose lives were transformed by the discovery of a very precious pearl. A reference to Mt 13:45-46 can be found in Chapter 3 of the Legend (which is part of the earlier section and which was heavily edited later on): first of all it deals with the symbolical value of number seven, (LO 15) which is connected with the seven stars of the Pleiades as well as with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. The image of the seven Pleiades can be found also at n. 22, and recalls spring, a time of rebirth and renewal²⁸. Our Seven Fathers contributed to the Church's renewal: "It was a time when Christ, the Light of the world, was beginning to bring new light and warmth to the earth through the two contemporary luminaries I mentioned before, blessed Dominic and blessed Francis."

"We could wonder why Our Lady chose to begin with a group of seven. I have no doubt that it was to convince everyone that she wished her Order endowed in a special way with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It was to make clear that down through the ages she would keep it alive, as one generation followed another, each with a number of men rich in these seven gifts of the Spirit. A final motive was to witness to all that she would love this Order of hers, filled with these same gifts, until the end of time, the so-called seventh age." (LO 15)²⁹

As far as our life in the world is concerned, Paragraph 17 is one of the most relevant, one we should take many cues from. When dealing with the place the Seven held in civil society before starting a permanent community, the Legend reminds us that they were merchants, trading and exchanging goods, and also that this kind of activity was beneficial to the well-being of the state and its citizens. "But then they found the pearl of great value. It would be more correct, perhaps, to say that, inspired by the Holy Spirit, they understood from Our Lady how they were to obtain that pearl, our Order, by creating a life in common, one in mind and body, and revealing it eventually to the world. To obtain the pearl really meant to let Our Lady use them to establish the Order, to introduce it eventually to the world and to make it known to all who wanted to give her worthy and faithful service. With this realization, they not only sold all their possessions and gave them to the poor, as the Gospel counsels, but they also dedicated themselves with joy and firmness to the faithful service of God and Our Lady."³⁰

To the Legend's mind, the Order of the Servants of Mary is indeed equal to the pearl of the gospel: it is the accomplishment of the Kingdom of God in contemporary times, an accomplishment brought about by the Fathers' communion. The discovery of this communion, repeatedly mentioned by the Legend as 'corporalis et animae unio' when it has to characterize the Fathers' life, brought about a deep change in the Fathers' activity – 'ars', art, as the Legend has it.

From its introduction onwards, it is often remarked in the Legend that work – art – is one of our primary tasks, recommended to us by the Fathers themselves: "Our purpose here is to extol a group of godly men who, second only to the Lord, deserve to be called our spiritual fathers. It was they who begot us, in the Order, by the holiness of their word and example. It was they who, like fathers, watched over us and saw to it that we had spiritual food for our nourishment; they took in hand our upbringing in knowledge, art and science..."³¹ Jesus' call changed the activity of His first

²⁸ "Now, the Pleiades are made up of seven stars and are part of the constellation Taurus, whose house the sun enters in the month of April, on the fifteenth to be exact. This means they begin to appear on the horizon in the springtime, just when the sun is getting warmer, opening up the earth and making it arable, causing the trees to burgeon and blossom." (LO 22) The passage from Scripture is Jb 38:31, interpreted following St Gregory the Great's commentary (*Moralia sive expositio in Iob*, I.XXIX, Ch. XXXI), that explains that the Pleiades are seven – a number the Book of Job does not mention – and links them to the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.

²⁹ *Sources for the History and Spirituality of the Servants of Mary*, I, p. 207.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

disciples, fishermen on the Lake of Galilee: “Come after me and I will make you fishers of people.” (Mt 4:19) And it changed the activity of our Seven Fathers too. They were merchants. They practised this art for the benefit of the city and its citizens. Then, as a consequence of the new perception brought about by the Holy Spirit, they put themselves at the service of the supreme good. “These men who had trafficked in worldly goods were to discover in their life together, one in mind and body, how to turn their talents to the business and craft of gaining souls for the Lord and Our Lady; while to those already in union with God they taught how to stay that way and how to give faithful service to the Lord and Our Lady. (...) They became dealers in heavenly merchandise, loving the souls of all who needed salvation.”³² Paragraph 17 underlines that the discovery of communion was conducive to this new kind of art. This art was then brought to its highest perfection by blessed Philip, who “would pass it on to the friars after him who wished to serve God and Our Lady faithfully.” Work is much more than a material activity: it has something to do with the spiritual progress of people. Not only was the art of the Fathers employed in the material up-building of the worldly city, it aimed at building up a new humanity: a primary task even nowadays, when careful choices must be made in order to further a new and deeper awareness in our society.

The Fathers ascended Mt Senario, leaving behind their everyday life. But they did not mean to become estranged from the world; rather, they wanted to redirect their lives towards the right priorities. In this respect, the Legend remarks that their single goal – in a way, similar to Abraham’s, who left his country, family and house – was to build up the people: ‘ad populum hedificandum’. (LO 40)³³ This passage echoes Rm 15:2, “Each of us must consider his neighbour’s good, so that we support one another.” The up-building of the community, where different people and different kinds of growth may coexist, is possible only if we do not please ourselves but support one another, bearing with the susceptibilities of the weaker ones.

In fact, the Legend had previously dealt with the up-building of the community, when it spoke about the Seven’s works of charity towards neighbour: “They actively searched out the needs of others; being men of compassion, they provided whatever they could for the spiritually or physically underprivileged. A neighbour was like a brother or sister to them...” (LO 37; for the expression *build up* cf. also n. 38).

The style of our work

It is believed that, when dealing with the pearl and with the Fathers’ change from trafficking in worldly goods to spiritual activity, the Legend might have been influenced by Franciscan sources³⁴.

Thomas of Celano, in his ‘Vita prima’, writes: “Francis was trying to conform his will to God’s. He used to withdraw from the tumult of the world and of dealings, trying to keep Jesus Christ in his heart. As a wary merchant, he concealed the pearl he had found from the sceptic’s eyes, and secretly did his best to buy it by selling everything else.”³⁵ St Bonaventure is more explicit: “After a short education, he was started in trade. Helped and protected by Heaven, [...] in spite of living amidst covetous merchants and being busy trading, he never reposed his hopes in money and riches.”³⁶ And again: “Withdrawing from the tumult of dealings and of customers, he

³² *Ibid.*, p. 209-210.

³³ It is interesting to realise that young Francis of Siena, just to this same conviction got when is able to understand that the commandment of “*avoiding men*”, expression he had listened to during a preach of Ambriogius Sansedoni, Domenican Friar of Siena, and that cause in him the desire of a lonely life, didn’t mean to break down with any type of relationship with other people, but to leave apart all vices of this world (*Legend of Blessed Francis of Siena*, 5 and 7, in *Sources for the History and Spirituality of the Servants of Mary*, I, p. 339-341).

³⁴ Cf. F.A. DAL PINO, *I frati Servi di S. Maria dalle origini all’approvazione (1233 ca.-1304)* [*The friars Servants of Mary from the origins to the approval – 1233 approx. To 1304-*], I, p. 416-418.

³⁵ *Franciscan Sources*, editio minor, editrici francescane, Asis 1986, p. 206.

³⁶ *Legenda Maior*, I,1, in *ibid.*, p. 519.

devoutly begged the Divine Mercy that his love for the heavenly home could make him regard every earthly thing with contempt. He believed he had found the hidden treasure and, being a wise merchant, was resolved to buy the pearl of great value by selling everything he owned. He was still undecided on how to accomplish his resolution: he had just realized that the world had to be treated with contempt and also that, if he were to become one of Christ's soldiers, he had to win a victory over himself first."³⁷

The influence of these texts on the Legend is undoubted. Still, it should be acknowledged that the Legend introduced many new elements to the pattern: our Fathers' change of activity was much more than 'personal conversion', 'contempt for the world', 'victory over oneself'. The aim of their activity was the well-being of the city (*civitatis utilitas*), both in its material as well as spiritual sense. And the witness of their communion was their main contribution to the spiritual growth of the city. This is indeed the Servants of Mary's true vocation and mission: to follow in their Fathers' footsteps, by helping everybody to live in communion and to discover that this is the pearl of great value.

Work as our mission

Consecrated life in the world draws its inspiration from God's own love. "For this is how God loved the world: He gave His only Son, ... so that through Him the world might be saved." (Jn 3:16-17) This passage from the Gospel is the epigraph of Chapter 7, one of the central chapters in our Rule of Life and connected with the theme of the 'ars' of the Fathers for the up-building of society.

Our work should be first of all a sign of the novelty entrusted to those who have been made new people in Christ by baptism. (art. 46) It should therefore convey Christ's love, that freed us from our "defence mechanisms and prejudices". It should be done at the side of the poorest of the poor "in their laborious march toward freedom". (art. 52) It should be done quietly and peacefully, without anxiety, as it is not by trusting in ourselves and in our own skills that we may save the world, but by our faith, love and the way we conduct each and every of our activities. (art. 47)

Any kind of work – even the most humble service – deserves great respect; its dignity will never derive from the world's attitude towards it, but from the fact that it can be lived as we would a liturgy, i.e. as service to our brothers and sisters, as worship and praise to God, who is the ultimate source of any of our gifts and activities. (art. 48)

Similarly to our Fathers', our service to the world should be "an expression of the universal fraternity" and "of that communion brought about by the reconciliation won for us by Christ." (art. 54) Fraternity – the pearl of great value embellishing each and every of our activities – should make of our work a means to communion and solidarity. None of us should work for the benefit of himself / herself only. None of us should have as his / her main concerns efficiency, productivity, earnings and career prospects. Work should be our mission and aim at making of the world an increasingly friendlier place. This should be our own contribution to the growth of our society, a society where the value of the human person is not always recognised.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1,4, p. 522.

6. COMMUNION AND SHARING

Lectio divina: «Blessed are those who mourn....» (Mt 5:5)

Legend: XII, 47, Love's labour

Rule of Life RM: 17

Let us start from the Biblical quotation, "Blessed are those who mourn." Who is Jesus referring to? And what are they mourning for? In order to answer these questions, we will see what the Greek term 'penthein' means, according to the Old as well as New Testament.

Reasons for mourning

In the Old Testament, this verb and its corresponding noun (penthos) refer to mourning over the death of a relation. Abraham mourned and bewailed Sarah. (cf Gn 23:2) After recognising Joseph's blood-stained tunic, Jacob tore his clothes, put sackcloth round his waist, mourned his son for many days and nobody managed to comfort him. (cf Gn 37:33-35) David mourned for Absalom and for his entire army victory was turned into mourning, the troops having learnt that the king was grieving for his degenerate son. (cf 2 S 19:1-5) See also Gn 27:41; 35:8; 50:3-4, 10-11; 2 S 14:2; 1 Ch 7:22; 2 Ch 35:24.

Bitter tears can be shed over one's beloved, over somebody who betrayed one's trust and love. "Samuel mourned over Saul, but the Lord regretted having made Saul king of Israel." (1 S 15:35) "Absalom had gone to Talmai, king of Geshur... The king mourned for his son every day." (2 S 13:37)

A city ravaged by war as a consequence of sin and injustice, causes discomfort. On hearing that those who survived from the captivity were in a very bad and demoralised condition, and also that the walls of Jerusalem were in ruins and its gates had been burnt down, Nehemiah sat down and wept and for some days mourned, fasting and praying before the God of Heaven." (Ne 1:3-4)

Nature too is mourning and wailing because of man's sin. The prophet Joel laments over the ruins of the country: "Mourn, as a virgin-bride in sackcloth for the bridegroom of her youth! Cereal offering and libation are lost to the Lord's Temple. The priests, the ministers of the Lord, are in mourning. The fields are ruined, the land is in mourning, for the grain has been ruined, the new wine has failed, of olive oil only a trickle. Stand dismayed, you farmers, wail, you vinedressers, for the wheat, for the barley! The harvest of the fields has been lost! The vine has withered, the fig tree wilts away; pomegranate, palm tree, apple tree, every tree in the countryside is dry, and for human beings joy has run dry too." (Jl 1:8-12) When communion between men is lacking, that land becomes barren and cannot produce God's gifts any longer. See also Am 1:2; 8:8; 9:5; Ba 4:9.

One can mourn over wisdom too: "I have stretched out my hands to heaven and bewailed how little I knew of her." (Si 51:19; see also 51:21) "When I was still a youth – Ben Sira writes – in my prayers I asked outright for wisdom. Outside the sanctuary I would pray for her, and to the last I shall continue to seek her." (Si 51:13-14) The path that leads one to possess her is long and wearisome. Everyday we experience our own weaknesses, we might be led astray, and selfishness and ignorance envelope us in their darkness.

Listening to the words of the divine Law may move one to tears too. A very famous passage from Nehemiah 8 describes Ezra's solemn reading of the Book of the Law of Moses, in front of all the people gathered as one man in the square of the Water Gate, in the seventh month of the year 444 b.C. . Beside Ezra stood thirteen prominent lay men as well as thirteen Levites. "Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God, translating and giving the sense; so the reading was understood. Then His Excellency Nehemiah and the priest-scribe Ezra and the Levites who were instructing the people said to all the people, 'Today is sacred to the Lord your God. Do not be mournful, do not weep.' For the people were all in tears as they listened to the words of the Law." (Ne 8:8-9)

People were weeping as they were realising how their lifestyle was distant from God's Word. Still, they were not desperate: tears were purifying their hearts of sin, and repentance was opening them up "to the Lord's joy." "You may go; eat what is rich, drink what is sweet, and send a helping to the man who has nothing prepared. For today is sacred to our Lord. Do not be sad; the joy of the Lord is your stronghold." (Ne 8:10) The Lord's joy may be felt even during times of tribulation, provided that we share what we have with our neighbour and that we provide for those in need.

"Do not turn your back on those who weep, but share the grief of the grief-stricken." (Si 7:34) "Be sad with those in sorrow." (Rm 12:15) If we follow these precepts, we will bring consolation to all the people in need as well as bear witness to brotherly / sisterly communion. On the other hand, the prophet Jeremiah was forbidden to mourn with other people (cf Jr 16:5) as God wanted him to become the symbol of a merciless and arbitrary society.

They shall be comforted

"Blessed are those who mourn..." The reasons why they are mourning may be varied. The list may include all those mentioned above: grief for the loss of one's beloved; bitterness for friendship betrayed; the awareness of one's sins; humble repentance; the attempt to establish deeper relations of communion.

Those who weep are blessed not because they are grieving, but because they are experiencing that God is very close to them: He is comforting them. Sorrow becomes then the very opportunity to live one's life to the full, beyond one's immediate experience, as well as an incentive for one's faith and love to grow, and an opportunity to carry each other's burdens.

A nerve-racking question recurs in Lamentations: who will comfort us? Jerusalem, now a widow as well as a slave, "is weeping all night long, tears running down her cheeks. Not one of all her lovers remains to comfort her. Her friends have all betrayed her... She never thought to end like this, and hence her astonishing fall with no one to comfort her... And that is why I weep; my eyes stream with water, since a comforter who could revive me is far away... Zion stretches out her hands, with no one to comfort her... Outside, the sword bereaves; inside it is like death. Listen, for I am groaning, with no one to comfort me." (Lm 1:2,9,16,17,20-21) But Scripture answers that question and removes all doubts: God is our Consoler. (cf Is 51:12) He is the source of all joy, even in times of tribulation: "Shout for joy, you heavens, earth, exult! Mountains, break into joyful cries! For the Lord has consoled His people, is taking pity on His afflicted ones. Zion was saying, 'The Lord has abandoned me, the Lord has forgotten me.' Can a woman forget her baby at the breast, feel no pity for the child she has borne? Even if these were to forget, I shall not forget you." (Is 49:13-15)

God is the consoler of the poor; the merciful God is always on the suffering humanity's side. "For thus says the High and Exalted One, who lives eternally and whose name is holy, 'I live in the holy heights but I am with the contrite and humble, to revive the spirit of the humble, to revive the heart of the contrite. For I do not want to be forever accusing nor always to be angry, or the spirit would fail under my onslaught, the souls that I myself have made. Angered by his wicked cupidity I

hid and struck him in anger, but he rebelliously went the way of his choice. I saw how he behaved, but I shall heal him, I shall lead him, fill him with consolation..." (Is 57:15-18)

It is our duty to console our neighbour on God's behalf. " 'Console my people, console them,' says your God. 'Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and cry to her that her period of service is ended...' " (Is 40:1-2; see also 2 Co 1:4) We should try to console our neighbour by proclaiming the good news of Easter, as Mary of Magdala did to the disciples who were mourning and in tears, (Mk 16:10; cf Mt 9:15) and as the Christian community did, by living in communion: "The apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power, and they were all accorded great respect.³⁸ None of their members was ever in want, as all those who owned land or housed would sell them, and bring the money from the sale of them, to present it to the apostles; it was then distributed to any who might be in need." (Ac 4:33-34)

Revelation, the last book of the Bible, shows us a vision of the new community, the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride dressed for her husband, shedding her light on the whole earth. "Here God lives among human beings. He will make His home among them; they will be His people, and He will be their God, God-with-them. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, no more mourning or sadness or pain. The world of the past has gone." (Rv 21:3-4)

True knowledge

The Legend of the Origin couples the blessedness of those who mourn with the gift of knowledge. Chapter 12, which closes the archaic section of the Legend, makes a spiritual portrait of the seven hermits in the light of Isaiah 11 and Matthew 5. This chapter is influenced by a typical St Augustine's exegesis: he used it for the first time in his work 'The sermon on the Mount', written in 394; and later on in his preaching as well as in others of his theological works. By this unusual matching of Mt 5 and Is 11, St Augustine meant to outline the path to Christian perfection, starting with the fear of God and humbleness, and culminating in wisdom and peace.

"The gift of knowledge enlightened our Fathers and led them to mourn in sorrow for the things they had misused." (LO, 47)³⁹ In his work 'The sermon on the Mount', St Augustine writes: "Knowledge belongs to those who mourn, as they have found out in the Scriptures which sins took them captive. Prior to that they were ignorant and used to long for those sins which they regarded as good and useful actions. 'Blessed are those who mourn.'"⁴⁰

In his work 'On the Trinity', written between 399 and 419, St Augustine dealt with the relationship between knowledge and wisdom in the light of Job 28:28,⁴¹ "Wisdom? – that is fear of the Lord; Intelligence? – avoidance of evil." Wisdom has to do with contemplation, knowledge with action. "To refrain from evil is what Job calls knowledge. We are subject to evil as we live in time, but we must refrain from evil in order to reach eternity. Whatever we do in all prudence, strength, temperance and justice is guided by that knowledge that directs our actions to refrain from evil and to long for good, a knowledge that includes also what we gather from history, i.e. from those events that may shed light on our lives."⁴²

Knowledge derives also from understanding of history: this is not easy, as there is always the risk of making mistakes and of sinning. We are so absorbed by temporal realities that we might end up believing that it is exactly in them that the meaning of life can be found, or that we are able

³⁸ In the Italian edition CEI, it is read "tutti essi godevano di grande simpatia" (everybody in the community was well-appreciated). More than the approval or love from people – very subjective values – here it is understood the grace of God, that means God's love that was visible through fraternal life among them.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

⁴⁰ *De sermone Domini in monte*, I, 4, 11, in *Works of Saint Augustine*, X/2, Città Nuova, Rome 1997, p. 91.

⁴¹ «This is wisdom, to fear God, to avoid evil, this is intelligence».

⁴² *De Trinitate* 12, 14, 22, in *Works of Saint Augustine*, IV, Città Nuova, Rome 1973, p. 492.

to control life's events, selling with pride and vainglory. In fact, true knowledge has nothing to do with vainglory (cf 1 Co 8:2) and is always accompanied by tears, purifying one's heart and soul. An ever recurring temptation man is prone to is to make use of things as if they belonged exclusively to him. Adam and Eve⁴³ made this mistake and were expelled from the Garden of Eden. The Scripture calls this sin 'avarice', or 'love of money': the material things that should lead man to God become an end in themselves. The love of money is the root of all evils. (cf 1 Tm 6:10)

The Fathers shed tears over their previous secular life and the things they misused; this was the sign that they had acquired true knowledge, a kind of knowledge that "instead of making man vainglorious, makes him lament over himself"⁴⁴. The Fathers lamented over the time they spent living on their own, prior to their discovery of life in communion, now giving meaning to their lives. Their legacy is the knowledge of temporal realities, which should not be enjoyed as private possessions, but always shared with others. This knowledge was drawn from the Gospel as well as from St Augustine's Rule, which managed to grasp the core of the Gospel. Consequently, the core of the Rule is a direction that states: 'Nobody should do anything on his own; everything will be done in common.' (5,2)

The theme of mourning can be found – with some differences – also in numbers 39 and 46 of the LO: according to Fr David Montagna these two paragraphs should be regarded as some of the most remarkable examples of 13th century literature⁴⁵. We have already dealt with them in the second unit of this essay ('Obedience in faith'). They deal with the Fathers' ardent waiting for the Bridegroom, whom they received 'with tear-filled eyes' (in fact, in the original, 'with the light of tears'). Of course these tears are different from the ones mentioned in n. 47 ('to mourn in sorrow'), flowing as they recalled to their minds their sins against love: tears of repentance, purifying their bitter and sad memories. The 'light of tears' of n° 39 implies sorrow as the Beloved is still far away, but also deep heart-felt joy. There is a certainty deriving from faith: the Beloved is near, He is knocking at the door and will finally reward the persevering waiting of His lovers.

Available to everybody

Let us consider now Chapter 3 of our Rule of Life, dealing with poverty (the next unit will deal with it too), so that we might find in it some of the above-mentioned features.

To us, Poverty is equal to communion. Even if we owned very few things, these would not give the measure of our poverty, which in fact is given by our promptness to share whatever we own. It is for this very reason that art. 17 is the core of Chapter 3: "Mindful that the gifts you have received must be shared, make yourself available to the other members of the Institute and to others. Such interior poverty will enable you to be attentive and skilled in welcoming, listening to and dialoguing with them."

'Make yourself available...': this is not only a matter of sharing things, but also succeeding in reaching a deeper unity with other people, after giving ourselves wholly to God and neighbour.

We must be self-less in order to truly share, as well as to be grateful, happy and simple, and to give praise to God always, as art. 16 highlights.

We must be grateful for all the gifts God gives us. We receive everything from Him. He called and keeps on calling us, in spite of our mistakes, falls and betrayals.

Happiness comes as a consequence of perfect communion: I can truly feel happy about the gifts others have received, as these belong to me too. Happiness frees us from envy, jealousy, resentment and claims.

⁴³ Cf. *De Trinitate* 12, 9, 14, *ibid.*, p. 483.

⁴⁴ Augustine, *De doctrina cristiana* 2,7, 10, in *Works of Saint Augustine*, VIII, Città Nuova, Rome 1992, p. 69-71.

⁴⁵ *Echi di esperienza monastica a Monte Senario nel Duecento [Echoes of monastical life in Monte Senario during 13th century]*, p. 249.

It is a bit more difficult to understand what the Rule means when prompts us to be ready 'to accept life as it is with simplicity'. It is my belief that this sentence should be regarded as an invitation to make the best of all circumstances, to bravely face difficulties, not to withdraw into ourselves, not to be ashamed to ask for help whenever we might need it, or to generously give help whenever and wherever it might be needed. Here we might recall paragraph 46 of the Legend, where it specifies that people especially fell for the Fathers' simplicity. "They saw that at least these seven men were not deceivers masking their real feelings behind stratagems, obscuring their meaning in ambiguous words, passing off the false as true or making the true seem false. They observed rather that they were truly simple persons without pretensions, who said what they meant, loved the truth and detested falsehood. They saw too that they were generous in sharing their possessions, more ready to endure evil than to commit it, not looking to take vengeance for past injuries but thinking it gain to suffer insult (cf Ac 5:41) for the sake of the truth." This is the very simplicity of the poor, of those who own nothing and want to keep nothing for themselves, without sharing it with others.

Our praise to the Lord should come straight from the same feeling of poverty that made Mary sing the Magnificat. In spite of our poverty, God can do great things for us. Our poverty will then become the sacrament of God's grace.

We should also bear in mind that art. 20 states that, as far as temporal goods are concerned, our vow of poverty is indeed binding. We should be accountable for their administration, or we would not be authentically poor and live in true communion as brothers and sisters.

7. POVERTY

Lectio divina: «Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart.» (Mt 11:29)

Legend IV, 23: The poor's communion

Rule of Life RM: 52

The gospel quotation for our Lectio can be found at paragraph 23 (Chapter 4) of the Legend of the Origin, where the author argues for the seven Fathers' holiness, even though they performed no miracles while they were still alive or even after death.⁴⁶

Paragraph 22 highlights how perfect and pious they were even before they came together to begin the Order. It was exactly because of their holiness that Our Lady deigned to use them to found her own Order, the Order of her Servants. The author compares them again to the seven Pleiades, as he did in paragraph 15⁴⁷: the Pleiades are part of the constellation Taurus, whose house the sun enters on April 15, and begin to appear on the horizon in the springtime. The seven Fathers appeared on the world's horizon in the spiritual springtime brought about by St Francis and St Dominic. And by the time St Philip was born in 1233⁴⁸, the Seven had already reached such a level of perfection that they were capable of drawing others to a life of perfection by diffusing rays of God's word and examples of humility. The surest indication of their spiritual maturity according to the gospel is the fact that Our Lady decided to begin the Order with them.

A relevant omission

Why then, in spite of their great perfection, no miracles were attributed to them and recorded? The Legend gives three reasons for that.

First of all, the events recorded in the Legend occurred a long time before they were recorded, and by that time all the older members of the Order had died, with the exception of Fra Alexis:⁴⁹ even though miracles did indeed occur, there was nobody to recount them.

⁴⁶ In fact, at least on what regards St. Alexis, the *Legend* talks about the vision of Christ and angels, vision he should have had during the last day of his life, according to witnesses gathered «by fr. Lapo from Florence, nephew of fr. Sostenes and present in the right moment of his death» (n. 28).

⁴⁷ A reference to this speech can be found also in n° 49: "... our first fathers came down from the mountain of worldly pride, down to humility, which is the base of all virtue."

⁴⁸ The year 1233, as the year of birth of St Philip together as the birth of Order of the Servants of Mary, has been already mentioned on paragraph 11. On Paragraph 10 it is said that the Order was born when Domenic – 1226- and Francis -1221 – were already dead, and while their brothers were beginning to catch away heresy. Instead, paragraph 22 confirms that the fathers' *oriri mundo corporaliter inceperunt*, meaning they were born when Dominic and Francis were still alive, that means before 1221, whilst their own Orders were already developing, around 1215. This suggests that, if our Fathers were born between 1215 and 1221, how could they were able to found the Order in 1233? Moreover, how could this happen if some of them were already married or widowed (cf. paragraph 16). Almost for sure, 1233 is the year of birth of St Philip and before 1244, year when St Peter of Verona moved to Florence.

⁴⁹ According to the Legend, Fra Alexis died at the age of 110 (cf n. 28) and this by the will of Virgin Mary. In fact, "Our Lady was pleased to preserve this Fra Alexis from death until our own day, so that on his testimony we could

Second, a more important reason, derived from the Gospel itself, can be found in one of St Augustine's speeches: "Shoulder my yoke and learn from me; learn not to create heaven and earth and all that is seen and unseen, not to perform miracles and to raise the dead, but that I am gentle and humble in heart. Would you like to raise yourself higher? Start by debasing yourself. Before building the lofty tower of sanctity, lay the foundations of humility. The bigger and loftier the planned building is, the deeper its foundations must be. Only after laying solid foundations a building can reach the sky and the finishing touches can be given to it."⁵⁰

Taking the lead from St Augustine's argument, the author of the *Legend* states that "the working of miracles is not the only sure sign of perfection and perfect piety. If that were the case, no one could be called perfect and truly pious unless God at one time or another worked miracles through him; and everyone knows that that is not true. The gift that all perfect and pious persons are given is that of loving God above all else, of preserving charity towards all and remaining sincerely humble. Our Lord never said, 'Learn from me to raise the dead or to give sight to the blind, but rather... [learn from me] for I am gentle and humble in heart' (Mt 11:29); and again, 'I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you... you must love one another just as I have loved you.' (Jn 13:15,34)⁵¹

The way to salvation

Matthew 11 opens with the Baptist's question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect someone else?" (Mt 11:3) Jesus' answer clearly gives a profile of a Messiah whose works exceed every expectation: "The blind see again, and the lame walk, those suffering from virulent skin-diseases are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life and the good news is proclaimed to the poor, and blessed is anyone who does not find me a cause of falling." (Mt 11:5-6)

Jesus is the poor and humble Messiah, who fulfils Zechariah's prophecy (Zc 9:9) quoted in Mt 21:5, "Say to the daughter of Zion: Look, your king is approaching, humble and riding on a donkey." He is the Servant who does not brawl or cry out, who does not break the crushed reed, or snuff the faltering wick. (cf Is 42:1-4; Mt 12:18-23) He cures the sick, not by amazing prodigies, but by bearing our sicknesses away and carrying our diseases. (cf Mt 8:17) Jesus is "the least in the Kingdom of Heaven". (Mt 11:11) He does not bring His salvation by His strength, but by being friends with tax collectors and sinners, and by revealing the mystery of God's wisdom (Mt 11:19), the wisdom of the Beatitudes that is being made flesh in Jesus Himself.

Jesus saves us by His poverty. This is a very simple and basic truth, the core of the spirituality of *the Order*. The *Constitutiones Antiquae*,⁵² the first written Servite legislation, contains only one explicit biblical quotation (Mt 11:29) where it deals with the novices, who must be taught by the master "to have humility of heart and of body, according to the saying: Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart."⁵³ The formation of a Servant of Mary is based on Jesus, "gentle and humble in heart". And the title of 'servant' is a constant reminder of our radical poverty which, once we have recognized and accepted it, must become the basis of communion. In fact, a servant never does anything in his / her personal capacity; a servant should never make himself / herself

know how our Order began and so pass down from one generation to the next until the Day of Judgement this memory of our beginning." (n. 26: *Sources for the History and Spirituality of the Servants of Mary*, I, p. 222). Nevertheless, from St. Alexis witness only remains what is part of the memory of the author of the *Legend*, after the pages, on which the records of the remembrances of this holy father were lost. (*Ibid.*, I, p. 223).

⁵⁰ *Speech* 69, 2, in *Works of St. Augustine*, XXX/1, Città Nuova, Rome 1982, p. 383. A reference to this speech can be found also in the conclusion of the old section of the *Legend* paragraph 49, which finishes with the coming down to the city of the Seven Fathers: "... our first fathers came down from the mountain of worldly pride, down to humility, which is the base of all virtue."

⁵¹ *Sources for the History and Spirituality of the Servants of Mary*, I, p. 218-219.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 109-144.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

conspicuous, or stand out, or long for success. In a way, similarly to Jesus, a servant should not indulge his own feelings, but consider his neighbour's good. (cf Rm 15:2-3) The fact that no miracles were attributed to the Fathers is then a sign of their poverty: they learnt from Jesus that it was only by living in poverty and welcoming and helping the poor that their society could be renewed and become more fraternal.

The second biblical quotation we find in the Legend is Jn 13:15, 34: "I have given you an example, so that you may copy what I have done to you... You must love one another just as I have loved you." Here the "gentle and humble in heart" Jesus washes His disciples' feet. In His last supper with them, He leaves His disciples a spiritual testament, based on the commandment to love and the promise of the Spirit, that is the promise that He will always be with them by His Holy Spirit. Jesus is also present among us by His disciples' communion of love. The washing of feet is an example of how this communion must be brought about. It is not just an ethical commitment, but also a 'sacrament', given that it shows us the only way we may share in Jesus' salvation, as evidenced by Jesus' reply to Peter, who was shrinking from his Master's gesture: "If I do not wash you, you can have no share with me." (Jn 13:8) This is an invitation to welcome the gift Jesus is giving us. The gift is Jesus Himself: He loved us to the end. (cf Jn 13:1) We may get Jesus' salvation by copying His washing of feet. Communion is possible only if we meet others in poverty and service.

The miracle of love

Some more quotations from St Matthew's gospel have been used in paragraph 23 as a proof that the working of miracles is not a sure sign of perfection. "It appears that many people are going to try to use miracles as a proof of perfection and piety at the Last Judgement and will say, 'Lord, have we not cast out devils in Your name? Have we not raised the dead?' (Mt 7:22) and this sort of things. Yet, they will hear from Christ, in proof that the working of miracles is a false criterion of perfection and piety, 'I tell you, I do not know you.' (Mt 25:12) 'Out of my sight, you evildoers.' (Mt 7:23) Obviously they could not receive such a frightening reply if the working of miracles were any kind of proof of perfection and piety."⁵⁴

Jesus drives away all 'evil-doers'. The term 'evil' can be found only in Matthew's gospel (7:23; 13:41; 23:28; 24:12). The Greek term is 'anomia', that is 'lawlessness' and refers to that Law Jesus has not come to abolish, rather to fulfil, (Mt 5:17) and which Jesus summarized in the commandment to love God and neighbour. (Mt 22:40) Mt 24:12 juxtaposes lawlessness and love: in the last times, "with the increase of lawlessness, love in most people will grow cold." Lawlessness means transgression of absence of the Law. And the law's core is the commandment to love. Without love, even the working of miracles would be pointless. (cf 1 Co 13:1-3) Jesus sent His disciples out as missionaries, instructing them as follows: "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those suffering from virulent skin-diseases, drive out devils." (Mt 10:8) These miracles were meant to strengthen their preaching of the coming of the kingdom of God, in the footsteps of Jesus who used to teach as well as to heal. "He went round the whole of Galilee teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing all kinds of disease and illness among the people." (Mt 4:23; cf 9:35) Jesus' word was a powerful remedy as He was the Servant who "bore our sicknesses away and carried our diseases." (Mt 8:17) We, in our turn, can cure too, provided that our love carries our neighbour's sufferings and sorrows.

Poverty and discernment

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

Paragraph 24 of the Legend of the Origin adds a third reason for the apparent lack of miracles during the Fathers' life and also after their death. According to the author, "Our Lady did not want any of those holy and perfect men who openly work miracles to be the founder of her Order. She wanted it to be clear that she alone is the foundress of the Order specially dedicated to her name." It would be wrong to accredit the foundation to the group of the seven first friars or to any single one of them, as Fra Alexis used to say: "Neither I nor my companions ever intended to found a new religious order or for that matter to attract a lot of others to us when we came together originally. We were under the impression that our divinely inspired purpose in going to live together was simply to flee the world and fulfil the Lord's will better and more easily."⁵⁵

Later on, while living a common life on Mt Senario, the Seven would understand more fully what God was asking them to do. When so many people came to them from all sides asking to join them, "now for the first time the thought occurred to them that Our Lady in her own quiet way had not brought them together only to acquire and pursue their own personal holiness. Rather, it had been God's plan in inspiring them to settle on this beautiful mountain so suitable to their life of penance that they should accept into their ranks others who wanted to seek holiness too. This would mean that a new Order, begun by Our Lady through their instrumentality, would begin to spread." (LO 48)⁵⁶ They had to abandon – not an easy thing for them –, the *pinguedo contemplationis*,⁵⁷ the richness of a life of contemplation to take up the care of others and start a new community: even though they had not planned that, it was indeed God's will. Poverty had made them come together and form a community where Jesus, their gentle and humble in heart Master, was teaching them to welcome and serve one another. That same poverty now was helping them recognize God's will in the events of their life and to do it, as only the poor who own nothing at all can do.

The march towards freedom

Now let us focus on art. 52 of our Rule of Life, an article we have already dealt with.⁵⁸ It demands that we should give our assistance to other people with simplicity and availability, and reminds us that we should be prompted by Christ's love, as well as be free of defence mechanisms and prejudice. Christ's love – the love Christ gives to us and to the whole world – should be a constant inspiration to us. According to art. 28, we should love the world as Christ Himself loves it. And in the prayer that has been chosen as our Rule's Epilogue (Ep 3:14-21) we ask the Father that He may grant us to know "the love of Christ, which is beyond knowledge."

It is indeed Christ's love that frees us and prompts us to prefer the poorest of the poor and "to be at their side in the laborious march towards freedom." Art. 58 adds: "Be aware that you will grow in evangelical freedom in so far as you strive to put off yourself and put on Christ. With such freedom, you will search for solutions to current problems in a spirit of obedience and in the full performance of your duties." These articles are perfectly in line with the Legend's teachings on poverty: we should be poor, so that we may meet the poor and be at their side in all gentleness and humbleness in heart, forgiving, supporting and encouraging them; we should free ourselves from

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

⁵⁷ In the Latin edition of *Legenda de Origine Ordinis dei Servi di Maria*, it is taken as reference the book of Judges 9: 8-9. In this passage all trees have the need of a king and begin their way for finding the best one. They offer the kingdom first than anybody else the Olive, who refuses it. In this book is described the terrible situation of Israel for the lack of authentic leaders or for the refusal from the part of whom has been called to cover the task or a certain responsibility, but was not able to deny his own comfortable position. The Fathers instead, left their richness of their contemplation and set themselves to service, sharing a type of life that was not according to their desires, but certainly to those related to the Will of God.

⁵⁸ Cf. unit 3.

any attachment that may prevent us from realizing what God's will is, and from doing it, as it is the one and only treasure we have.

It may be useful to read also art. 60 ("This communion will assist you in accepting ordinary limitations peacefully and in overcoming inevitable difficulties with courage and support."), art. 15 ("With confidence abandon yourself to the Father's providence and be entirely free in the use of material goods. In this way, you will be able to welcome Christ into your heart and bring Him to others."), and art. 21 ("By making yours the will of the Father, you will grow in union with Him and make progress towards complete freedom.").

We should never cease from divesting ourselves of our own self, however laborious it may be, as God, who is aware of our wretchedness, is incessantly calling us to do that, day after day. He expects our "responsible and voluntary response of love." (art. 55) We must respond to His invitation, while being aware of our own wretchedness and merciful to other people's wretchedness too.

8. FRIENDSHIP

Lectio Divina: «I was leading them with human ties, with leading-strings of love» (Hos 11:4)

Legend VI, 39: The seal of perfection

Rule of Life RM: 53

This last unit will draw its inspiration from Hosea 4:11: the Legend quotes two words from that in order to qualify the Seven's experience of friendship. Their whole spiritual and religious path originated exactly from friendship. Friendship was one of their constant principles of conduct.

God's womb

In order to fully understand Hosea's idea of God's love, we should read Chapter 11 of his book. In order to describe God's love, Chapter 2 uses the allegory of conjugal love thwarted: He is similar to a passionate husband whose wife has been unfaithful, yet he sticks to his decision to give his whole self as a gift to her. Chapter 11 deals with God's love too, but uses the imagery of a mother and her child. In fact, no human description can fully define God's reality or express all its richness.

Hos 11:1-7 describes how God cares for His son Israel⁵⁹; in fact, Hosea never uses the term 'father' when speaking about God, and God's care seems to be more maternal than paternal: He teaches Israel to walk He takes him by the arm, He feeds him.

Hos 11:4 is a bit obscure. According to the Italian Bishops' Conference's translation of the Bible, God "was like someone lifting and infant to his cheek". This is a conjectural translation, given that the Hebrew text reads 'yoke' instead of 'cheek' [*in fact, instead of 'infant', as the original Jerusalem Bible states in the relevant note, Translator*]. Yoke seems to be an out of context term: "...with them, I was like someone lifting their yoke from their neck". Nevertheless, we prefer to stick to it, as it introduces a new and very important idea into the discussion: true love means helping other people's liberty to grow. God lifts the yoke from His children's neck, His love makes them free. Not only does He teach them to walk and feed them, He also gives them life's most precious blessing: liberty. The imagery of the yoke recalls the first part of the line, where the term that Hosea uses is 'ties', but those are 'human ties'⁶⁰ and 'leading-strings of love', not 'reins'. (cf. Is 5:18) True humanity derives from love. In a way, when He lovingly cares for Israel, God behaves as human beings do. God's 'humanity' is exactly His maternal love for Israel.

⁵⁹ The quotation in the Bible of Jerusalem says: «*This is a chapter completely related to 1-3. After the analogy of love betrayed as a couple, that love of a father is not refused*». Hosea, nevertheless, never applied to God the name "father", and what described in chapter 11, is clearly a behavior of a mother. Other scholar propose other possibilities of translation that will give emphasis in the characteristics presented in this chapter: "to teach how to walk" could be represented with the expression "nourish" and "chicks" that could indicate the "chest".

⁶⁰ While *Volgata* version translates literally *in funiculis Adam*, the Greek version says "among human ruins", using the double sense of the Hebrew term that means both "link" and "anguish", "labour", and making a further analysis: in whichever painful situation, God is not far away his people and continues loving it with a particular care.

Now let us focus on the verb ‘to lead’. It is used in the Song of Songs 1:4, where the Beloved says: “Draw me in your footsteps...”; “Draw me,” says the Beloved, longing for her Lover’s love. And again in Chapter 2 of Hosea, where it deals with conjugal love. And Jesus, talking about the Father and about Himself, says: “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me...” (Jn 6:44); “And when I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all people to myself.” (Jn 12:32)

Disregarding God’s loving care, Israel goes away from Him and offers sacrifices to Baal, burns incense to idols. Then God’s maternal heart is troubled: “My heart within me is overwhelmed, fever grips my inmost being [*womb*]. I will not give rein to my fierce anger.” (11:8) ‘Fever grips...’ means ‘compassion’. ‘Anger’ is just the opposite of ‘understanding’ and ‘forgiveness’, both of which are maternal attitudes.

This divine drama is well portrayed in Joseph’s story: when meeting his brothers, love will be stronger than resentment and anger. Looking about, Joseph saw his younger brother Benjamin. “Joseph hurried out; so strong was the affection he felt⁶¹ for his brother that he wanted to cry. He went into his room and there he wept.” (Gn 43:30) [*The Italian translation has: “...his womb (sic!) was moved to tears...”; not so in the Jerusalem Bible, quoted above.*]. We find this divine drama also in the Parable of the Prodigal Son: “While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him.” (Lk 15:20) Jesus Himself took pity on large crowds, as they were like sheep without a shepherd, (cf. Mk 6:34) poor and needy. Like a mother troubling about to feed her children, He provided them with both the material and the spiritual food, i.e. His Word.

God decides not to give rein to His anger, and to give expression to His maternal love instead. “I will not give rein to my fierce anger, I will not destroy Ephraim, for I am God, not man, the Holy One in your midst and I shall not come to you in anger.” (Hs 11:9) Here ‘man’ (Hebrew, ‘ish) should not be understood as a general term – as we have seen before, Hosea uses the term ‘adam’ to express the idea of ‘humankind’ – rather as referring to a male human being (cf. Gn 2:23) exercising his authority over his family, or as a politician or a judge, and taking part in wars. God, therefore, is definitely not an ‘ish, He is not someone whose predominant features are arrogance, anger and violence and punishment, rather the Holy One whose actions are never destructive but protective, nourishing and encouraging.

Of course, even though the female, compassionate side is prevalent, we do not mean to argue (in line with Romanticism) that women are symbols of tenderness and pity. The prophet Hosea is trying to say that salvation cannot come from power, domination and violence, but from compassion, i.e. from sharing man’s life’s ups and downs. The symbol of maternity related to God may hinder man from arguing in favour of violence and arrogance, and help him argue in favour of solidarity, participation and justice.

Hosea’s prophecy prefigures the Son of God’s helplessness on the Cross: the poverty of His love which is just a gift. On the Cross, God is suffering with us, even though He is always the Other, the Holy One. We can venture to say that Hosea is outlining a kind of ‘theology of the Cross’.

The seal of perfection

After the digression on the life and death of Fra Alexis, (Chapter V, 26-28) the Legend of the Origin deals with the theme of the Fathers’ perfection once again, perfection they had already acquired even before they came to live together. Chapter 6 tells of a kind of novitiate the Seven accomplished in this world before they came to live together in “a small house, in a corner of the

⁶¹ Literally: *because his womb was crying for his brother.*

cemetery of the Friars Minor to the right of their church, at the far end on their plot.” (LO 31)⁶² The main features of this ‘novitiate’ were penance, conversion and poverty. Furthermore, “those of them who were till married obtained the consent of their wives to release themselves from their marriages according to the prescripts of the law. Then they gave up their wives, who likewise freely consecrated themselves to the service of God.” (LO 30)⁶³

The seal of perfection was their friendship. “They did not even know each other, residing as they did in different parts of the city ... they gradually came to be of one mind in perfect friendship and the *bonds of love*, one first with another, and finally all together.” (LO 29)⁶⁴ The quotation from Hosea 1:4 (*bonds of love*) is the only explicit biblical quotation we can find in Chapter 6. It qualifies the deep (‘perfecta’ in Latin) friendship binding the Seven. “Given that they were all already so alike in the practice of perfection and piety, it was fitting that loving friendship should bind them together to be of one mind; even more so because Our Lady was before long to bring them together to establish our Order.” (LO 29)⁶⁵

Their friendship was coupled with charity: it was not a friendship of the natural kind, a friendship that appeals to the feelings, but something directly inspired by Jesus Christ’s gratuitous love. That is why paragraph 29 ends with a reference to Christ, “for love of whom they had been united in such friendship.”

This loving friendship – states paragraph 29 – drew them, first of all, “to agree completely with each other in good will and love on every issue both human and divine, which is what pleases God”; and “they could not bear being away from each other, separated for even an hour, without feeling quite uneasy.” This is an echo of St Paul’s desire to see his brothers face to face so that they may be strengthened together through their mutual faith. He wrote in his first Epistle to the Thessalonians: “Although we had been deprived of you for only a short time in body but never in affection, brothers, we had an especially strong desire and longing to see you face to face again.” (1Th 2:17) “We are earnestly praying night and day to be able to see you face to face again and make up any shortcomings in our faith.” (1Th 3:10) And to the Romans he has not met yet, but with whom he would like to mutually share God’s gifts: “... asking always that by some means I may at long last be enabled to visit you, if it is God’s will. For I am longing to see you so that I can convey to you some spiritual gift that will be a lasting strength, or rather that we may be strengthened together through our mutual faith, yours and mine.” (Rm 1:10-12)

This impatience expresses the Fathers’ wish to grow together, fighting the temptation of living one’s faith in an individualistic way and patiently waiting for them, whose growth might be slower. Common life is of paramount importance; according to the Legend, its starting point is friendship. Friendship helped them to be faithful to their resolve to live a life of penance and, “going even further, it left them with a definite resolve that would enable them to dwell happily together not only one in mind but actually in the same place, supporting each other in example and deed and by what they said to one another.” (LO 29)⁶⁶

Here St. Augustine’s influence is more than evident. St. Augustine started his religious life together with a group of friends⁶⁷ and, according to him, one’s quest for truth would be fruitless if communion were lacking. He dealt with the paramount importance of friendship in a letter to St. Jerome: “I am not ashamed to confess that for me it is completely normal to let myself go to [my

⁶² *Sources for the History and Spirituality of the Servants of Mary*, I, p. 229. For the controversy of this information and the precise setting of the first lodging of the Minor friars in Florence, cf. F.A. DAL PINO, *I frati Servi di Santa Maria dalle origini all’approvazione*[quoted before], I, p. 31, quotation 27; p. 70, quotation 60; p. 314-315, quotation 32.

⁶³ *Sources for the History and Spirituality of the Servants of Mary*, I, p. 227.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 226. Important to remember that all chapter VI is to be attributed to the first author, even though some changes had been made by the last writer. Cf. F.A. DAL PINO, *I frati Servi di Santa Maria dalle origini all’approvazione*, I, p. 309.

⁶⁵ *Sources for the History and Spirituality of the Servants of Mary*, I, p. 227.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Already in 384, three year before being baptised, St. Augustine planned with some friends to constitute a community devoted to study, meditation and work. Cf. what he wrote regarding this point in *Confessions*, 6, 14.

friends'] love, especially when I feel oppressed by this world's scandals: I find rest in their hearts, in their hearts I feel free from worries, as I firmly believe that God is dwelling in them. To Him I confidently entrust myself; in Him I find rest. I am so certain of this that I do not fear the uncertainties of the future, deriving from human frailty. (...) In fact, when I realise that somebody is burning with Christian love, thanks to which he has become a faithful friend of mine, whatever plan or thought I entrust to him is not entrusted to a human being but to the One in whom he lives and who makes him. God is love and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him."⁶⁸

Thanks to friendship, our common life can be warm, full of openness, trust, liberty and affection; otherwise, it would be cold and meaningless.

The Legend mentions also the Seven's friendship with St. Peter of Verona who, commissioned by the Pope to preach against heretics, went to Florence in 1244. The Father frequented Peter's sermons "and in this way became aware of the fervour of the Holy Spirit in him. They were so moved by love for him that they made themselves known to him and accepted him as a dear friend. In fact, they chose him as their special father and protector and sole consulter for their spiritual welfare." (LO 51)⁶⁹ It is interesting to note that knowledge⁷⁰ is a way to friendship. We are often lacking this desire to deeply know other people, to see beyond their words and manners. On the contrary, if we kindled this desire, it would be easier for us to find new friends. Going back to the Fathers, their friend became at last also a counsellor and a spiritual father. Spiritual direction will always be fruitful in proportion to the mutual affection and knowledge binding the group of friends together.

God's gift

Art. 53 of our Rule of Life states: "Consider friendship as God's gift. You shall accept it with joy as a mutual enrichment and you shall live it as an expression of communion with others." It is not by chance that the mention of friendship can be found in Chapter 7, dealing with 'Life in the world'. This is the most important chapter in our Rule, reminding us that we must live in the world with that empathy deriving from friendship. Our secular vocation demands that we genuinely love the world and all its problems.

Friendship is a gift from God: it must therefore be the loving friendship the Legends speaks of. Its source is our faith in Jesus Christ. Its end is to recognise the presence of Christ in everybody. Friendship is mutually enriching, as it makes us more humane and enables us to see beyond life's appearances and to go deeply into our neighbour's heart. Our friendship should not be given to RM's members only, but to other people too, as a means to convey to them in all simplicity the Truth which provides meaning as well as joy to our lives.

Even if the term 'friendship' is mentioned only once in our Rule of Life, there are many other articles dealing with perfect and gratuitous love: this should be the main feature of both our relations within our Family and our service to the world.

Art. 2 states that our Family must be loved "in good times and bad" – with the faithful love which is characteristic of friendship – and also that we should give to the Family "our personal contribution of love".

Art. 3 quotes Jesus' commandment to love (cf. Jn 13:35) as the very basis of Christian life. It is Jesus' love that makes us all one in one Family, and prompts us to establish deep and genuine relations between us.

And again at art. 36: "... let us nourish a strong love for our Family, keeping ourselves always open and loyal."

⁶⁸ Letter 73, 10, in *Works of St. Augustine*, XXI, Città Nuova, Rome 1969, p. 591-593.

⁶⁹ *Sources for the History and Spirituality of the Servants of Mary*, I, p. 250.

⁷⁰ For the link of knowledge (*notitia* said in LO) and love, cf. paragraph 45 (people wants to know the community of Monte Senario, and this knowledge draws to the desire of becoming part of it) and 48 (knowledge is God's love).

The last paragraph of art. 7 points out that we should be inspired by Our Lady “to commit ourselves in a joyful spirit of service, even at the cost of sacrifices.”

Art. 38 reminds us that, in line with Mt 25:31-46, love must be put into practice by being “solicitous in welcoming and in hospitality” as well as by being “present to those members who are experiencing suffering in their lives.” Thus our friendship will be put to the test.

Authority too must be exercised “in a spirit of love, of attentive listening, and of assistance to others.” (art. 39; cf. also art. 66)

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**Let's praise those 'illustrious men' ...
our Fathers, who watched over us...**

and took in hand our upbringing

”

in knowledge, art and science...

- from the *Legend of Origin* -

Pier Giorgio M. Di Domenico was born on 2 December 1940; became part of the Order of the Servants of Mary in 1964; together with other brothers, he tried to give, since 1974, «a more open space for the contemplative characteristics» of the Order (*Cost. OSM, 4*). This research has made him live in different places in Italy: first Montefano (Macerata), then Casola di Canossa (Reggio Emilia), Ronzano (Bologna), Matera, Arco (Trento), where he lives at present. Other tasks in his life are preaching and teaching subjects like History of Christian Spirituality.