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TO THE VERY ROOTS OF OUR CHARISM

3

The Mother of Jesus

by Regnum Mariae

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1. WALKING TOWARDS CHRIST

Lectio Divina: «He replied, ‘Come and see’; so they went and saw where He lived.» (Jn 1:39)
«Do whatever He tells you.» (Jn 2:5)

Regola di Vita RM 7: «In one’s own path towards Christ, each of us [each sister] imitate Mary...»

This year our biblical-theological essay will focus on art. 7 of our Rule of Life. In fact, we have been analysing the different aspects of Jesus’ disciples’ secular calling since 2002; and, in particular, the path on which we can follow our Master according to the Servite spirituality and tradition: two years ago we dealt with that very ancient and venerable document, the Legend of the Origins; then we went through St Augustine’s Rule – a source of inspiration for our Order – in order to get all the basic features our secular consecration is made up of; in this respect we realised that the Rule is not just a monastic document, but also a genuine formation programme, whose main values are ‘communion’, ‘sharing’, and ‘freedom’. These are the very ideals we should try to give to the world by our lives, so that the seeds of the Kingdom of God that we have sown might strengthen and grow to the benefit of the whole humankind, and we might renew our society and make it more humane.

This year our essay will focus on Our Lady, the teacher of and model for each and every Servant, as far as his or her life of service to the world and prayer are concerned. Art. 7 of our Rule of Life summarizes all the characteristics of Regnum Mariae – which are dealt with by Chapter 1 – as embodied by Mary. The RM is “a Family gathered together in the name of the Lord Jesus. In it, we commit ourselves to witness to the Gospel and to be at the service of the Church and of mankind, while living in this world, but constantly drawing our inspiration from Mary...” (art. 1) Each RM member fulfils the commandment to love, first of all by loving the Family, where her love is chiefly put to the test (arts. 2-3); secondly, by loving her own environment, to whose growth she can contribute by her Christian witness as well as by responsibly carrying out her duties; and last but not least, by loving the Church, in whose mystery she lives thanks to her prayer and apostolic witness, and to her co-operation with those who have been called to exercise the ministerial priesthood in the Church (arts. 4-6).

«Each of us imitate Mary»

“...each of us will imitate Mary”: thus art. 7 begins. It must be evident to all of us that our imitation of Mary should not overshadow the fact that our first and foremost model is Christ. A General Chapter’s document states: ‘Jesus is the “prototype” of holiness for every and each of His disciples. He presented Himself as the model, “I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you.” (Jn 13:15) His disciples will have to follow His example mainly by serving (cf Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45; Lk 22:27) and by loving (cf Jn 13:34-35). Jesus is the first and foremost model because – even during His life on earth – He is the Holy One of God (cf Mk 1:24; Ac 3:14), the obedient Son, the Beloved, on whom the Father’s favour rests (cf Mk 1:11; Mt 3:17; Lk 3:22), the Anointed overflowing with the Holy Spirit (cf Jn 1:32-33; Lk 4:16-21), the Master of

truth (cf Mt 22:16). Christ's exemplary condition is the reason why all His disciples must imitate and follow Him (cf Mk 8:34; Lk 14:27; Mt 10:38). [...] The Virgin Mary, the Woman-Disciple, is a model for all the disciples, but in the light of Christ. [...] In our own life and apostolic mission we should never disregard Mary of Nazareth's example. The Virgin, an icon of life according to the Gospel, is drawing her Servants' attention.¹

"In one's own path towards Christ, each of us will imitate Mary." It must be highlighted that here the path is individual ("one's own"): each of us must learn from Mary how to personally meet Jesus. Mary was deeply disturbed by the angel's words, and said to him, 'How can this come about, since I have no knowledge of man?' (Lk 1:34). This is a proof that she did not discover her path to Jesus by reading a book, but by ardently loving. Her longing for a love without reservations led her to imagine a lifestyle that in her social and religious environment would have been labelled as 'uncommon' or 'weird'.² 'I have no knowledge of man': this means 'I am a virgin'.³ This sentence expresses Mary's inner life, and the fact that she had only one longing: to belong exclusively to the Lord. This longing will never leave her, not even when she has to walk side by side with Jesus, and the path she has to tread on may be marked by nerve-wracking doubts. Therefore, when we have to imitate Mary, we will have to thoroughly adhere to Jesus as the Virgin did – our Rule says. It is by imitating her that we can come to communion with Jesus, and we can re-enact His life in our own lives.⁴

The author of the Legend of the Origins, in order to explain the curious fact that St Philip was born in the same year the Servite Order began, directly addresses the Virgin so: "O lovely Lady, what is this you are doing? You are making your future servant a replica of your Son and clearly showing how great he will be someday and what a wonderful servant he will be to you! [...] O my Lady, Blessed Virgin Mary, to whom are we to give the credit for this amazing similarity between your servant Philip and your beloved Son, Jesus Christ? I am astonished, seeing a servant of yours put on a par with your Son like this! I am overwhelmed and I cannot imagine what could be behind it all. Surely it cannot be attributed to any merit of your servant; he was just a new-born infant. Nor could your Order take any credit for it; it was just at its beginnings too. Though my wonder and admiration never cease and I am totally unable to explain this phenomenon, yet with all due reverence to you, dear Lady and my Mother, I dare to speculate. I grant that you wanted to show how full of merit and dignity your servant blessed Philip and the Order specially dedicated to you would someday be, and that they were full of virtues and heavenly gifts in your sight. As such, they would be most deserving of honour; that I cannot deny. Yet, the principal reason can be none other than your own kindness and mercy. It was simply your good pleasure, without any merit on their part, to honour your servant Philip and the Order specially dedicated to you, by arranging this striking likeness to Jesus at the time of his birth."⁵

The goal of our walking towards Christ is to become similar to Him. Our Lady is offering us the example of her virginal life and by her merciful intercession she gains for us the greatest grace of all: this grace exceeds beyond compare our own poverty. Our holy Fathers devoted their lives to Our Lady in order to become similar to Jesus: "These men were not unaware of their

¹ 210° General Chapter of the Order of the Servants of Mary, *Servant of the Magnificat. The canticle of the Virgin and consecrated life*, Servitium, pp. 84-90.

² In the Old Testament, the choice of virginity is exemplified only by the prophet Jeremiah, who gave up marriage when God asked him to represent by his life the sad and tragic fate of the people of Israel; Elijah and Elisha, as well as John the Baptist, can be regarded as celibate too.

³ This is the sense in the expression according to Sacred Scripture. cf Jg 11:38-39; 21:12 : Iefte's daughter, before being sacrificed, asks the father to wander in the mountains for two months crying for her virginity; in fact «she didn't have knowledge of man». And in the second passage, in Iabes of Galaad there were «four hundred virgin girls who didn't have knowledge of man».

⁴ To this same intimate and personal relationship with Christ is that Paul makes reference when he proposes himself as a model. He doesn't want to present himself or his qualities at the top, but his way of following Christ. He is conscious of his limits, but no matter this, his attention towards Christ is enormous, and from this he has been completely touched. This is the strong desire, no matter the limits, that all brothers and sisters should imitate. cf Ph 3:7, 12, 17; 1 Th 1:6-7.

⁵ LO 11, *Sources for the History and Spirituality of the Servants of Mary*, I, Sotto il Monte BG 1998, p. 203-204.

imperfections, which is precisely why they did the wise thing: in total devotion they humbly placed themselves and their hearts at the feet of the Queen of Heaven, the glorious Virgin Mary. It was she who would have to mediate for them and, in her abundant love, supply for their own deficiencies. It was for her to reconcile and commend them to her Son and, taking pity on them, win for them a wealth of merit. That is why the moment they bound themselves to honour God through service of the Virgin Mary they wanted to be known as the Servants of Saint Mary...⁶

They stayed with Him that day

We should imitate Mary in order to become like Christ Jesus: this is the reason why I chose two passages from St John's gospel for this month's lectio.

In the first passage (Jn 1:35-51), Andrew and another disciple of John the Baptist's (Jesus' beloved disciple?), after hearing their master define Jesus as 'the Lamb of God', "followed Jesus. Jesus turned round, saw them following and said, 'What do you want?' They answered, 'Rabbi' – which means Teacher – 'where do You live?' He replied, 'Come and see'; so they went and saw where He lived, and stayed with Him that day. It was about the tenth hour." (Jn 1:37-39)

'What do you want?' This is the first question Jesus puts to all those who want to follow Him. Maybe the answer to that question is not at all easy. Very often we do not know what we should look for... We just feel that something is missing from our lives, and when we become fully aware of that, we start searching for it... Jesus asks a similar question – 'Who are you looking for?' – on two more occasions: when Judas brings the guards to the garden of Gethsemane so that they could arrest Jesus (Jn 18:4, 7); and in the garden of the resurrection, when He meets Mary of Magdala (Jn 20:15). In the first case, a group of hostile people is looking for Jesus. They are led by one of His disciples: perhaps he has been disappointed by his Master's behaviour. In the second case, a woman is looking for Jesus: she is led by her passionate heart. In fact, she cannot accept the loss of her Beloved. However, her search must be rectified too; and Jesus admonishes her so: "Do not cling to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father." (Jn 20:17) It may be difficult to look for Jesus with a pure heart, free from prejudices or illusions or selfishness. In fact, Andrew and his companion do not answer Jesus. Their reply is a new question: "Where do you live?", literally, 'Where do you stay / remain?' The adverb 'where' occurs some twenty times in St John's gospel. It refers to Jesus' origin, to the place which is His true dwelling. The verb 'to stay / remain' expresses the fact that the Son thoroughly belongs to the Father: "...a son belongs to it [the household] for ever." (Jn 8:35); or, better, "He is close to the Father's heart" (Jn 1:18). There is a mutual indwelling: "It is the Father, living in me, who is doing His works." (Jn 14:10) This intimate communion is promised also to any disciple who "makes Jesus' word his home" (Jn 8:31). Jesus urges us to be in communion with Him: "Remain in me, as I in you." (Jn 15:4) This communion is nourished by the bread of His Holy Supper, the memorial of His death: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in that person." (Jn 6:56)

The two disciples put to Jesus a question which is indeed very important, because it introduces us into the mystery of His person as well as life. In order for us to welcome this mystery, we must 'experience' Jesus, know Him personally. That is why Jesus says, "Come and see." We must obey this order ("Come!"), so that the promise ("see") may be fulfilled. The same pattern can be found in all the biblical stories of vocation. God gives Abraham this order: "Leave your country..." (Gn 12:1), then He makes a promise: "I shall make you a great nation..." (Gn 12:2) "So now I am sending you to Pharaoh," so God addresses Moses from the burning bush, "and I shall be with you." (Ex 3:10, 12) An order and a subsequent promise can be found also in the synoptic gospels, when they deal with the calling of the first four disciples: "Come after me, and I will make

⁶ LO 18, *Ibid.*, p. 211-212.

you fishers of people.” (Mt 4:19; Mk 1:17; cf Lk 5:10) Following Jesus introduces us to a new life we are not master of, but that we must welcome. Our response must be an act of pure faith: we cannot require guarantees or assurances; on the contrary, we must rely on the word of Him who is calling us. We must respond by obeying the Lord, entrusting our own life into His hands.

Andrew and the other disciple “went and saw where He lived, and stayed with Him⁷ that day. It was about the tenth hour.” They see with their own eyes; their faith does not derive from other people’s opinions any longer, rather from what they are personally experiencing now. The same experience will occur to the Samaritans called out by the woman who had met Jesus at Jacob’s well. “When the Samaritans came up to Him, they begged Him to stay with them. He stayed for two days, and many more came to believe on the strength of the words He spoke to them; and they said to the woman, ‘Now we believe no longer because of what you told us; we have heard Him ourselves and we know that He is indeed the Saviour of the world.’” (Jn 4:40-42)

St John specifies that it was about the tenth hour (4.00 pm) when Jesus and the first disciples met. The specific hour of the meeting is worthy of record, not only to make the account of the event more vivid and factual, but also because the number 10 is a symbolic number: in the Bible, it defines a fulfilled reality. After delivering them from slavery by the ten plagues of Egypt, (cf Ex 7-12) God collected all His requests to Israel in the ten commandments. On the tenth day of the seventh month the Jews must fast and refrain from work, (cf Lv 16:29-30) as it is the day of expiation, of purification from all sins.⁸

Out of the many ancient Bible commentaries, I chose St Augustine’s, and in particular the passage where he provides an explanation of St John’s ‘tenth hour’: “Why should the evangelist specify the time? Maybe he is trying to point to something, or giving us a hint... It was the tenth hour. This number refers to the Law, because the Law had been formulated in ten precepts. Now it was the time when the Law must be fulfilled by love [...]. This is why the Lord said, ‘I have come not to abolish the Law but to complete it.’ (Mt 5:17) It was not by chance, then, that at the tenth hour the two of them followed Him, after that the Bridegroom’s friend had testified to Him. And at the tenth hour He heard them call Him ‘Rabbi’ – which means Master (Teacher). If at the tenth hour the Lord was called ‘Rabbi’, and if the number ten refers to the Law, then the Master of the Law is none other than the One who gave the Law. I mean that the One who gave the Law is also the One who is teaching it. He is the Master of the Law and He is teaching it to us. Mercy can be found on His lips, and He is merciful when He teaches the Law too. [...] Do not think that the Law cannot be fulfilled: it can. So, take shelter in His mercy.”⁹

By staying with Jesus that day, the two disciples could find out that God is love and mercy. The joy they could feel was great, and they shared it immediately with other people. “The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother and say to him, ‘We have found the Messiah – which means the Christ – and he took Simon to Jesus.’” (Jn 1: 41-42) Shortly afterwards Philip too, who had been called by Jesus, “found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and the prophets wrote’”. (Jn 1:45) The experience of meeting Jesus was joyfully communicated by the Samaritan woman too, who, after discovering His love – the love of someone who told her everything she had done but did not judge her – “hurried back to the town to tell the people, Come and see a man who has told me everything I have done; could this be the Christ?” This brought people out of the town and they made their way towards Him.” (Jn 4:29-30) Martha, after her profession of faith in Jesus, went to call her sister Mary, saying in a low voice, “The Master is here

⁷ It could be interesting to pay attention to the difference, in John’s Gospel, between “stayed *with him*” and “stayed *in*”. Here Andrew and his companion stayed *with* Jesus, and so Jesus, until he was in this world, he was *with* his disciples («I told you all these things while I was still with you»: Jn 14:25). To stay *in* Jesus seems to indicate a progression, to become mature in the relationship between Jesus and the disciples. This is very clear in Jn 14:17 where is said, in reference to the Spirit, that «he lives in you and will be in you». The Spirit is already present and helps and guides us; but our full transformation will be when he will be in us.

⁸ cf also Gn 14:20; Lv 27:30. The number 10 may be also associated to hostile powers, as in Dn 7:7-24, where the ten horns denote evil taken as a whole.

⁹ *Commentary to the Gospel of John*, 7, 10, in *Works of St. Augustine*, XXIV/1, Città Nuova, Rome 1968, p. 167.

and wants to see you.” (Jn 11:28) Parallel to the growth of her faith in Jesus, we can see the growth of the relation between her and her sister, while previously she could not understand her sister’s behaviour. (cf Lk 10:40) Now she is the one to invite her sister, who was “sitting in the house”, (Jn 11:20) to go out and meet Jesus. And she called her in a low voice, as if Jesus had been their own secret, the new bond of love and communion between them.

Exactly like her

In a way similar to Andrew’s and Philip’s, the Samaritan woman’s and Martha’s, Our Lady is leading us to Jesus and to obedience to His word. At Cana, the Mother of Jesus “was there”: this means that she was there on her own, and that Jesus and His disciples arrived later. (cf Jn 2:1, 2) When they ran out of wine, she informed Jesus, but His reply was a bit like a refusal. Nonetheless the Mother said to the servants, “Do whatever He tells you.” (Jn 2:5) And Jesus performed a miracle beyond compare.

The gospel of St John presents this same pattern in two other cases:¹⁰ the cure of the royal official’s son (Jn 4:46-54) and the resurrection of Lazarus (Jn 11:1-44). In both cases there is a request, a refusal on Jesus’ part, then again an insistent – maybe annoying – request; and in the end Jesus performs a sign that does exceed every expectation. This pattern is consistent with St John’s gospel’s Christology: Jesus is the One who knows everything and who always takes the initiative. Even during His passion and death, Jesus is the master of the situation. There is also a whole series of accounts of miracles, where Jesus performs them even though nobody requested them (cf Jn 5:1-9, the cure of a sick man at the Pool of Bethesda; 6:1-15, the miracle of the loaves; 6:16-21, Jesus comes to His disciples walking on the waters; 9:1-7, the cure of the man born blind). Then the refusal that Jesus seems to give at Cana and in the two other cases mentioned above should be read as a narrative device by which the evangelist is highlighting Jesus’ thorough freedom and at the same time His utter obedience to the Father, that frees Him from any human conditioning.

It must be added that St John’s gospel closely links the two accounts of the miracle at Cana and the cure of the royal official’s son (cf Jn 4:46; 2:11 / 4:54). In fact, after the miracle at Cana “His disciples believed in Him” (Jn 2:11); and the royal official put his trust in Jesus’ word, went on his way home, (cf 4:50) and realised that his son had been cured exactly at the time when Jesus had said, ‘Your son will live’: then, “he and all his household believed” (Jn 4:53). He believes together with his ‘family’. In a similar way, the account of the first of Jesus’ miracles at Cana ends with a reference to the new family gathered together by Jesus’ word: “After this He went down to Capernaum with His mother and His brothers and His disciples” (Jn 2:12). The aim of each and every miracle is to rouse people to faith and to build on this faith a community of brothers and sisters.

Jesus’ reply (‘Woman, what do you want from me? My hour has not come yet.’ – Jn 2:4) seems to exclude that the request may be granted. But Mary does not persist in her prayer; she addresses the servants, as she perceives that Jesus’ reply is nothing but an invitation for her to display her faith. “Do whatever He tells you”: she asks the servants to obey Jesus’ word, exactly as she is doing herself. Jesus’ reply is a bit obscure, but His Mother adheres to it completely, even though she cannot comprehend. Our Lady is urging us to confidently trust in Jesus Christ, exactly as she did from Cana to the Cross: in this respect she is not only His Mother but also our very mother.

¹⁰ Here I follow J.P. Meier’s interpretation that can be found in *‘Un ebreo marginale. Ripensare il Gesù storico, 2. Mentore, messaggio e miracoli’* [A non upstanding hebrew. Reconsider the Historical figure of Jesus – Master, message and miracles], Queriniana, Brescia, 2002, pp. 1157-1191.

The Mother of the disciples

Some years ago, an ecumenical group of theologians and exegetes studied and discussed the role of Mary in the history of salvation. This group, known as the Dombes Group, was founded in 1937 by Paul Couturier, who started gathering French and Swiss, Catholic and Protestant theologians at the Abbey of Nôtre Dame des Dombes, near Lyons, France. His aim was to foster friendship among them, as well as to promote a theological dialogue. Now the group has some forty members. So far, it has dealt with a number of topics, and effectively contributed to the ecumenical dialogue by publishing, independently from ecclesiastical authority, some documents on the Eucharist, the various Church ministries, and the conversion of the Churches. These are not binding statements; rather, they intend to contribute to the official ecumenical dialogue. Among them, the document on Mary and her role in the history of salvation is definitely one of the most prominent. Originally published in 1997-98, it provides a balanced examination of the Scriptural, historical and dogmatic questions in a way that leads to common statements without compromise. The first of its four sections presents Mary's role within the undivided tradition of the first millennium, as well as the disagreements that have progressively arisen between the different Christian Churches afterwards. In the second section there is a review of the relevant Scriptural passages within the framework of the three principal articles of the Creed. The third and fourth sections deal with the disputed questions about Mary and report the Group's suggestions to the Churches for convergence, as well as a 'call to conversion'. Here we quote the paragraphs dealing with Mary as described in St John's gospel.

178. The two passages from St John's gospel (2:1-5; 19:25-27) define Mary as a mother, at the beginning and at the end of the episode of Cana, and later at the foot of the cross. However, they highlight that in a way Jesus keeps His distance, when He addresses her as 'woman' and not 'mother'. Is it because He doesn't want to recognise Mary as the one who gave birth to Him? No. On the contrary, the context shows that Jesus is offering Mary a greater role than simply that of giving birth to Him.

179. At Cana, Mary does not request anything from her Son; she simply makes an observation, then she addresses the servants. But her observation underlines what the feast is lacking. It is Mary who underlines what is not working. Then she intercedes with her Son. When she intervenes, she illustrates the believer's conduct, which has to listen to people, then present their needs to Jesus so that He may come to their help.

180. The lack of wine that Mary pointed out confronts Jesus, whose mission is at that very moment not 'well-defined' yet: "His hour has not come yet". In fact, Jesus' presence at a feast is not aimed at doing something about what is lacking, rather at revealing His glory and rousing people to faith. He illustrates this novelty beforehand, by fulfilling the sign. This event reveals the theological perspective of the gospel. Mary is present at this revelation, even though she is not aware of it.

181. "What do you want from me?" may be a puzzling question, not only underlining Mary's shortcomings (in fact, on the spot she cannot comprehend how and when Jesus will reveal His glory) but also inviting her to see her Son's perspective, and also to get rid of her own initiative in order to follow His. In this respect, we can say that the episode of Cana is a milestone on Mary's path of conversion: she understands that by now she has the role of leading the servants to her Son, so that they may listen to His word and thoroughly obey it.

182. Mary personally experiences that both the obedience to a word and the appeal to renunciation are a source of blessing. Propped up by trust in Him, even before learning what Jesus intends to do, she says to the servants: “Do whatever He tells you”, urging them to behave with the same blind faith she has.

183. The servants of the feast at Cana are in a way ‘disciples’. Later on, their position will be perfectly embodied by the beloved disciple. At Cana, Mary accepts to relate to the servants / disciples. She is part both of the family group and the community of the disciples. She submits to this twofold relation, she accepts to switch from one to the other, even though she will be fully part of the latter only after the cross: she will switch from being the mother of Jesus to being the mother of the disciple. The crucified Jesus calls her natural maternity to become a spiritual maternity, starting from the beloved disciple, the one who was very close to Jesus during His passion, cross and resurrection, then extending to all the disciples.

184. St John’s gospel arranges the three elements – Mary the Mother of Jesus, Mary-the-woman, and Mary the mother of the disciples – according to a theological progression. St John’s gospel starts with Mary “the Mother of Jesus”, then goes on with Mary-the-woman, and ends with Mary “the mother of the disciples”, the mother of a new maternity, different from the former, still, confessed by the Church in conjunction with it.¹¹

¹¹ “Regno Documenti” 3, 1998, p. 118.

2. BLESSINGS OF FAITH

Lectio Divina: «Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.» (Lk 1:45)

«As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.» (Lk 2:19; cf 2:51)

Israel's lectio: Si 38:24-39:11 (individual lectio)

Ne 8:1-12 (community lectio)

Rule of Life RM 7: «“...each of us [each sister] will learn from Her ‘Fiat’ to welcome the Word of God...»

In order that we may learn from Our Lady's example, in this unit we will highlight three different ways of welcoming the Word of God: faith in the Word's power to change man; man's heart's assent and his joyful response.

The power of faith

In a way, Mary's "fiat" ["Be it done..."] echoes the divine command that started creation: "Let there be..." (Gn 1:3) This divine imperative is turned by Mary into a prayer expressing her longing and her wish. It is thanks to her ardent longing for communion with God, as well as from her trustful yielding to His calling, that a 'new creation' is brought about.

Elizabeth gave a loud cry and said, 'Blessed is she who believed.' (Lk 1:45) She believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled, she believed in the power of the Word to fulfil the promise. The passage can also be translated in a different way: 'Blessed are you who have believed, because what has been promised to you by the Lord will be fulfilled.' This means: you have believed, and thanks to your faith the promise will be fulfilled. In fact, Jesus often attributed His miracles to the faith of those who were pleading for them. 'Woman,' He said to the Canaanite woman, 'you have great faith. Let your desire be granted.' (Mt 15:28) And to the centurion, who acknowledged his own unworthiness to have Him under his roof and consequently asked Him just to give His word, Jesus declared: 'In truth I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found faith as great as this. [...] Go back, then; let this be done for you, as your faith demands.' (Mt 8:5-13) And again, the woman who had been suffering from a haemorrhage for twelve years and who thought that it would be enough for her to touch Jesus' cloak in order to be saved, heard the following words: 'Courage, my daughter, your faith has saved you.' (Mt 9:22)

The Word and faith are closely linked: the former gives life to the latter. This is what St Paul means, when he thanks God for the community that, after hearing the word that he brought them as God's message, welcomed it for what it really was: not the word of any human being, but God's word, "a power that is working among you believers." (1 Th 2:13) The Jerusalem Bible's note on this point warns us that the passage can also be translated thus: "...has come to be at work". Both translations highlight the great richness of the dialectical relation between God's Word and believers. The Word is very powerful, but it will not be fulfilled as if by magic: it needs a firm and indestructible faith. This was an accepted truth also in the Old Testament's times. Let us consider Isaiah 55:10-11, for instance: "For, as the rain and the snow come down from the sky and do not return before having watered the earth, fertilising it and making it germinate, to provide seed for the

sower and food to eat, so it is with the Word that goes from my mouth: it will not return to me unfulfilled or before having carried out my good pleasure and having achieved what it was sent to do.” Nature seems to be regenerated by rain and snow thanks to a prodigy; but the miracle occurring when the Word falls on the fertile soil of a heart opened up to faith is even more prodigious. In this case the Word does not need explanations of any sort, because it speaks with the power of life itself, and life makes it possible for Christ to be made flesh in the world, even nowadays. Faith must be ‘conquered’ every single day, given that, by living in this world, we are sometimes far away from it. However, we must labour and strive “with His energy which works in [us] so mightily.” (Col 1:29)

In the heart

Mary is described by Lk 2:19, 51 as the one who “treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart”. “The tradition of the Church states that the Virgin progressively assimilated her Son’s teachings – His words and unconventional gestures, as well as the values and the lifestyle of His kingdom – by sharing in His life. She assimilated them by living, by treasuring in her heart and comparing the ancient prophecies with the words that she herself could hear, and with both the extraordinary and the ordinary everyday life events she could witness. Thus she became wise.”¹² In a word, by her “heart’s special labour”¹³ she always looked for her Lord, even when His words and gestures might seem incomprehensible and mysterious. Now we will focus on the heart.

The term “[man’s] heart” occurs more than 800 times¹⁴ in the Old Testament. This fact clearly shows that the heart has pride of place in the sacred book. It should be noted also that the term “heart” refers to the actual physical organ only ten times and, even in these cases, the meaning is deeper than one could think. As an example, let us go through the story of Nabal and Abigail. 1 Samuel 25:37-38 tells of Nabal’s death as the result of a heart attack. This man was the husband of Abigail who, after his death, will become David’s wife. When David was fleeing from Saul, Nabal had arrogantly refused to provide for David and his men. David, who had always protected Nabal’s shepherds and his flocks, wanted to take his revenge on Nabal for the insult and marched with four hundred men towards Nabal’s place. [‘Nabal’ means ‘fool’.] Abigail, Nabal’s wife, went out to meet David and ask for his forgiveness. When she returned home, Nabal was holding a feast: “He was in high spirits, and as he was very drunk she told him nothing at all till it was daylight. In the morning, when Nabal’s wine had left him and his wife told him everything that had happened, his heart died within him and he became like a stone. About ten days later the Lord struck Nabal, and he died.” A modern doctor could diagnose apoplexy, coupled with a cerebral haemorrhage; in those conditions a man can survive up to ten days. “The ancient author regarded the heart as the organ supervising the limbs’ movements.”¹⁵ Holy Scripture conveys a deeper meaning, though. The fact that Nabal “became like a stone” is due to his selfishness: he has not died yet, but his heart does not beat any longer, given that it is not a heart of flesh any longer; rather, it is a heart of stone (cf Ezk 36:26).

Hosea 13:6-8 presents God as a lion, or a leopard or a bear robbed of her cubs, or a lioness attacking Israel: once satisfied, the Israelites’ hearts have grown proud and they have forgotten the Lord (cf Ps 17:10). That is why God will “rend the membrane of their heart”: He will not rend the heart itself, given that God does not want to kill man, but what prevents it from beating properly.

¹² *Servants of the Magnificat. The Canticle of the Virgin and consecrated life*, p. 78.

¹³ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater* (25th March 1987), 17.

¹⁴ Five times there is a reference to the animal’s heart, one time only the animal itself (Jb 41:16) and four in relation to man’s heart (2Sm 17:10; Hos 7:11; Dn 4: 13; 5:21). Twenty-six times it is referred to God’s “heart”, and around ten times we have expressions like “the sea’s heart”, “the sky’s heart”, “the tree’s heart”.

¹⁵ H W WOLFF, *Antropologia dell’Antico Testamento* [Anthropology of the Old Testament], Queriniana, Brescia, 1975, p. 59.

Let us consider Jeremiah's lament too (4:18b-19): "Your wickedness, how bitter, has stabbed you to the heart! In the pit of my stomach how great my agony! Walls of my heart! My heart is throbbing! I cannot keep quiet, for I have heard the trumpet call, the battle cry." These are the very symptoms of angina pectoris...¹⁶ This heart seems to be on the point of bursting; in fact, it represents God's sorrow for Israel, that He loves as a beloved son (cf Jr 31:20). It is the same sorrow of those who keep on believing in love, even when they have been insulted and betrayed.¹⁷

The Bible ascribes to the heart the functions we believe as proper of the mind. The heart can know, think, perceive, realise, remember, ponder, judge... The Bible uses the term 'heart' in order to stress the unity of man's thinking activity with his feelings and emotions. Contemporary man, on the contrary, "has divided intelligence from love, reason from passion, the mind from the heart. Proud of his scientific knowledge, he believes that he himself is the one and only maker of his own destiny, the one and only source of meaning."¹⁸

A basic function the Bible ascribes to the heart that comprehends. God has given man eyes to see, ears to hear and a heart to understand (cf Dt 29:3). It is in the heart that we can understand that, as a man trains his child, so the Lord is training Israel (Dt 8:5). It is in the heart that we can understand the meaning of time: God has given us time so that we may look for Him: "Teach us to count up the days that are ours, and we shall come to the heart of wisdom." (Ps 90:12)

We can comprehend only after carefully listening. Solomon proved himself very wise when he did not ask the Lord for long life or riches or the lives of his enemies, but for "a heart to understand" (1 K 3:9), so that, in order to govern his people, he could discern between good and evil, the different laws regulating the life of the world, as well as the phenomena of nature (cf. 1K 5:9).

When man is neither willing to go deeply into things nor to understand them, he is superficial. His heart is not open to salvation, as the harsh oracle of Is 6:10 says: "Make this people's heart coarse, make their ears dull, shut their eyes tight, or they will use their eyes to see, use their ears to hear, use their heart to understand, and change their ways and be healed." Here we find again the triad 'heart-ears-eyes' of Dt 29:3. When the heart is closed, the ears and the eyes cannot perceive either.¹⁹ The heart's coarseness looks like a blind alley; still, we should never forget that this utter incapability of the heart to go out of itself highlights in fact the Lord's absolute goodness. The prophet Isaiah asks in dismay: 'Until when, Lord?' (Is 6:11) And God replies that, from a people that cannot understand any longer, a "holy seed" will survive, a holy nation, consecrated to the Lord. God's grace is stronger than sin. Even the worst disaster is not equal to the end of history, but prepares a future of hope (cf Is 29:18; 30:20-21; 43:8-13).

Knowledge must be turned into permanent consciousness. The Lord's words must be continually re-called to mind.²⁰ When Daniel says that he "kept these things to himself" (Dn 7:28), he expresses his will to keep his visions alive in his memory. And Tobit thus recommended his son Tobias, leaving for Media, "Remember these precepts and never let them fade from your heart." (Tb 4:19)

The heart is, according to the Bible, the core of the person in communion with God. It is the whole person welcoming the divine word within itself; the rich soil welcoming the seed that the Sower has sown. "As for the part in the rich soil, this is people with a noble and generous heart who have heard the Word and take it to themselves and yield a harvest through their perseverance." (Lk 8:15; cf also 24:32; Ac 16:14) Of course, the "noble and generous heart" is Mary's, the virgin soil where the seed of the Word produces its crop a hundredfold (cf Lk 8:8). We confidently appeal to

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁷ Cf. also Jr 23:9; 8:18. The Word of God tests very rigidly the prophet's heart, whose life depends totally from God.

¹⁸ N. VAQLENTINI, *Nascosta bellezza del cuore* [Hidden heart's beauty], in 'Regno attualità', January 15, 2004, p. 58. Take also in consideration the object of the "theologia cordis" from Eastern Christianity, but has a lot of links with Sacred Scripture and Western authors (Augustine, Pascal..).

¹⁹ For the triad 'heart-ears-eyes', cf Pr 2:2; 18:15; 22:17; 23:12; Dt 29:3; Is 32:3; 42:18-25; Jr 11:8; Ezk 3:10; 40:4; 44:5.

²⁰ cf Dt 6:6; Pr 3:3; 6:21; 7:3; Jr 17:1; 31:33.

her heart, as she is our mother as well as sister, so that she may show us the way to our own wretched heart, a way for us to find our inner unity again in Jesus Christ, our life-giving and pacifying core. May the Virgin teach us to silence our hearts: this silence will be alive and crackling as a burning flame; it will not talk about God by hearsay; it will silence the noises produced by our external activity; it will make us brave enough to look at our inner selves as they really are. May Our Lady, who treasured the events of her Son's life in her heart, give us the courage not to flee from our selves, but to trustfully adhere to our heart, in order for us to become aware of our sins, but also to discover what comes from the Holy Spirit, and to give praise and thanks to the Lord.

The scribe's wisdom

Now we will go through two passages from Ben Sira: Si 38:24-34 and 39:1-11. The former deals with 'trades and crafts', the latter with the work of the 'scribe'. They may seem very different forms of activity; in fact, they complement each other. Chapter 38 of Ecclesiasticus deals with the ploughman (38:25-26), the craftsman (38:27), the blacksmith (38:28), the potter (38:29-30). Ben Sira wonders, 'How can the ploughman become wise, whose sole ambition is to wield the goad... his thoughts absorbed in the furrows he traces, and his long evenings spent in fattening heifers?' (38:25-26) The craftsman is absorbed in a new design, and stays up late to get the work done. The noise of the hammer and the heat of the furnace prevent the blacksmith from thinking of anything else (nowadays, this is what happens to all those working in big factories or at an assembly line). Similarly, the potter must be constantly on the alert over his work, because not always the clay takes the shapes that he could wish. All of them are completely absorbed in their respective jobs. "A town could not be inhabited without them, there would be no settling, no travelling. But you will not find them in parliament, they do not hold high rank in the assembly. They do not sit on the judicial bench..." (38:32-34) Still, each of them is "skilled at his own craft" (38:31) or, literally, "wise", in line with the idea that the Bible has of work: every human activity needs the wisdom which comes from God (cf Ex 31:1-6; 35:30-36; 1 K 5:20; 7:13-14; Ezk 27:8). The Jerusalem Bible's note specifies that "craftsmanship is an elementary form of wisdom. Such wisdom, however, cannot be compared with that of the scribe." Before dealing with crafts and trades, Ben Sira warns the reader that "leisure gives the scribe the chance to acquire wisdom; a man with few commitments can grow wise." (Si 38:24)

Ben Sira warns us not to focus exclusively on our material commitments, even though we should not shirk tiring jobs or farm work, ordained by the Most High (cf Si 7:15). Man must earn his daily bread. Work gives man dignity. "For a person of private means and one who works hard, life is pleasant"; but even better is the life of the man who finds a treasure: (cf Si 40:18) the treasure of wisdom (cf Si 1:22), that is, the word of the Lord itself, which adds flavour to life. Who is engrossed in his work, has no time for anything else. "Not so with one who concentrates his mind and his meditation on the Law of the Most High. He researches into the wisdom of all the Ancients, he occupies his time with the prophecies." (Si 39:1) Law, Wisdom and Prophecies: all the Scripture must be read and studied with devotion; this devotion confers a special dignity on the scribe, so that he "enters the service of princes, he is seen in the presence of rulers." (39:4) In fact, he has acquired discernment and understanding, intelligence and wisdom and they cannot be gained in any other way. This wisdom does not lock up the scribe in his golden tower; on the contrary, "he travels in foreign countries, he has experienced human good and human evil." (39:5) The Jerusalem Bible's note explains: "The scribe is often a court official, minister, or ambassador." True, but this explanation is not enough for us who are always on the look out for something relevant to our contemporary lives. In fact, the scribe Ecclesiasticus tells us of represents all those who love the Lord's word and who wish to devote their lives to it. The scribe travels in foreign countries because God's word has opened him up to the world; it has made the world dear to his heart, and now he loves the world and wishes to make it more and more beautiful and in conformity with God's plan.

One can “travel in foreign countries” even without leaving one’s own room, given that what it really matters is to keep the world within our heart, to pray and intercede for the whole humankind. “At dawn and with all his heart he turns to the Lord his Creator; he pleads in the presence of the Most High, he opens his mouth in prayer and makes entreaty for his sins.” (Si 39:5) When prayer sheds light on our shortcomings, we should turn it into a plead for forgiveness: too often we did not feel responsible for the whole world...

It is by doing the Lord’s will, gathered from His Word, that the scribe can be filled with the Holy Spirit’s gifts (Si 39:6-7; cf Is 11:2): intelligence and wisdom (the ability to discern good from evil), counsel and power (the ability to carry out what is good), and he will take his pride in the Law of the Lord’s covenant. (cf Si 39:8) His strength will come from the awareness that he is faithfully doing the Lord’s will.

“His memory will not disappear, generation after generation his name will live.” (39:9) Mary’s canticle will echo that very passage: “...all generations will call me blessed.” (Lk 1:48) When life has been lived to the full, its memory is like a hidden spring of pure water fertilising the earth, or a precious heritage giving life to the future generations.

The joy which comes from the Word

Another passage from the Old Testament – Nehemiah 8:1-12 – may help us to understand how a community should welcome God’s word and carry it out, by committing themselves to an ever increasing communion. We will interpret this passage in the light of Mary, the woman who pondered everything in her heart. The passage tells about the gathering of all the people who had come back from the exile, in order for them to listen to the public reading of the Book of the Law. They gathered in the square in front of the Water Gate. All the people is like “one man” (8:1): their unity comes from the Word of God, which they are listening to with an earnest wish for conversion. The people, from dawn till noon (8:3), listened attentively to the Book of the Law, read by Ezra and some Levites (8:8). “The people were all in tears as they listened to the words of the Law.” (8:9) These tears show their repentance, after finding out that their lives are very different from what they should be according to the Word of God. These tears are healthy, as St Paul says to the Corinthians: “So now, though I did distress you with my letter, I do not regret it. Even if I did regret it – and I realise that the letter distressed you, even though not for long – I am glad now, not because you were made to feel distress, but because the distress that you were caused led to repentance; your distress was the kind that God approves and so you have come to no kind of harm through us. For to be distressed in a way that God approves leads to repentance and then to salvation with no regrets; it is the world’s kind of distress that ends in death.” (2 Co 7:8-10)

Nehemiah and the Levites tried to calm down the people: “For today is sacred to our Lord. Do not be sad: the joy of the Lord is your stronghold.” (Ne 8:10c) This joy can be experienced only by responding to the Lord’s call. “You may go; eat what is rich, drink what is sweet and send a helping to the man who has nothing prepared.” (Ne 8:10a) “Then all the people went off to eat and drink and give helpings away and enjoy themselves to the full, since they had understood the meaning of what had been proclaimed to them.” (Ne 8:12) This is how the Word should be carried out in our lives, so that life itself may make its meaning clearer. The proof that the Word has been correctly understood is that it brings about communion. Love is the only key that can open the Word up and disclose its secret treasure.

Do we Servants of St Mary genuinely listen of the Word of God? The answer to this question lies in the kind of fraternal life we lead. For us, is fraternal life in communion still a demanding and austere ideal, requiring interior poverty, renunciation and the thorough giving away of one’s own self? May the Virgin give us the courage to be faithful to it; may she make us capable of giving others – especially in difficult circumstances – a hearty, homely and respectful welcome.

3. AT THE SERVICE OF THE WORLD

Lectio Divina: «They went to look for Him among their relations and acquaintances. When they failed to find Him they went back to Jerusalem looking for Him everywhere.» (Lk 2:44-45)
«One day His mother and His brothers went to see Him, but due to the crowd, weren't able to get close.» (Lk 8:19)

«Woman, what do you want from me?» (Jn 2:4)

Rule of Life RM 7: «...from Her life with Jesus at Nazareth, each of us [each sister] will learn the meaning of her participation in society...»

In no way the Virgin Mary's life with Jesus at Nazareth can be defined a sort of "quiet life". Even before He started His apostolic life, He was a demanding Son: He requested from her a constant effort to convert herself.

This unit's lectio will go through three different events of Mary's life with Jesus, as they are three steps into her Son's own identity, disclosing its never ending novelty.

Why?

Lk 2:41 introduces us to an event of Jesus' teens that caused distress and bewilderment to His parents. Every year Mary and Joseph used to go up to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, as the Law required (cf Ex 23:14-17; 34:22-23; Dt 16:16). They used to leave with their Son and, supposedly, with their whole family group, i.e. Jesus' "brothers and sisters". It was an exhausting, but at the same time cheerful, pilgrimage: they used to sing the Songs of Ascents, and this strengthened in their hearts the desire to reach the holy city and the Lord's temple; relatives and friends could meet, talk, share the food they had brought with them. During one of these pilgrimages, occurring when He was twelve years old, "the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem without His parents knowing it" (Lk 2:44).

Some scholars think that Luke wrote the account of this event with the Lord's passion in mind. Jesus' disappearance foreshadows His death: His parents looked for Him for three days, and three days He would stay in the sepulchre. After looking for Him everywhere, they found Him in Jerusalem, where He would die and rise again. The term "distressed" (Lk 2:48) has a very deep meaning: Luke makes use of it when he speaks of the elders of Ephesus, all in tears and putting their arms round Paul's neck, because of 'his saying that they would never see his face again' (Ac 20:38). It is the same distress we feel when we irreparably lose one of our relatives or friends.²¹ Jesus answers that He "must be in His Father's house". Luke makes use of this verb ("must") also to show that Jesus' passion was necessary (cf Lk 9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 22:37; 24:7, 26, 44).

"My Child, why have You done this to us? See how worried Your father and I have been, looking for You." (Lk 2:48) In Luke's gospel these are the only words Mary addresses to her Son;

²¹ Luke makes use of the same term, dealing with the torments of Hell: Lk 16:24, 25.

they are also her last ones. It must be highlighted that Mary addresses Jesus as “her Child”, the child she has conceived and given to birth. How come a son behaves in such a way towards his mother? How come a son gives his mother such a sorrow? Mary’s “why” is similar to the believers’ “why” when they are confronted with the mystery of life as well as the mystery of pain and sorrow. “Why was I not still-born, or why did I not perish as I left the womb? Why were there knees to receive me, breasts for me to suck?... Why give light to my man of grief? Why give life to those bitter of heart?” (Jb 3:11-12, 20) It is the ‘why’ that one asks when his faith does not get any reply from the Lord: “Why have You forgotten me?” (Ps 42:10) “Wake, Lord! Why are You asleep? Awake! Do not abandon us for good. Why do You turn Your face away...” (Ps 44:23-24) “Why, Lord, do You rebuff me, turn Your face away from me?” (Ps 88:15)

Mary’s question prompts Jesus’ first words in Luke’s gospel: “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Lk 2:49) Jesus replied to His mother’s “why” with another “why”, surprised that they were not aware of the special relationship between Himself and the Father. Jesus “must be” in His Father’s house, because His whole life can find a meaning only in the Father. The Father’s will is an absolute ‘must’ for Jesus, preceding any other tie. His obedience to the Father’s will, will lead Him on a path that will separate Him even from His family. Now the meaning of Simeon’s prophecy [“A sword will pierce your soul too...” (Lk 2:35)] has become clear.

‘They did not understand what He meant.’ (Lk 2:50) Jesus’ reply does not shed much light for his parents. They do not grasp what’s happening. We find a similar situation when Jesus is prophesying of His own passion to the disciples: ‘But they could make nothing of this; what He said was quite obscure to them, they did not understand what He was telling them.’ (Lk 18:34) Their lack of understanding derives from the fact that they have no experience of what Jesus is foretelling them. This is a true kind of blindness, and, in fact, the gospel presents immediately afterwards the episode of the blind man of Jericho (cf Lk 18:35-43), a type of the man who has to grope his way unless Jesus heals him.

Mary and Joseph are kind of short-sighted. They look for Jesus along the wrong paths, but they are prompted by their love for Him. They cannot understand yet what Jesus means when he speaks of the Father’s will. But at the end of the chapter Luke adds that the Virgin ‘stored up all these things in her heart’ (2:51), so that she could remember them at a later stage, when she was certain they would disclose their full meaning to her.

Mary provides an example of how everybody should try to understand the Lord’s word. The Word is an infinite mystery: we can increase our understanding, but certainly we can never say that we do understand it in full, not even after many years of patient study. Moreover, the path it is pointing to is not easy. It is not easy for us to discern the Father’s will; it was not easy for Jesus either, who “was” in His Father’s house. In order that He could learn obedience, He had to offer prayer and entreaty, with loud cries and with tears, as Hebrews 5:7-8 specifies. In her hidden life at Nazareth, Mary stored up what she did not understand in her heart, i.e. she entrusted it to God with a blind faith. Following in her footsteps, we should learn to patiently and respectfully wait. We should learn to be patient and respectful towards all those brothers and sisters who are trying to understand their own lives; and towards God too, because His mystery surpasses us infinitely.

My mother and my brothers

In Luke’s gospel, the episode of Jesus’ mother and brothers trying to get to Him is related to a context different from what we find in Mark’s and Matthew’s. In fact, Luke does not make use of this episode as an introduction to the parable of the sower and its explanation (cf Mk 3:31-35; Mt 12:46-50), but he places it after the parable itself and after the warning to “take care how you listen; anyone who has, will be given more; anyone who has not, will be deprived even of what he thinks

he has.” (Lk 8:18) It is only through ‘perseverance’ (Lk 8:15) that the Word of God can be received and welcomed in one’s life. And with the Word, God Himself.

Jesus’ mother and brothers cannot get to Him because of the crowd (8:19). There are also other occasions when the crowd prevents people from reaching Jesus, as in the case of the paralytic (cf Lk 5:19) and Zacchaeus (cf Lk 19:3), who “kept trying to see which Jesus was, but he was too short and could not see Him for the crowd”. Still, in these two cases the crowd is not an insurmountable obstacle; rather, it strengthens the faith that Jesus can be reached: “They went up onto the top of the house and lowered him and his stretcher down through the tiles into the middle of the gathering, in front of Jesus.” (5:19) And the wish to see Him becomes stronger: “So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus who was to pass that way.” (19:4)

Jesus’ mother and brothers are left outside, but they want to see Him all the same. It is possible that Luke is passing judgement on their wish to see Him, as it is evident from another passage where he deals with Herod Antipas, who was ‘anxious to see Him’ (Lk 9:9). Herod would see Jesus during His passion: ‘Herod was delighted to see Jesus... moreover, he was hoping to see some miracle worked by Him.’ (Lk 23:8) But Jesus did not comply with the king’s wish (cf Lk 23:9). If one wants to see Jesus, he has to join His community, that is, the community of all those who ‘hear the Word of God and put it into practice’. Jesus’ mother and brothers themselves are not allowed to stay outside of it, but have to become His disciples; thus they will become His true family.

We get more information if we relate Lk 8:19-21 to Lk 11:27-28: “It happened that as He was speaking, a woman in the crowd raised her voice...” What was Jesus saying? He had just driven out a devil out of a dumb man, and the dumb man had started to speak (Lk 11:14). Jesus warned people that the miracle did not prevent the unclean spirit from returning (11:24). This unclean spirit wanders through waterless country, where the devils usually reside (cf Is 32:21; 34:14; Lv 16:20, 22; Tb 8:3), but loves especially to dwell in men: “I will go back to the home I came from.” (Lk 11:24) On arrival, he finds it ‘swept and tidied’. Matthew adds that he finds it also ‘empty’ (Mt 12:44). It is apparently swept and tidied, as in fact it is empty. It is apparently respectable, but absolutely barren. Then the unclean spirit ‘brings seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and set up house there, and so that person ends up worse off than before.’ (Lk 11:26; cf 2 P 2:20) Exterior purity is not enough; we need inner purity, and we can get it only by listening to the Word. Therefore, as it happened in Lk 8:21, to the woman’s blessing (“Blessed the womb that bore You and the breasts that fed You!” – 11:27) Jesus replies: “More blessed still are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” (11:28)

To keep the Word means to put it into practice. Listening to and putting the Word of God into practice are one and the same thing: this is one of the most important conclusions we can get from the Bible. I have already highlighted that in Exodus 24:7, when ratifying the Covenant, the whole people of Israel shouts, “We shall do everything that the Lord has said; we shall obey.” Obedience to God implies putting His commandments into practice, in all trust, given that, through them, He is offering us true liberty and the fulfilment of our lives. Martin Buber renders this passage so: “We shall do everything the Lord has said so that we can obey.” And the Hebrew sages state: ‘Someone whose knowledge is not turned into actions can be compared to a tree with many branches, but very few roots. When the wind gets up, it will be uprooted and knocked down... On the contrary, someone whose actions exceed his knowledge can be compared to a tree with very few branches and many roots. It would stand firm even though all the winds of the world got up against it.’ (Pirke Avot, III, 22) Here we can find an echo of Jesus’ words: ‘Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a sensible man who built his house on rock. Rain came down, floods rose, gales blew and hurled themselves against that house, and it did not fall: it was founded on rock.’ (Mt 7:24-25)

Jesus reminds His mother and his brothers who want to see Him that she can have no claim on Him, even though she bore Him in her womb and fed Him. She has to understand that her blessedness does not come from conceiving and giving birth to Him, rather from being a woman-

disciple who listens to His word. At the Annunciation Mary said, “Be it done to me according to Your Word.” (Lk 1:38) Now, living with Jesus at Nazareth makes her realise what the consent that she gave then really implies, and also how hard it is.

In the community of Jesus

Another event that puts the Virgin to the test and makes her grow is the wedding feast of Cana. ‘On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee. The mother of Jesus was there.’ (Jn 2:1) We may be a bit shocked by Mary’s solitude. Apparently her family does not exist any longer: when she arrives at Cana she is on her own. This fact reminds us of her faith in Jesus, prompting her to walk on a lonely and hard path. It reminds us also that she accompanies us as our friend and sister along the dark and solitary paths of our own faith...

Jesus arrives at the feast with His first disciples: Andrew and the ‘beloved disciple’, who used to be disciples of John the Baptist’s, and who started following Jesus at ‘Bethany, on the far side of the Jordan, where John was baptising’ (Jn 1:28); and also Simon, Philip and Nathanael. This is Jesus’ true family, increasing in number, to which He directs His mother too, so that her maternity may be transformed into a universal maternity, a love gift from her to the whole world.

There is a reason why the evangelist John never calls Mary by name, but uses the term ‘mother’: she is relevant only because she is ‘the mother of Jesus’ (Jn 2:1, 3; 2:5, 12; 6:42; 19:25-26; 19:27). There is no reason to think that the evangelist did not know her name: he knew perfectly well the name of Jesus’ putative father, Joseph, as well as the names of two of the women who stood near the cross of Jesus with Mary (Mary of Clopas and Mary of Magdala: 19:25). His referring exclusively to Mary’s motherhood has a symbolic meaning, as it is evident also from the way Jesus addresses her. ‘Woman, what do you want from me? My hour has not come yet.’ (2:4) This designation cannot be found in any other book either of the Old or of the New Testament; therefore it looks a bit weird. In fact, it is in no way disrespectful. Jesus used it also for the Samaritan woman who came to Jacob’s well to draw water – “Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.” (Jn 4:21) – thus prompting her to have faith in Him and to recognise Him as the Messiah who reveals God’s will. Jesus used it also for Mary of Magdala, when she was standing outside of His empty tomb, weeping: “Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?” (Jn 20:15) The woman’s quest must take a new direction, her faith must go beyond the physical presence of her Master: “Do not cling to me... but go to the brothers...” (Jn 20:17) Jesus used the same designation also for the adulterous woman, giving back to her, after her conversion, her dignity and value: “Woman... go away, and from this moment sin no more.” (Jn 8:10, 11) The title of ‘woman’ that He gives to His mother is therefore an appeal for her faith to rely exclusively on His word. The mother agrees to it and says to the servants: “Do whatever He tells you.” (Jn 2:5)

Jesus replies to His mother’s remark that ‘They have no wine’ (Jn 2:3) as “harshly” as He replied to His parents who were looking for Him when He was in the Temple, or to His mother and brothers who wanted to see Him. The sorrow Jesus’ words caused in her was meant to lead her to the Cross. In fact, after the wedding feast of Cana, Mary disappears from John’s gospel, to be back on Calvary, where she will be called ‘mother’ and ‘woman’ again. When Jesus’ hour comes, that is, when He is glorified by His death on the cross (Jn 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1), no longer will Mary be just His mother, but a “mother” and a “woman” in the fullest and most universal sense of the word.

Now, let us go through some paragraphs of the Dombes group’s document again, as this document is a very important ecumenical effort to biblically found a new Marian devotion, a devotion that may be able ‘to heal the old scars that exist between different churches and even within single churches as far as Marian theology is concerned’.

179. At Cana, Mary does not request anything from her Son; she simply makes an observation, then she addresses the servants. But her observation underlines what the feast is lacking. It is Mary who underlines what is not working. Then she intercedes with her Son. When she intervenes, she illustrates the believer's conduct, who has to listen to people, then present their needs to Jesus so that He may come to their help.

180. The lack of wine that Mary pointed out confronts Jesus, whose mission is at that very moment not 'well-defined' yet: "His hour has not come yet". In fact, Jesus' presence at a feast is not aimed at doing something about what is lacking, rather at revealing His glory and rousing people to faith. He illustrates this novelty beforehand, by fulfilling the sign. This event reveals the theological perspective of the gospel. Mary is present at this revelation, even though she is not aware of it.

181. "What do you want from me?" may be a puzzling question, not only underlining Mary's shortcomings (in fact, on the spot she cannot comprehend how and when Jesus will reveal His glory) but also inviting her to see her Son's perspective, and also to get rid of her own initiative in order to follow His. In this respect, we can say that the episode of Cana is a milestone on Mary's path of conversion: she understands that by now she has the role of leading the servants to her Son, so that they may listen to His word and thoroughly obey it.

182. Mary personally experiences that both the obedience to a word and the appeal to renunciation are a source of blessing. Propped up by trust in Him, even before learning what Jesus intends to do, she says to the servants: "Do whatever He tells you", urging them to behave with the same blind faith she has.²²

After taking part at the wedding at Cana, Jesus 'went down to Capernaum with His mother and His brothers and His disciples...' (Jn 2:12) Mary is no longer on her own; now she is part of the great family of the disciples and brothers of Jesus. She will leave Nazareth and Galilee, as many other women did (cf Lk 8:2-3; 23:49; Mk 15:40-41), and will follow Jesus in His journeys around the country of Israel.

Following Christ in the world

Mary's life with Jesus has much to teach to our 'secular' vocation, that tries to put the gospel into practice in the world, in all the different and complicated situations we may find ourselves in. This 'secular' vocation calls us to be extremely poor and self-less: in fact we have no support but our faith in Jesus Christ. Each and every RM sister should therefore try to experience the same solitude of Our Lady, who treasured her Son's words in her heart and based her own personal growth on them, the sorrowful growth of a believer who wanted to understand what God's will required from her, then to put it into practice. This solitude is not an end in itself: filled with an ever increasing longing for knowledge and an ever increasing love, it creates new relations, new communities of brothers and sisters, and is the basis of spiritual fatherhood and motherhood.

According to our Rule of Life, our 'secular' consecration should be based on the same attitude of Mary, who patiently listened to the Word. It is not always easy to be faithful to this task. Our 'ordinary jobs' as well as our commitment 'to live all of life's situations in Christ, and to carry out our social mandate in a spirit of service, with responsibility and competence' (Rule of Life, art. 4), expose us to the risk of becoming anxious: this is 'typical of those who do confide in their own efforts' (Rule of Life, art. 47). And anxiety may take away our liberty: we will not grow, then; we

²² Dombes Group, *Mary in the Design of God and in the communion of Saints*, n. 179-182: "Regno-documenti", 3rd February 1998, p. 118.

will not be able to give ourselves to God and neighbour and to spend our lives for them. Art. 47 states also that we should 'draw our inspiration from the service that Mary rendered and still renders to the world'; by her service, she leads people to Christ, she brings into the world the new ferment of faith. In her service she is self-less and poor, and she is not focussed on her own good, but on other people's.

May she help us to be faithful 'to our daily, long, personal meeting with the Lord' (Rule of Life, art. 32), stripping our natural bare selves so that we can put on Christ (cf art. 58). Our secular vocation needs prayer. Prayer is for us 'a radical duty' (art. 59) exactly because we live in the world. Without prayer, the call we have received 'to silently annunciate Christ to the world' (cf. art. 11) would become sterile. And a new humanity would never see the light where we live and work.

4. NEAR THE CROSS

Lectio Divina: «A sword will pierce your soul too.» (Lk 2:35)

«Under the cross of Jesus stood His mother and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala.» (Jn 19:25)

«It makes me happy to be suffering for you now, and in my own body to make up all the hardships that still have to be undergone by Christ for the sake of His body, the Church.» (Col 1:24)

«The upright one, my servant, will justify many by taking their guilt on himself.» (Is 53:11)

Rule of Life RM 7: «...from Her participation in the redemptive mission of Her Son, each of us will be led to understand, alleviate and make the most of human sufferings.»

In this unit we will deal with one of the basic points of disagreement between Catholics and Protestants. The Catholic Church's belief that Mary co-operated in the Saviour's work of redemption (cf Catechism of the Catholic Church, n° 968) looks to Protestants as disqualifying their own principle that men are justified by their faith in Jesus Christ, the one and only Saviour, who would save them simply out of grace, not by their works [on this dispute, cf CCC, nn° 1987-2029]. Nowadays as they have always done in the past, the churches of the Reformation refuse to establish a parallelism between Mary and Christ, or between Mary and the Church, and do not want to credit her with titles which would attribute to Mary a place that is not hers; they are just willing to say that she is our sister, the 'lowly one' – as the gospel puts it. Recently, the Catholic Church has slightly changed her vocabulary, so that it could be more respectful of the Protestant sensitivity, and her doctrine could be expressed in a clearer way. For example, the title 'co-redemptrix' is no longer used in official Catholic documents, as it could give the impression that Mary's role is of the same type as Christ's. Vatican II used the title 'mediatrix', under which the Blessed Virgin is invoked by the Church together with the titles of 'advocate', 'auxiliatrix' and 'adjutrix'. "This, however, is to be so understood that it neither takes away from nor adds anything to the dignity and efficaciousness of Christ the one Mediator. For no creature could ever be counted as equal with the Incarnate Word and Redeemer. Just as the priesthood of Christ is shared in various ways both by the ministers and by the faithful, and as the one goodness of God is really communicated in different ways to His creatures, so also the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a sharing in this one source." (Lumen Gentium, 62)

Vatican II insists on the idea of co-operation, as it is relevant to each and every believer's life. "Thus Mary, a daughter of Adam, consenting to the divine Word, became the mother of Jesus, the one and only Mediator. Embracing God's salvific will with a full heart and impeded by no sin, she devoted herself totally as a handmaid of the Lord to the person and work of her Son, under Him and with Him, by the grace of almighty God, serving the mystery of redemption. Rightly therefore the holy Fathers see her as used by God not merely in a passive way, but as freely cooperating in the work of human salvation through faith and obedience. For, as St. Irenaeus says, she 'being obedient, became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race.(Adversus haereses III, 22, 4) Hence not a few of the early Fathers gladly assert in their preaching, 'The knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience; what the virgin Eve bound through her unbelief, the Virgin Mary loosened by her faith.'(Irenaeus, *ibid.*) Comparing Mary with Eve, they call her 'the Mother of the living' (St Epiphanius, *Haer.* 78, 18) and still more often they say: 'death through Eve, life through Mary' (St Jerome, *Letter* 22, 21). This union of the Mother with the Son

in the work of salvation is made manifest from the time of Christ's virginal conception up to His death..." (Lumen Gentium, 56-57) "Predestined from eternity by that decree of divine providence which determined the incarnation of the Word to be the Mother of God, the Blessed Virgin was in this earth the virgin Mother of the Redeemer, and above all others and in a singular way the generous associate and humble handmaid of the Lord. She conceived, brought forth and nourished Christ. she presented Him to the Father in the temple, and was united with Him by compassion as He died on the Cross. In this singular way she cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the work of the Saviour in giving back supernatural life to souls. Wherefore she is our mother in the order of grace." (Lumen Gentium, 61) "By her maternal charity, she cares for the brethren of her Son, who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers..." (Lumen Gentium, 61)

In favour of His body, which is the Church

The Mother's 'co-operation' and 'union' with her Son remind all the believers that they have to strive to reach unity with Christ, their Mediator and Saviour; they also remind them that, especially because they adhere to Christ, they must be responsible towards their brothers and sisters. In union with Christ, they can commit themselves to their brothers and sisters, by devoting their whole lives to them, interceding on their behalf, offering Christ their own sufferings out of love, thus co-operating in His redemption of the world.

I chose Col 1:14 for your Lectio divina as it deals with this 'co-operation'. First, Paul exalts Christ as the Head of all creation (cf Col 1:13-20). Of course, this primacy has nothing to do with misuse of power... Rather, God wanted all fullness to be found in Him and through Him – who is the Beginning, the first-born of all creation – to reconcile all things to Him, everything in heaven and everything on earth, by making peace through His death on the cross (cf Col 1:15, 19-20). The cosmic primacy of Christ is displayed through reconciliation and peace. Then Paul addresses the community: once its members were "estranged and of hostile intent through their evil behaviour" (Col 1:21); but now Christ has reconciled them to Him, "by His death and in that mortal body". This "mortal body" is our own sinful human nature, that Christ redeemed by His sacrifice on the cross (cf Rm 8:3). By His grace we can be brought before Him, holy, faultless and irreproachable, as long as we persevere and stand firm on the solid base of the faith, never letting ourselves drift away from the hope promised by the gospel, which we have heard (cf Col 1:22-23). Christ saved us; nevertheless, our own response is required for our own and everybody else's salvation. "It makes me happy – Paul writes – to be suffering for you now, and in my own body to make up all the hardships that still have to be undergone by Christ for the sake of His body, the Church." (Col 1:24) We associate ourselves with Christ's trials (cf also 2 Co 1:5), that is, His passion (cf Col 1:22), in all the hardships we get from this world: these, however painful they may be, cannot cut us off from Christ (cf Rm 8:35). "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 4:8-10) Every hardship in our life may become meaningful for us if we subject to it in communion with Jesus. It is by living in communion with Jesus' sufferings – a source of joy and consolation, however weird that may seem – that we can make up all the hardships that still have to be undergone by Christ for the sake of His body, the Church: not because we can add anything to the redemptive value of the cross, to which in any case nothing is lacking; rather because we have been specially called to share Jesus' own service to our brothers and sisters. Thus, we share the very movement of the Son, who "emptied and humbled Himself" (Ph 2:7-8), as well as the very movement of Mary, whose "Fiat" is like Christ's own humble and obedient "Yes" to His Father. Both the Son and the Mother are dispossessed of their own will. By their renunciation, everybody else can discover that true freedom lies in giving up one's own love for the self.

The Word as a sword

Dealing with our sharing in the hardships of Christ and with our responsibility towards our brothers and sisters, we must add the words that Simeon said to Mary: “Look, He [Jesus] is destined for the fall and for the rise of many in Israel, destined to be a sign that is opposed – and a sword will pierce your soul too.” (Lk 2:34-35) Jesus fulfils what the prophets foretold about the Lord and His Word. “[The Lord] will be a sanctuary, a stumbling-stone, a rock to trip up the two Houses of Israel.” (Is 8:14) But all those who entrust their lives to the Lord will not stumble: “My trust is in the Lord who hides His face from the House of Jacob; I put my hope in Him.” (Is 8:17) Founded on the rock of faith, life will not be shaken: “Now I shall lay a stone in Zion, a granite stone, a precious corner-stone, a firm foundation-stone: no one who relies on this will stumble.” (Is 28:16)

This stumbling stone is God Himself, given that He may be welcomed or refused. The prophet’s life is a stumbling stone too: “A disaster for me, mother, that you bore me to be a man of strife and dissension for the whole country.” (Jr 15:10) In this prophet’s lamentation, the Word of God is obviously compared to a sword. This symbolic image can be found also in Heb 4:12, “The Word of God is something alive and active: it cuts more incisively than any two-edged sword: it can seek out the place where soul is divided from spirit, or joints from marrow; it can pass judgement on secret emotions and thoughts.” Fr Aristide Serra thoroughly studied ‘the Word of God as a sword’ in the Old Testament, the ancient Jewish literature, and the Greek and Latin tradition of the first thirteen centuries of the Christian era. If you want to acquire a thorough knowledge of that matter, please refer to his study.²³ Here the point is simpler: to understand why the Word is a sword piercing one’s soul.

Many contemporary authorities suggest that the sword foretold by Simeon to Mary could be the sorrow that she felt at seeing her Son rejected by His own people – what happened during His public ministry and, above all, during His passion and death – as well as at seeing the persecution against the early Christian community of Jerusalem she was part of (cf Ac 1:14). Rupert of Deutz (+ 1130), a very learned Medieval scholar who knew the Bible very well, felt that Paul’s confession of his great sorrow and unremitting agony in his heart (cf Rm 9:2) for the lot of his own people has a Marian dimension. In his commentary to the Song of Songs, Rupert applies Paul’s passage to the Virgin and makes her say: “What could this mean, if not praying for the salvation of the remnant of my people? Could I have less compassion towards my people than my friends – that is the prophets and the apostles – had? [...] Do not forget Your mercy, given that – as You told our fathers – when all the nations have become part of it, then all Israel will be safe.” (cf Rm 11:16) Mary’s sorrow is the Messiah’s own, for being rejected by His own people: she shares His fate because she is His mother. Aristide Serra aptly points out that the symbolism of the sword can be applied to many other situations. Luke himself takes care to highlight the many effects that the Word of God produced on Mary. The gospel lists a wide range of experiences and feelings, which we have already dealt with in the previous units of this essay: Mary is deeply disturbed (Lk 1:29); she puts forward questions (Lk 1:29, 34; 2:48); she is afraid (Lk 1:30); she obeys (Lk 1:38); she gives praise to God (Lk 1:46-47); she ponders everything in her heart (Lk 2:19, 51); she is amazed (Lk 2:23, 47-48). And she is worried when, going back home after celebrating the feast of the Passover in Jerusalem, she cannot find her Son Jesus anywhere. Now Simeon’s prophecy is clear: her life – like the life of every believer – will be pierced by the sword of the Word of God, which exceeds our expectations, is deeper and wider than the depths of the sea, always new even after many years of study, always demanding.

²³ A. SERRA, *‘Una spada trafiggerà la tua vita (Lc 2:35). Quale spada? Bibbia e tradizione giudaico-cristiana a confronto’* [«A sword will pierce your life too (Lk 2:25). Which sword? Comparison between Bible and Hebrew-Christian tradition], Marianum-Servitium, Sotto il Monte (Bergamo), 2003.

The image of the sword occurs in St Luke's gospel another time, during the Last Supper: "Jesus said to them, 'When I sent you out without purse or haversack or sandals, were you short of anything?' 'No, nothing,' they said. He said to them, 'But now if you have a purse, take it, and the same with a haversack; if you have no sword, sell your cloak and buy one, because I tell you these words of Scripture are destined to be fulfilled in me: He was counted as one of the rebellious. (Is 53:12) Yes, what it says about me is even now reaching its fulfilment.'" (Lk 22:35-37)

When Jesus sent out the Twelve (cf Lk 9:1-6), then the 72 disciples (cf Lk 10:1-24), He warned them not to take anything for the journey with them: neither haversack nor purse, neither bread nor money, neither a spare tunic nor sandals. Yet, they were not short of anything. Now, on the eve of His passion, the situation is definitely different. Jesus not only bids them take both purse and haversack with them; He also bids them sell their cloaks in order to buy swords... Of course He does not mean that they have to buy material swords; but the disciples, misled by His puzzling words, show Him two swords. Then Jesus harshly replies, 'That is enough!' (cf Lk 22:38) And again, when He is about to be arrested, they have not still understood their Master's language: " 'Lord, shall we use our swords?' And one of them struck the high priest's servant and cut off his right ear. But at this Jesus said, 'That is enough.' And touching the man's ear He healed him." (Lk 22:49-51)

In Jesus' way of thinking, the sword is indeed His Word: "...if you have no sword, sell your cloak and buy one, because I tell you these words of Scripture are destined to be fulfilled in me: He was counted as one of the rebellious." He is innocent, but He accepts to be counted as one of the rebellious, in order to ransom them from their rebellion. "Yes, what [the Scripture] says about me is even now reaching its fulfilment." This is the true meaning of the Word of God, as well as the height of the whole Revelation: Jesus amidst the rebellious, similar to them in order to save them from evil, willing to give up His life for them. This should be a test for us too: we are not really listening to the Word of God, we are not really obeying it, unless we are willing to share our life with our brothers and sisters, unless we care for them and bring them the consolation and hope deriving from communion and mutual help.

Under the cross

Standing under the cross, Mary is not co-operating in the unique sacrifice that is Christ's own. However, as Vatican II states, she "advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and faithfully persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross, where she stood, in keeping with the divine plan, grieving exceedingly with her only begotten Son, uniting herself with a maternal heart with His sacrifice..." (Lumen Gentium, 58) Calvary is a perfect representation of the relation between God and man. God's salvation always requires this relation between the One who is giving and the one who is receiving. Moreover, God's salvation requires man's acceptance, man's grateful response. God loves us first and establishes with us a covenant of communion first; but He waits our positive response for the covenant to become effective. God willed that His Word should be made flesh by Mary's "Fiat". In this respect, the Dombes ecumenical document quotes a passage by Alexandre Vinet, a 19th century Protestant theologian: "We do not say: 'Work out your salvation in spite of the fact that God gives you the intention and the powers to act'; rather, with the Apostle, 'Work out your salvation in fear and trembling because it is God who, for His own generous purpose, gives you the intention and the powers to act' (Ph 2:12-13). Someone said that true Christian wisdom lies in being quiet as if it were God who does everything, and in working out as if He did not do anything. Well, we'd better say that it is He who does everything: He made us; we, in our turn, can act but it is He who gives us the intention and the powers to act; through us He works; but whatever He does, He wants to do it with us; He does not want to do it in any other way." (n° 219) Then the document goes on: "We must specify that welcoming a gift is not equal to giving it. The one who receives it has no part in the initiative of giving it. Still, the gift can be a gift only if

there is someone who welcomes and receives it. Otherwise, we should speak of ‘offer’, not ‘gift’. The one who gives, needs someone willing to receive. The gift can be compared to an invocation, on the part of the one who is willing to give, to the one who is supposed to receive. Thus, the response can be seen as a basic part of the gift. God’s gift to mankind – Christ – is subject to this principle too: the gift must be gladly received: ‘How often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you refused!’ (Mt 23:37) Later on, Augustine will say: ‘The One who created you without your co-operation, will not be able to save you without your co-operation.’ (Discourse 169, 11, 13). [...] Such is the paradox of the Covenant: it is unilateral on God’s part, but becomes bilateral in order to become effective. The Covenant does exist before man’s response: a refusal on man’s part does not invalidate it, given that it is part of God’s plan.

Our ‘Yes’ has already been pronounced by God in Jesus Christ: ‘You wanted no sacrifice or cereal offering, but You gave me a body... then I said, “Here I am, I am coming,”... to do Your will, God.’ (Heb 10:5-7, quoting Ps 40:7-9 according to the Septuagint). Still it is important that we, in our turn, freely respond, “Yes”.’ (n° 220, 222)

Mary’s “Yes” to God is fulfilled by her willingness to lose her Son Jesus and to welcome as a son the beloved disciple, that is, each and every believer, each and every of Jesus’ brothers and sisters. Mary welcomes the beloved disciple as a son, while the beloved disciple welcomes her as a mother into his home. Under Jesus’ cross a new family is born. Blood ties play no part in it, substituted by faith and service. In fact, it is the Lord’s will to save us as one body living in communion, as one community of brothers and sisters who mutually help one another on the path towards the Kingdom. The risen Jesus will call His disciples, ‘brothers’, and God, ‘my Father and your Father’ (cf Jn 20:17; Mt 28:10).

The glorious and sorrowful Virgin

According to RM’s Rule of Life, from the Mother of God’s participation in the redemptive mission of Her Son, each of us should be led to “understand, alleviate and make the most of human sufferings.” (Rule of Life, art. 7)

By our living in society we should participate in the people’s problems (to understand), offer them help (to alleviate), and also point out to them the true meaning of their sufferings. This is indeed part of RM’s charisma: in the first place, because it is a secular institute; in the second place, because its secular vocation arose from the Servite Order. From its very origins, the Order gave help to the sick and the poor, as well as to pilgrims: this service drew its inspiration from the Mater Dolorosa (Sorrowful Mother). In the ‘vulgate’ Legend of St Philip (n° 8) one can read the following passage: “We are called Servants of the glorious Virgin, of whose widowhood we wear the habit.”²⁴ The Virgin is at the same time glorious and sorrowful, and the Servant depicted her so in many paintings and icons. We especially remember the *Bordone Madonna* (Siena, 1261) and *Her Majesty of the Servants* (Orvieto, 1268), both by Coppo of Marcovaldo. In both paintings, the iconographic type is called ‘Majesty’ – given that the Mother of God is enthroned, and has her Baby on her lap, assisted by angels and saints – but she wears a black mantle with a golden lining. The glorious Virgin wears her widowhood’s garment: she is at the same time the glorious Mother and a woman afflicted by sufferings. She is glorious because, in spite of her sufferings, she shines with God’s light. An essential part of RM’s vocation is to help suffering people find the meaning of their sorrows. Thus, we will put into practice what art. 26 of our Rule of Life prescribes: “You shall contemplate and imitate Mary, the faithful maidservant of the Lord who, by being open to and by accepting the will of God, conceived and gave birth to Christ. Throughout her whole life, she co-operated in His work of love and redemption.”

²⁴ *Sources for the History and Spirituality of the Servants of Mary*, I, p. 270.

5. HOPE OF UNITY

Lectio Divina: «...one hope is the goal of your calling by God.» (Ep 4:4)

Rule of Life RM 7: «Each of us [each sister] will strive for the Virgin Mary an example of trust in the Lord – to be a sign of hope and unity to the divided men and women of our times.»

“Each of us,” art. 7 of our Rule of Life states, “will strive for the Virgin Mary – an example of trust in the Lord – to be a sign of hope and unity to the divided and insecure men and women of our times.” Hope and unity seem to be strictly correlated: in fact, hope has as its object unity, and unity is in its turn a source of hope.

In this unit we will refer first to Chapter 8 of Vatican II’s *Lumen Gentium*, the dogmatic constitution on the Church, and quote some of its phrases and passages in order to understand how Our Lady can be a sign of hope and unity to us. Then, starting from Ephesians 4:4, we will investigate how both the Old and the New Testament deal with hope. Finally we will deal with the Rule of Life itself.

The pilgrim’s hope

“Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.” (Lk 1:45) The loud cry Elisabeth gives explains the basic spiritual attitude of her who should be for us “an example of trust in the Lord”. Faith; trust; to entrust oneself: Holy Scripture makes use of just one word (‘pistis’) in order to express the attitude of those who are so brave that they trust in God and thoroughly entrust themselves into His hands. It is the very courage of the little ones and of the poor, who are perfectly aware that they cannot trust in their own resources. The Virgin, from the Annunciation to Pentecost, could advance in her ‘pilgrimage’ thanks to the courage she got from faith. This is why – Vatican II states – “she stands out among the poor and humble of the Lord, who confidently hope for and receive salvation from Him.” (LG, 55)

So that the Virgin could be the mother of His Son, God made her a “new creature”, that is, simply a creature who acknowledges that she is not her own mistress, but depends on her Creator, the obedient handmaid who freely and thoroughly consents to her Lord’s request. “Thus Mary, a daughter of Adam, consenting to the divine Word, became the mother of Jesus, the one and only Mediator. Embracing God’s salvific will with a full heart and impeded by no sin, she devoted herself totally as a handmaid of the Lord to the person and work of her Son, under Him and with Him, by the grace of almighty God, serving the mystery of redemption. Rightly therefore the holy Fathers see her as used by God not merely in a passive way, but as freely cooperating in the work of human salvation through faith and obedience.” (LG, 56)

As I wrote in Unit 4, Mary’s co-operation to man’s salvation derives from the close union she always lived in with Jesus, both during His infancy and His public life. “In the course of her Son’s preaching she received the words whereby in extolling a kingdom beyond the calculations and bonds of flesh and blood, He declared blessed (cf Mk 3:35; Lk 11:27-28) those who heard and kept

the word of God, as she was faithfully doing. (cf Lk 2:19, 51) After this manner the Blessed Virgin advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and faithfully persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross, where she stood, in keeping with the divine plan, (cf Jn 19:25) grieving exceedingly with her only begotten Son, uniting herself with a maternal heart with His sacrifice, and lovingly consenting to the immolation of this Victim which she herself had brought forth.” (LG, 58)

The extremely close relation between the Virgin Mother and Jesus sheds its light on the Church, given that the Church is virgin and mother as well. “The Mother of God is a type of the Church in the order of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ. (...) The Church indeed, contemplating her hidden sanctity, imitating her charity and faithfully fulfilling the Father's will, by receiving the word of God in faith becomes herself a mother. By her preaching she brings forth to a new and immortal life the sons who are born to her in baptism, conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of God. She herself is a virgin, who keeps the faith given to her by her Spouse whole and entire. Imitating the mother of her Lord, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, she keeps with virginal purity an entire faith, a firm hope and a sincere charity.” (LG, 63-64)

Mary herself was a pilgrim along the roads of this world. Her faith can therefore help us understand that we do not have anything to conquer, rather that we must strive to advance in our pilgrimage. We should not strive to gain spiritual or material possessions, but we should hope that fullness can be achieved. Our Lady exhorts us never to abandon hope, even when we might be tempted by dejection and lack of confidence. “In the interim just as the Mother of Jesus, glorified in body and soul in heaven, is the image and beginning of the Church as it is to be perfected in the world to come, so too does she shine forth on earth, until the day of the Lord shall come, (cf 2 P 3:10) as a sign of sure hope and solace to the people of God during its sojourn on earth.” (LG, 68)

According to Isaiah's vision (Is 2:2-5), all the nations will stream to Zion, the mountain of the Lord. This people, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage, fulfils the believer's hope, which has to do not with individual happiness, but with the unity of different peoples and nations: in fact, we do not go up to the mountain of the Lord on our own, but with everybody else. Hope makes us all brothers and sisters. It is relevant that Chapter 8 of Lumen Gentium ends with the idea of mankind's unity, and Mary herself intercedes so that we can reach this goal: “The entire body of the faithful pours forth instant supplications to the Mother of God and Mother of men that she, who aided the beginnings of the Church by her prayers, may now, exalted as she is above all the angels and saints, intercede before her Son in the fellowship of all the saints, until all families of people, whether they are honoured with the title of Christian or whether they still do not know the Saviour, may be happily gathered together in peace and harmony into one people of God, for the glory of the Most Holy and Undivided Trinity.” (LG, 69)

Trust

Mary nourishes the hope of the pilgrim people that strives to build a new humanity, living in fraternal love and unity. This is the reason why, for this unit's lectio, I chose St Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, the purpose of which is to restore the unity of the Church by reminding all believers of the novelty of the Christian life that they have just embraced. Incidentally, in the Bible the term 'unity' can be found only twice: Ep 4:3 and 4:13. At the time, the Church's members came from different religious as well as cultural backgrounds, and there was a risk that the part with a pagan background prevailed over the part with a Jewish background. St Paul reminds the former that they have a share in Israel's inheritance too (cf Ep 2:11-22). But they have to get rid of their feelings of superiority, while striving to attain to the peace which is Christ Himself. “For He is the peace between us, and has made the two into one entity and broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart, by destroying in His own person the hostility, that is, the Law of commandments with its decrees. His purpose in this was, by restoring peace, to create a single New Man out of the two of them...” (Ep 2:14-15; cf 4:3) The ecclesial community, in spite of the different backgrounds of its members, originates from Christ's salvific will; His will precedes the world's creation (cf Ep 1:3,

4, 5, 11-12): from eternity God has willed a community of people redeemed by Christ His Son, and hid in it the “mystery” of His purpose (cf Ep 1:9), that is, “that He would bring everything together under Christ, as head” (Ep 1:10). The unity of this community must be a sign of the goal towards which, in God’s plan, the world is striving. The Church must be aware of the mystery she has been entrusted with: her life must be consistent with it; thanks to it, she may be ready to have trust in the world. The world is not an evil reality; it bears in itself a positive orientation. This image of the world is very important for all those who have a “secular” vocation and want to be part of the world as the yeast mixed in with the flour, till what is good in the world is leavened all through.

The Letter to the Ephesians attributes the quality of Body of Christ to the Church only (1:23; 2:16; 4:4, 12, 16; 5:23, 30), the place where one can find the fullness of His grace and His gifts (3:19; 4:10, 13; 5:18); the Church only is Christ’s Bride (cf 5:25-30). However, the world too belongs to Christ, is subject to His rule, and must become His kingdom. By her unity, the Church must bear witness to “the manifold wisdom of God” (Ep 3:10), singing a hymn of praise to the “one God and Father of all, over all, through all and within all” (Ep 4:6).

To nourish our hope in unity is the very purpose of the Church’s ministry. There are some specific ministries, ordered for the up-building of the community (cf Ep 4:11). But there is also a ‘service’ which should be each and every Church member’s. “On each one of us God’s favour has been bestowed in whatever way Christ allotted it.” (Ep 4:7) ‘Us’ refers to ‘the whole community’, given that it is immediately followed by a quotation of Psalm 68 (“He gave gifts to humanity” – 4:8) and by the phrase of line 10: “The one who went down is none other than the one who went up above all the heavens to fill all things.” The specific ministries within the community have been instituted by God Himself, not as means of personal promotion, rather in order “to knit God’s holy people together for the work of service to build up the Body of Christ, until we all reach unity in faith and knowledge of the Son of God and form the perfect Man, fully mature with the fullness of Christ Himself.” (Ep 4:12-13) We are all servants of unity: this is the true service to the Church, the service which Christians find their true identity in. It must be a service nourished by hope, given that the ultimate goal of the world is good. We must co-operate one with the other in order for all its potentialities of goodness to come to light.

To hope against all hope

“One hope is the goal of your calling by God.” (Ep 4:4) This hope is quite the opposite of “dreams” (cf Si 34:1-8): it is God Himself, whom Israel addresses with the words, “For You are my hope, Lord” (Ps 71:5); “Lord, hope of Israel” (Jr 14:8; 17:13). As far as ancient religions are concerned, this designation cannot be found elsewhere. The Lord is the unique foundation on which man’s hope is built. Israel put its hope in the Lord; in fact, God was the object of its hope, as He is faithful and never lets man down (cf Is 8:17; Mi 7:7; Ps 42:6). If in the past God has kept His promises of salvation, He will do so in the future as well. It is easy to understand why the biblical tradition attaches such a great importance to the theme of memory-memorial-meditation: the memory of what God did in the past comes true in the present and prepares man for the future (cf Dt 7:17-21; Jdt 8:26-27; 1 M 2:61; 2 M 8:19-20; 13:10; 15:7-11). Within the liturgical assembly the people is brought up to celebrate the memorial of his Lord’s deeds. This meditation of the whole community gives rise to the hope that God will keep His promises in the future too.

From Abraham onwards, at the time of the Exodus from Egypt and the entrance into the promised land, Israel did experiment that their hope in God did not prevent them from being part of contemporary history. On the contrary, it made them true protagonists of history, by guiding them on the path to liberation from slavery, and letting them enter into the land of freedom and communion.

Israel hopes in God: still, their future is not in their own hands; and they are not insured against life’s downs either. Hope needs obedience and a complete trust in God. This is the lesson

Israel learns during the Babylonian deportation. After losing everything they owned, and having no illusions left about the future, they start to hope in God again: “He gives strength to the weary, He strengthens the powerless. Youths grow tired and weary, the young stumble and fall, but those who hope in the Lord will regain their strength, they will sprout wings like eagles, though they run they will not grow weary, though they walk they will never tire.” (Is 40:29-31)

Thanks to man’s personal relation with God, a new life can spring from hope. Israel will have to put its trust in the divine love again. In fact, God would like to stay with us as a friend. “But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, descendant of Abraham my friend (...) do not be afraid, for I am with you; do not be alarmed, for I am your God. (...) For I, the Lord, your God, I grasp you by your right hand; I tell you, ‘Do not be afraid, I shall help you.’ Do not be afraid, Jacob, you worm! You little handful of Israel! I shall help you, declares the Lord; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.” (Is 41:8-14) God is trying to establish an intimate and loving relation with His creature: the terms “my servant”, “...whom I have chosen”, “descendant of Abraham”, imply that Israel is the Lord’s property and also that God can see Himself in Israel, His beloved. At the same time, though, He calls Israel, “worm” and “little handful”, in order to remind them that they are powerless and fragile. The fact that Israel is God’s beloved servant does not make a ‘super-people’ of it. They are poor and wretched mortals like any other people; their strength does not lie in their own resources, but in God.

God is true to His promises; still, He can do what He likes like a sovereign. His faithfulness comes true when He fulfils His promises to the fathers; yet, it exceeds all human expectations. God’s mystery is inexhaustible; it cannot be contained by human history. It surpasses any expectations, it is an unpredictable novelty. “Thus says the Lord, who made a way through the sea, a path in the raging waters, who led out chariot and horse together with an army of picked troops. (...) No need to remember past events, no need to think about what was done before. Look, I am doing something new, now it emerges; can you not see it?” (Is 43:16-19) The new exodus will not be just a repetition of the Exodus from Egypt. Faith and hope are not based on something predictable; they invite man to look forward to a future which is always new. Hope should help us discover the new energy which is contained in all the events of our lives. Hope should free us from our false certainties, as well as from prejudices.

To hope means to trust in God the Creator. Now we should go through Chapter 4 of St Paul’s Letter to the Romans again, where all the faith of Israel, from Abraham to Christ, is regarded as adherence to God’s creative power, even when someone experiences delusion, adversity, death. In particular, have a look at Rm 4:17-25. Abraham’s faith and hope were not shaken on account of his real life’s situations, of the fact that he was old and “his body was as good as dead”. “There seemed to be no hope.” “Abraham is our father in the eyes of God, in whom he put his faith, and who brings the dead to life and calls into existence what does not yet exist.” (Rm 4:17) Christ’s resurrection proclaims to us that it is always possible to hope, even when it seems that we are at a low ebb.

God raised Christ from the dead as “the first-fruits of all who have fallen asleep”, “the first-born of many brothers” and “life-giving spirit” (1 Co 15:20-57; Rm 8:9; Col 1:18). His victory is indeed our victory, as it is the fulfilment of God’s promise and the beginning of “the age to come” (cf Col 1:15-20; Ep 1:10, 20-23). Christian hope is based on the fact of the resurrection: with death and sin closing in upon us, the resurrection opens up our lives to a bright future. In the risen Christ, God has conquered the forces of evil set against His kingdom for ever; He has also given us the certainty that human history will not end in failure.

This hope-certainty is the reason why we keep on striving in this life, even when it seems that the forces of evil, violence and wickedness might win and the future looks dark²⁵. “Let us exult, too, in our hardships, understanding that hardship develops perseverance, and perseverance develops a tested character, something that gives us hope, and a hope which will not let us down,

²⁵ It could be useful the reading of n. 5/2004 of “Concilium” review, regarding the considerations of *Un altro mondo è possibile [It is possible another type of world]*.

because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the holy Spirit which has been given to us.” (Rm 5:3-5) Christian hope is deeply rooted in the cross, that is, it is born during our daily struggle against every kind of power – both inside and outside us – preventing our own resurrection. Our hope is based on Easter, but here and now we experience the darkness of the cross, because we cannot run away from the burdens of everyday life and into the realm of day-dreaming. Christian hope shrinks from ‘enthusiasm’, that is, from the illusion or presumption that we already possess God’s gifts (cf 1 Co 4:8-13; 2 Co 4:7-18). Christian hope stands at the foot of the cross, like Mary did, with a firm faith in life springing up even from death.

Know the contemporary world

We should bring this message of hope “to the divided and insecure men and women of our times”. They are made insecure by the hardships and delusions of life (cf. Rule of Life, art. 18). They are incapable of believing that the world can be changed for the better. They are insecure as they do not find in themselves the strength to believe that goodness lies hidden somewhere in this world, the strength to entrust themselves to God’s love. As they are insecure, they are also divided, confined to their own narrow-mindedness, their petty interests and ideologies.

In line with art. 56 of our Rule of Life, each RM sister should therefore commit herself to “thoroughly study” contemporary society and its culture – in addition to the Scriptures and liturgy – in order “to participate more responsibly and with greater understanding in the life and journey of faith of the Church and of the world”. “This itinerary of knowledge... will help you bear witness by a life perfect in faith, patient in hope and persevering in love.”

6. SIGN OF UNITY

Lectio Divina: «With one heart all these joined constantly in prayer, together with some women, including Mary, the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.» (Ac 1:14)

Rule of Life RM 7: «Each of us [each sister] will strive for the Virgin Mary – an example of trust in the Lord – to be a sign of hope and unity to the divided men and women of our times.»

In the previous unit we have highlighted how Mary can nourish our hope in the up building of a new humanity, living in fraternal love and unity. In this unit we will go on discussing this topic, by meditating on Acts 1:14 and its context.

In the same place

After Jesus' ascension to Heaven, the early group of followers of His gathered together, according to the Acts of the Apostles, "in the same place" (Ac 1:15), that is, in the "upper room where they were staying" (Ac 1:13). It is the same place where Jesus' last supper took place (cf Lk 22:11-12; Mk 14:14-15). The Greek phrase 'epi to ayto', 'in the same place', is rendered by the Italian Bishops' Conference Bible in many different ways: in Ac 1:15 with "congregation"; in Ac 2:44 with "in common"; in Ac 2:48 with "community"; only in Ac 2:1 the literal meaning is retained ("in the same place").

The people who were gathered together in the Upper Room were the Eleven, some women and Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and His brothers. "With one heart all these joined constantly in prayer." (Ac 1:14) Many more people must have joined this original group, given that later on it is reported that "there were about a hundred and twenty people in the congregation". (Ac 1:15)

The Eleven, the women, Mary and the brothers of Jesus were three distinct groups of disciples: they differed one from the other as far as their respective lifestyles, calling and paths of faith were concerned. The Apostles, picked out by Jesus in the greater group of disciples (cf Lk 6:12-16 par): their very number, now that they were eleven instead of twelve, was the painful sign that they had betrayed and deserted their Master.

The women had followed Jesus from Galilee and helped Him in His itinerant ministry, and provided for Him out of their own resources (cf Lk 8:3). They distinguished themselves from the Eleven for their faithfulness, which had not wavered even when they were put to the test: some of them were standing at a distance from His cross and "saw all that happen". (cf Lk 23:49) Others stood near the cross of Jesus with His Mother (cf Jn 19:25). On the first day of the week, at dawn, the women went to the tomb with the spices and ointments they had prepared to embalm Jesus' body, but they did not find Him: in fact, someone who is alive must not be looked for among the dead, but elsewhere (cf Lk 24:1-8). The women's quest had been prompted by their sincere love and deep affection for Jesus.

The brothers of Jesus are joined to His Mother in Mk 3:31-35 (cf Mt 12:46-50; Lk 8:19-21). Standing outside, they sent in a message asking for Him, and waited for Him to go out to them. But Jesus stated that the relation between the disciples and Himself was deeper than that with His family (cf Mk 3:33-35 par). Consequently, His Mother and brothers must join the group of His disciples, the group of those who listened to His word. Jesus' reply may be a clue that there were

disagreements between His original family and the new ‘family’, made up of disciples. His relations, the gospels say, believed He was out of His mind (cf Mk 3:21); His brothers had no faith in Him (cf Jn 7:5).

Now, in Jerusalem, these three groups “joined constantly in prayer” (Ac 1:14). The Greek verb ‘pros-karterein’ (‘to persevere’) conveys the idea of holding fast to something. In the Letter to the Hebrews, even though the initial preposition ‘pros’, which conveys the idea of persevering, is missing, this verb qualifies Moses’ sound faith: “he held to his purpose like someone who could see the invisible” (Heb 11:27). The verb is linked to prayer also in Acts 2:42; 6:4; Romans 12:12; Col 4:2. To persevere in prayer needs courage; it is the condition to receive the Holy Spirit. Prayer must be made “jointly”, as if all those who are praying were one heart and one soul. This term can be found nearly exclusively in Acts (elsewhere in the New Testament we can find it once in Rm 15:6). It is referred to the community of believers, gathered together in order to pray (Ac 1:14; 2:46; 4:24), to meet (Ac 5:12), to listen to the message (Ac 8:6), to confer special ministries on the brothers (Ac 15:25).

Encouraged by the new strength which confirmed them on the path that they had just started, and which united them by a new spiritual tie, now the three groups (the Eleven, the women, Mary and Jesus’ brothers) were waiting to receive the Spirit promised by the Lord. What was this new strength? It was the faith in the risen Christ, enabling them to establish new relations.

Brothers of Jesus

The Eleven bore the mark of having betrayed Jesus. But thanks to Jesus’ initiative who addressed them as ‘brothers’ again (cf Mt 28:10; Jn 20:17), they could start the ‘return voyage’. Now they saw to replacing Judas. Peter stood up “to speak to the brothers” – here the term ‘brothers’ refers to the wider circle of Jesus’ disciples and converts, the hundred and twenty people the congregation was made up of (cf Ac 1:15). Peter quoted the Scriptures: “The passage of Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit, speaking through David, foretells the fate of Judas, who acted as guide to the men who arrested Jesus.” (Ac 1:16) The one to replace Judas must be chosen from among those who had lived with Jesus “from the time when John was baptising until the day He was taken up into heaven” (cf Ac 1:21-22), as the Eleven and Judas himself did. But Judas, after being one of the Twelve and sharing their ministry (Ac 1:17), had abandoned it “to go to his proper place”. (Ac 1:25) The other disciples had scattered as well, “each going his own way” (Jn 16:32); but later on they had found their way again, starting from Peter who, after denying his Master, “wept bitterly” (Lk 22:62 par.) and started following Him again, this time as a repentant sinner. Judas, on the contrary, “made off and went and hanged himself” (Mt 27:5). He was filled with despair, because he had broken communion with Jesus, the one and only hope which could save him. Now, going back to Acts, the Eleven must choose someone who had been in communion with Jesus, from the very beginning of His public ministry to the end, and “appoint him to serve with us as a witness to His resurrection” (Ac 1:22).

Once Judas had been replaced, and unity had been built out of the disciples’ relation with Jesus, the hundred and twenty ‘brothers’ became the ‘soil’ where the Holy Spirit’s life-giving breath could make new shoots sprout. While a violent wind was filling the house where they had met, “there appeared to them tongues as of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each of them.” (cf Ac 2:1-4) One is the Spirit, many are the languages they began to speak. One is the place where they were gathered, but each of them started speaking in a different language. Each of them was free to express himself. Now we understand better that to stay “in the same place” does not only imply that all of them were physically in the same place, but also that they were all turning to the One God, to Him who “holds everything together and knows every word said” (Ws 1:7).

Mary among the brothers

Mary can be seen with the apostles, the women and the brothers of Jesus. The Acts will not mention her again, even though she will influence both the early Christian community's and the whole of the Church's history. In fact, the way she is present among the disciples and the believers reveals the true nature of the Christian community. In this community she has no ministries; she accompanies them, she shares their lives, their prayer, their waiting for the Lord's return, thus co-operating in building up a church that is one in love.

According to St John's gospel, the meaning of Mary's presence among the brothers is highlighted by two fundamental events in Jesus' life. After the miracle at Cana's wedding, Jesus "went down to Capernaum with His mother and His brothers and His disciples" (Jn 2:12). We are surprised to see that here the evangelist mentions Jesus' 'brothers': he never mentioned them before. Is he trying to suggest that the faith in Jesus Christ can build up a community of brothers? In this community now we find His mother. It will be the same on Golgotha: Jesus will entrust His beloved disciple to His mother, and His mother to His beloved disciple (Jn 19:26-27), healing any possible disagreement between the two groups and joining the mother and the disciple with a new tie, cemented by His sacrifice on the cross.

Mary lives hidden among the brothers. She keeps silent, but her presence is decisive as far as the up building of a community around Jesus is concerned. We have much to learn from her: how to build new relations with everyone; how not to be self-centred; how to make room for others; how to welcome others with solicitude and kindness, as well as to be humble and grateful when others might welcome us.

At the beginning of the 19th century, Johann Adam Moehler, who studied the reality of the Church in the light of the Holy Spirit, thus summed up the ecclesial community's gathering: "In the life of the Church we see two different attitudes, both of which 'radical' as well as selfish: either *every one* or *each one* wants to be everything. In the latter case, the bond of unity is so tight and love so intrusive that they become asphyxiating. In the former case, everything breaks up and cools down up to the point of freezing. The first kind of selfishness gives rise to the second; and vice versa. In fact, it is not necessary for *every one* or *each one* to be everything. Only by gathering all together we can be everything; and only if all of us live in unity we can be one. This is the very concept of Catholic Church."²⁶

A family gathered together in the name of Jesus

Each and every chapter of RM's Rule of Life deals with the concept of unity. Our secular vocation implies the will to lead "a hidden life in the world... and the ability to live a solitary witness" (art. 68), as well as the will to build up "a family gathered together in the name of the Lord Jesus" (art. 1), where we can live "as one in mutual love" (art. 3). We can genuinely take part in the life of the world only after striving to reach unity, as the Lord Jesus, who "knows us one by one, calls us and gathers us together so that we can walk on a common spiritual path" (art. 64). By the offer of our whole selves to Christ, loved above everything else, (art. 9) a new fraternity is born, embracing each and every person as well as all creation (art. 10). Our communion with the Lord, the source of all gifts we do receive, frees us from our self-centredness and makes us able to appreciate and be grateful for the gifts others might have received: "You shall be grateful for whatever you may receive from God and from your brothers and sisters. You shall be happy about the gifts others have received." (art. 16) "Mindful that the gifts you have received must be shared with your brothers and sisters, you shall put yourself at your Sisters' as well as at everybody else's

²⁶ *L'unità della Chiesa, cioè il principio del cattolicesimo nello spirito dei Padri della Chiesa dei primi tre secoli [The Unity of the Church, i.e. the beginning of Catholicism in the Spirit of the Fathers of the Church during the first three centuries]*, Città Nuova, Roma 1969, p. 70.

disposal. By your interior poverty you will be made attentive to them, and you will also be made capable of welcoming, being open to and exchanging views with them.” (art. 17)

As we have seen from Acts, prayer increases our communion with the Lord and with our brothers and sisters. Common prayer is the best way to grow in unity (cf art. 34): “that unity which Christ asked of the Father for His disciples, and which derives from constant prayer” (art. 36).

As far as permanent formation is concerned, the Virgin Mary should be our source of inspiration: “Be available, as the Virgin was, to the action of the Holy Spirit, and co-operate with it” (art. 55). Our Mistress should be the Virgin of the Upper Room: “You shall learn from Mary, who from the Upper Room days always supported in faith the early Christian community, that evangelical style of fraternity which must identify your behaviour towards all the Sisters, towards your neighbour, and especially towards those who have been called to lead the Church of Christ.” (art. 45) By living in communion, RM’s sisters express and are the sign of a wider communion which includes the whole Church, whose “anxieties and urges” (art. 5) they share.

We may be helped to persevere walking courageously on the path to unity, by faithfully taking part in RM’s meetings (“Each meeting of the Family – such as Local Group’s meetings, the General Assembly and so on – is a special occasion for unity, fraternal communion and manifestation of God’s will: it brings about the presence of the Lord, which He promised to the disciples gathered together in His name.” – art. 41); by faithfully obeying our Rule, the common resolutions, the Leaders’ guidelines (“You shall commit yourself to carry out with faith and love the Rule of Life, the resolutions of the Assembly and of the Central Council, the guidelines of the Group’s Leaders as well as whatever might be decided by our fraternal meetings. Thus, you will effectively contribute to the up-building of that unity willed by Christ Himself.” – art. 24); by recognising that the Elder Sister is a sign of the unity of all the sisters (art. 103) and that she has the task of fostering the unity of the Family and promoting the active participation of all the members (art. 105a).

In one’s own family too, each sister shall be a sign of peace and unity, and shall contribute both her love and practical help to it (cf. art. 51).

7. THE WOMAN ROBED WITH THE SUN

Lectio Divina: «Let it happen to me as you have said.» (Lk 1:38)

«Of all women you are the most blessed.» (Lk 1:42)

«Now a great sign appeared in Heaven: a woman, robed with the sun...» (Rv 12:1 ff)

Rule of Life RM 7: «Each of us [each sister] will draw her inspiration from Her, the embodiment of the highest feminine values, in order to fulfil herself as a woman, as well as to commit herself to love and to serve, even if this might mean giving up something of great value.»

Our Rule of Life states that Mary is “the embodiment of the highest feminine values”. This does neither mean that such values are women’s exclusive property nor that they are relevant solely to women. In fact, Mary appeals to each of us; she calls each and everyone, men and women alike, to conversion; and we must commit to those values which she embodied by her life as a woman disciple and the Mother of the Lord.

In this Unit we shall highlight some of those values, as we gather them from the New Testament’s quotations of our *Lectio Divina*.

Faith and love

“Let it happen to me as you have said.” (Lk 1:38) Mary’s reply clarifies the deepest meaning of the event of the Annunciation. The Virgin represents the people of Israel, as well as any believer who puts his trust in God’s word and fully consents to it. This kind of obedience does not imply that one has to renounce his own ability to perceive, understand, actively take part in something, though. Mary’s listening to the word of God is active: she wonders what the angel’s greeting might mean; she wishes that God’s word might take flesh in her; she treasures all these things and ponders them in her heart. “The Virgin of the ‘fiat’ is a woman who decides. The Christian tradition repeatedly highlighted Mary of Nazareth’s wisdom as demonstrated by her talk with the archangel Gabriel, and the importance of her consent with respect to the salvation of mankind. In the event of the Annunciation the Virgin demonstrates that she can autonomously take decisions and assume full responsibility for them, even though in her social, cultural and religious environment they could have given rise to puzzlement, misunderstandings and scandalised rejection.”²⁷

Faith implies an incessant quest, a constant wish to understand and learn. There may be doubts at times, but faith gets a new strength from them. Faith is the certainty that “nothing is impossible to God” (Lk 1:37). He is continuously creating new things and situations, and addressing new requests to us; we, in our turn, should faithfully consent to His creative liberty, in order to become ourselves free, like Mary did. This is the true meaning of Mary’s virginity. This truth is so relevant to the growth of each and every person, of each and every believer, as well as of each and every Servant of Mary, that it must be correctly formulated: to do so, let me quote the words of a very wise man, Father G. Vannucci.

²⁷ *The Servants of Mary. The Canticle of the Virgin and Consecrated life* (210th General Chapter of the Order of the Servants of Mary – Mexico City, 1995) Servitium, Rome 1996, p. 158-159.

“[The Annunciation] is the first and foremost source of inspiration to the Servite religious experience, to the Servants’ consecrated life. At the Annunciation Mary is the *pure soil* that has no knowledge of man, and at the same time the pure soil *totally covered* by the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit, so that the most beautiful flower of the earth – the Immanuel, the One to carry in His human nature the mystery of the Son of God – may take flesh in her.”²⁸

The phrase “I have no knowledge of man” shows us how we should avoid being victims of and avoid identifying ourselves with...:

“our physical body, our emotions and our intellectual powers, or with vivid pictures of happiness either on earth or in heaven. ‘I have no knowledge of man’ expresses the fact that perfect nakedness has been achieved, and that the human spirit, having dropped the mask, can embrace the divine Spirit’s transparency and brightness. It expresses also the awareness that all of man’s achievements are but illusions, as well as the human nature’s perfect welcome to the power of the Spirit, and Mary’s perfect submission to the divine Word: the Virginité of the soul has been achieved; the Word rests on it as a flower floats on the clear surface of the water. [...] The phrase ‘I have no knowledge of man’ expresses the fact that Mary is diving into the abyss of divine Love, getting rid of her own nature and character, in order to be desperately in love out of love’s sake.”²⁹

In the light of Our Lady, who was the pure and simple handmaid of the Lord, virginity implies getting rid of all our prejudices, all our selfishness, all ideologies, all wait-and-see policies.

A limitless love lies behind Mary’s reply to the angel. Her heart is deeply moved: her heartfelt longing makes her obedience become a free and perfect consent. Our own obedience to God must be similar to Mary’s: He is not a master, rather a Father giving us love and expecting love in return. In order to render the exact nuance of the verb ‘to happen’, the sentence should be translated so: “May the words you say really become true.” Jesus taught His disciples to say: “Thy will be done...” In fact, even before Jesus taught them, Mary already had these words in her heart. This kind of prayer was not unknown to her, given that it was part of her most intimate desire. Once again the ardent longing which is life’s very core, and which can be fulfilled by God, and by God only, is revealed as the true meaning of Mary’s virginity, as well as of our own. With Jesus Mary said – and we with her: “My food is to do the will of the one who sent me.”(cf. Jn 4: 34)

Mary thus set an example to all the disciples, men and women alike. Men and women may become Jesus’ disciples by giving Him their love response, a response which must include in itself the whole of their lives. “In her everyday life, [Mary] responded perfectly and responsibly to God’s will, [...] she welcomed His word and put it into practice; [...] charity and the spirit of service moved her to action; [...] in a word, she was the first and most perfect of Christ’s disciples: she is an example to all, for all the ages to come.” (Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus*, 35)

Thanks to her limitless love, Mary was fully a person, she was fully a woman. This is the reason why art. 7 of our Rule of Life states that “in order to fulfil herself as a woman” it is necessary for a RM’s sister “to commit herself to love and to serve, even if this might mean giving up something of great value.” The same idea can be found somewhere else in the Rule. In art. 54, for example, where the Rule deals with carrying out our service in the world, “up to the point of losing our life for love’s sake”. And in art. 57, which states that to welcome others is the true fulfilment of our own femininity. And also in art. 63, which suggests that, at regular intervals, the fulfilment of our commitment must be evaluated with our leader: “This will be a time for growing in the gift of yourself to God and to others.”

²⁸ G. VANNUCCI, *I Servi e la Vergine Madre [The Servants and the Virgin Mother]*, ‘Servitium’ 26-27, 1983, p. 95.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

Gratuitousness

Immediately after pronouncing her 'Yes', Mary set out and went as quickly as she could to a town in Judah. This journey was prompted by her obedience to God. All her hurry was a sign of the joy which came not only from bearing Jesus in her womb, but also from her willingness to serve. Mary would always face all of life's circumstances with this attitude of gratuitous service: she was "full of God's grace", and she would give God's grace to everybody. In this respect she was truly "a creature of the Spirit", a creature "covered with the shadow of the Most High". And now she has become herself a gift to everybody.

Mary, exactly like the Church has to do nowadays, had to obey the Holy Spirit. She had to acknowledge His power, submit to Him. In other words, she had to make room within herself to the 'paradigm' of gratuitousness that His Person was proposing.

There is no reason to think that, during her life, Mary might have been unfaithful to it. Holy Scripture, with the exception of those passages describing Jesus' family's difficulty to understand His mystery, testifies to Mary's constant gratuitous behaviour, which in its turn testifies to her conformity and submission to the Holy Spirit.

Perfect examples of this are her prompt visit to Elisabeth (cf Lk 1:39-45), the way she gave praise to God and proclaimed the great things He had done for her (cf Lk 1:46-55); the birth of Jesus (cf Lk 2:19); the presentation in the Temple (cf Lk 2:34-35); the episode when Jesus' parents lost Him, then found Him again among the doctors of the Law (cf Lk 2:41-50); and again her presence at Cana's wedding (cf Jn 2:1-11); her presence at the foot of the cross (cf Jn 19:25-27); and her presence in the Upper Room at Pentecost (cf Ac 1:14). She was under no obligation to behave as she did. Still, she called herself "a servant" (Lk 1:38, 48) according to the meaning that used to be given to this term by Israel's spirituality. She consigned herself to God's will, she conformed to the Holy Spirit's breath.

Mary lived all her life in all gratuitousness; by doing so she destroyed the selfishness implied in man's "do ut des" mentality ("I give, in order to receive"). She was perfectly aware that all that she had received was a gift, 'grace'. She acted accordingly.

In Mary, the Church has already reached her perfection. Still, on the historical level, the faithful strive to submit to the Spirit, they still strive to behave as true creatures of the Spirit.³⁰

Filled with the Holy Spirit (cf Lk 1:41), Elisabeth blessed Mary and the fruit of her womb (cf Lk 1:42): she blessed God Himself, the One who fulfils all His promises, as well as her who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled, and thanks to whose faith the promise could be fulfilled. Mary and Elisabeth differed one from the other as far as their respective age and lifestyle, but they could become mothers because both of them welcomed the gratuitous gift from Above. In Elisabeth's blessing we can hear the echo of the voice of the community of believers, as well as the joy deriving from the presence of Christ.

Beauty

Chapter 12 of Revelation belongs to Part II of the book (Chapters 4-20), and, more precisely, to the section which describes the community of believers fighting against the forces of evil (Chapters 12-20).

"Now a great sign appeared in heaven." The adjective 'great' must not be interpreted as defining quantity, but quality: this sign contains a message of the utmost importance. The vision includes three characters. The first one is "a woman, robed with the sun, standing on the moon, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (Rv 12:1). It is a royal, cosmic and heavenly figure. "She was

³⁰ cf C. MILITELLO, *Maria con occhi di donna* [Mary through a woman's eyes], Piemme, Casale Monferrato, 1999, pp. 275-276.

pregnant, and in labour, crying aloud in the pangs of childbirth” (Rv 12:2). This figure is endowed with a strength surpassing the forces at work in this world, and at the same time experiencing the pains of labour. There is then “a huge red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, and each of the seven heads crowned with a coronet. its tail swept a third of the stars from the sky and hurled them to the ground” (Rv 12:3-4). Then the child, a boy born from the woman, whom the dragon tries to eat. But “the son who was to rule all the nations with an iron sceptre (cf Ps 2:9) was taken straight up to God and to His throne, while the woman escaped into the desert, where God had prepared a place for her to be looked after for twelve hundred and sixty days.” (Rv 12:5-6).

The baby boy is clearly Christ: His ‘birth’ is His enthronement as the risen and glorified Messiah, as the quotation from Psalm 2 suggests. Many New Testament passages regard that very moment of Christ’s life as fulfilling Psalm 2’s prophecy. So does Paul in his speech at Antioch (Ac 13:32-33) and at the very beginning of his Letter to the Romans (Rm 1:4). It is also the time for the dragon’s defeat; the dragon is Satan, who believed he could ‘eat’ Christ by His death on the Cross.

In the history of the exegesis of Chapter 12 of Revelation, the woman has been interpreted either in an ecclesiological or in a Mariological way. The former interpretation, now prevailing, dates back to the times of the Fathers of the Church; the latter dates back to the Middle Age, and is of monastic and liturgical origin.

The type of the woman robed with the sun finds its sources of inspiration in Isaiah 60, where Jerusalem, the daughter of Zion, is described as resplendent of the glory of God (cf Is 60:1, 19-20), and in the Song of Songs, 6:10: “Who is this arising like the dawn, fair as the moon, resplendent as the sun...?” The twelve stars evoke “the twelve tribes of Israel” (Rv 21:12). No doubt this is a reference to the People of God. Isaiah also announced that God would grant this woman to give birth to a whole new world (cf Is 66:7). According to the fourth gospel, Jesus Himself made use of this image, when He announced His disciples that His departure was about to take place: “In all truth I tell you, you will be weeping and wailing while the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn to joy. A woman in childbirth suffers, because her time has come; but when she has given birth to the child she forgets the suffering in her joy that a human being has been born into the world. So it is with you: you are sad now, but I shall see you again, and your hearts will be full of joy, and that joy no one shall take from you.” (Jn 16:20-22) Jesus compares the woman’s suffering and joy to His disciples’. In the great ‘labour’ of the cross, the Son of God, by taking upon Himself the whole sinful humankind, once and for all covered the great distance existing between death and life. Christ was born on the cross and, after His definitive victory over the forces of evil, He was taken up into heaven, to sit at the right hand of God. The woman is the symbol of the people of God having a share in Christ’s victory, bravely undertaking the fight against the dragon. She is in the ‘desert’ of trial, where she will stay for twelve hundred and sixty days – three years and a half, which is half of seven – that is, for a limited period of time: the forces of evil’s power is subject to God’s control. Evil will disappear; God’s love will never come to an end. This certainty gives the Church enough faith and courage to carry out the fight against evil, even when evil seems to prevail.

This ecclesiological interpretation of Chapter 12 of Revelation does not exclude the Mariological one, though. In fact, better results can be obtained by considering the two of them together. On one hand, the woman represents the Church and each of us; on the other, she represents Mary, who definitely experienced the labour of faith to the full. Christ’s words and life were “the sword who would pierce her soul”. She was at the foot of the cross with some other women disciples and with the beloved disciple, all of them types of the community which, by its faithful communion with its Lord, can give a new life to men. In the Johannine writings, Mary is always called “the woman” (Jn 2:4; 19:26); this symbol is at the core of the image of the Messianic people, of the image of the Church. The woman in labour of Revelation 12 is the Messianic community, represented by the Mother of Jesus in St John’s gospel.

Mary bears in herself Jesus, the Messiah, the source of life. His life is continuously put at risk by the huge red dragon, who “stopped in front of the woman... so that it could eat the child as

soon as it was born” (Rv 12:3-4). The woman is adorned with the most beautiful elements of creation: the sun as a robe, the moon as a dais, the stars as a crown. She is the type of the cosmos in its beauty and integrity, of the cosmos renewed by Christ’s love. Thus the woman robed with the sun reminds us that our faith in Jesus Christ must nourish our respect for life, for each and every of God’s creatures. Our faith must nourish the hope that any action improving the quality of our lives is a service to the whole humankind, and the expression of that longing for peace which is Christ’s as well as the Holy Spirit’s gift. The document ‘Servants of the Magnificat’ reminds us that: “we should reject any form of violence against man or woman, animal or plant, soil and water; we should stop having an arrogant or vulgar or banal attitude towards them. Our own relation with God’s creation must find its source of inspiration in Our Lady’s ‘gentleness’, as well as in her strength. It is not without a reason that we ask the Lord ‘to make us deeply respectful of the dignity of each and every creature, and strong to resist those who try to insult it.’ (*Liturgia delle Ore OSM [Liturgy of the Hours OSM]*, memoria di Santa Maria in Sabato, III, Rome, 1978, p. 625)”³¹

³¹ *Servants of Magnificat. The Canticle of the Virgin and Consecrated Life*, (210th General Chapter of the Order of the Servants of Mary – Mexico City, 1995) Servitium, Sotto il Monte, 1996, pp. 190-191.

8. VOICE GIVING PRAISE TO GOD

Lectio Divina: «My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord...» (Lk 1:46-55)

Rule of Life RM 7: «She [each sister] will always turn to Her with devotion and filial trust. With Her, she will become a voice giving praise to God, on behalf of all the men and women living on earth.»

With Our Lady, each RM Sister “will become a voice giving praise to God, on behalf of all the men and women living on earth”. This is a clear hint to the Magnificat, the Virgin’s song of praise to Her Lord for the incommensurable gift that she has received for free: this gift is Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God by whom all things were created.

The Servite new song

Praise and singing are part of the Servite tradition: in the Servants’ life of prayer, they were used to sing in order to express their faith and devotion. Our own heritage includes hymns such as ‘Ave Novella Femina’ or ‘Ave Virgo Virginum’. The former has been defined “the Servite song par excellence”.³² It is a song to the ‘new woman’ (*Ave novella femina*³³) renewed by the Paschal mystery, the summit of man’s striving for perfection. The Servants asks her that she may help them start to sing the ‘new melody’, the new song springing from a heart in which the Lord dwells. The latter, ‘Ave Virgo Virginum’, gives praise to her who is our joy and our peace³⁴. From the very start, singing the ‘Salve Regina’ took pride of place in the daily prayer of our Order. “Every evening the Salve is to be sung with great devotion after the reading of the Vigil of Our Lady, when this is sung; when and if the Vigil is not sung, the Salve Regina is to be sung at the end of Compline. All the friars present in the priory, including the provincials and other officials, are to take part from the very beginning, having put aside every other task; and the bell is to be rung so that the friars cannot put forward excuses.”³⁵ The *Legenda* “Perugina” highlights that St Philip Benizi loved to sing: “He continuously sang praise to the Lord with Blessed Francis, who was living in Florence at that time.”³⁶ Of course, in this report there is an evident anachronism, given that St Philip was not a contemporary of St Francis of Assisi. St Philip’s love for singing would be inscribed in his name too: “The name Philip is derived from ‘Philos’ which means ‘song’... For Philip was a song of fervent prayer before God, because by singing the psalter each day, his song devoutly resounded in God’s ears. He made music also for the ‘majesty of the whole Trinity by the example of a good life and he gained distinction by the witness of his life.” The man of God was always obedient. He prayed and sang the psalter, sometimes in his cell, sometimes in the garden, and sometimes in church. (...) He was accustomed to begin the psalmody of the prophets at

³² *Sources for History and the Spirituality of the Servants of Mary*, I, p. 166.

³³ Chorus G, St. Mary of the Servants, Siena. *Sources for the history and spirituality of the Servants of St Mary*, I, p. 170-173.

³⁴ Chorus G, St. Mary of the Servants, Siena. *Sources for the history and spirituality of the Servants of St Mary*, I, p. 169-170.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

Compline and he would recite it in a low voice throughout the night. During the day, however, he sang with a loud voice.”³⁷ At the time of his translation [i.e., death], “ thousands and thousands of swallows, whiter than snow... came upon the church and sang with the friars the praises of the Lord.”³⁸

May Our Lady help us go on singing her song of praise to the Lord for His gifts. May our singing help us face life with serenity, joy and peace, in spite of our everyday life’s tribulations.

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord

After the Annunciation, when the angel told Mary that she would become pregnant and that her child would be great, (Lk 1:32-33, 35) after her obedient response by which she gave her whole self to God’s will as a gift, (Lk 1:38) and after her Visitation to Elisabeth, highlighting the Mother of the Lord’s faith, (Lk 1:44-45) here comes the Magnificat, (Lk 1:46-55) a song springing from a heart astonished at God’s wonders and grateful for that love which fulfils life and makes it meaningful. Our Lady’s song becomes our own song when we realise that we have received so many gifts from God: life, faith, and the experience of God’s mercy.

The Magnificat is made up of ten verses. In fact, taking into account the rhythm, it should be divided into eighteen short sentences / lines [*or 14, according to the New Jerusalem Bible, Transl*].

The song opens by stating Mary’s feelings:

“46 My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour...” (Lk 1:46-47)

Mary’s rejoicing, filling her heart completely, is relevant to our faith too. I’d like to quote some passages from Martin Luther’s commentary, which is very famous.³⁹ In its introduction Luther highlights what the core of the Magnificat is:

“In order to understand what the structure of this holy hymn of praise is, we should highlight that the Virgin Mary is speaking about an experience of hers, during which she was enlightened and taught by the Holy Spirit Himself. In fact, God and His Word can be understood only through His Holy Spirit; but man can get that from the Holy Spirit, only provided that he experiences and feels Him. During this kind of experience the Holy Spirit teaches man in His own school; outside of it, just idle talks and tales can be taught.

This experience occurred to the Virgin Mary herself. After experiencing that God did great things for her, even though she was lowly, poor and despised, the Holy Spirit made her understand this truth, that God is a Lord who raises high the lowly, pulls down the mighty, breaks the unbroken and restores what has been broken.”⁴⁰

Mary’s faith, and ours as well, is first of all an experience of God:

“This verse [46] springs from such an ardent desire and joy that they cannot be measured [...]. That is why Mary does not say: ‘I proclaim the greatness of the Lord’, but rather ‘My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord’. This means: ‘My whole life, with all my thoughts, is so bathed in love, praise of God and deep joy, that I lose control and I am raised high to

³⁷ *Sources for the History and the Spirituality of the Servants of Mary*, I, p. 290, 295-296.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

³⁹ Cf. *Commentary to the Magnificat*, Centro di studi ecumenici Giovanni XXIII, Sotto il Monte, Bergamo 1967. ‘Servitium’ has recently re-published the document. Luther wrote it in 1520, immediately before being excommunicated (which occurred in January 1521).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

give praise to God. This same experience occurs to all those who are bathed in the sweetness of the divine Spirit, and they can feel more than they can express in words. [...] In Psalm 34:9 [:8] David says: ‘Taste and see that the Lord is good. How blessed are those who take refuge in Him.’ David places ‘taste’ before and ‘see’ after, as learning is impossible without a direct and personal experience.”⁴¹

Faith means also to entrust oneself to God, wholly and completely.

“Mary did not say: ‘My soul proclaims my own greatness’, or ‘I rate myself high’. She had a low opinion of herself, and proclaimed the greatness of God, and of God only, to whom she gave credit for everything. She got rid of everything and offered everything to God, from whom she had received it. [...] She left God the property of His benefits. She was simply the divine Guest’s dwelling, as well as an obedient Hostess. [...] In her dignity as Mother of God she saw herself raised above all men, yet she remained an unpretentious and quiet woman, who did not regard any maidservant lower in rank than herself. Alas, how wretched we are! When we own some material goods, authority or honour, when we are more beautiful than other people, then we are no more capable of comparing ourselves to somebody who is poorer than ourselves: we become pretentious beyond measure. What would we do if we owned many goods? This is the reason why God leaves us poor and unhappy, [and does not] corrupt us [by] His pleasant gifts [*? Here the Italian sentence is not very clear... Something must be missing, Transl.*]. In fact, after receiving them, we are capable of not considering ourselves different in any way from what we were before receiving them; but at the same time we let our presumptuousness grow or diminish, when we respectively receive some goods or are deprived of them. On the contrary, Mary’s heart is consistent in every situation; God is free to work within her in accordance with His will, and this brings comfort to her, as well as joy, and her trust in God deepens. We should follow Mary’s example... Then we could sing the Magnificat in our turn!”⁴²

Faith is the expression of absolute gratuitousness. Luther deems as ‘fake’ those preachers who

“teach that good deeds must be done, and an honest life must be lived, not simply for the divine goodness’ sake, but for one’s own profit’s sake. In fact, if heaven and hell did not exist, and if they could expect no benefit from the divine goodness, they would renounce God’s goodness, and they would not love nor praise it either. [...] Unfortunately, people who live and act with this false and distorted belief in mind, abound all around the world, in every convent and church. [...] In fact... as God makes us blessed out of pure goodness, even though we have no strict right to any merit in spite of our good deeds, in the same way we should do good deeds for love of God’s pure goodness’ sake, without seeking a reward or profit whatsoever, just wishing to please Him.”⁴³

He has looked upon the humiliation of His servant

Verses 48-50 of the Magnificat are made up of two causative sentences, both of which start with ‘because / for’:

“48 because He has looked upon the humiliation of His servant.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

Yes, from now onwards all generations will call me blessed,
49 for the Almighty has done great things for me.
Holy is His name,
50 and His faithful love extends age after age to those who fear Him.”

It is easy to note that the two causative sentences are symmetrical and complement each other. Together, they constitute an antithetical parallelism between the lowly condition of the maidservant of the Lord and the Almighty who has done great things for her. God has done great things for Mary especially because she was humble.

Luther states that the Greek term ‘tapeinois’ (‘humility’ in Italian) can summarize his whole “theology of the Cross”, on whose formulation St Augustine had a great influence. Mary’s lowliness is Christ’s own: He became the humblest of men in order to save all men. In his commentary to Mt 11:29 (which we already know from the Legend of the Origins) St Augustine states:

*“Shoulder my yoke and learn from me: do not learn to make the world, to create all the visible and invisible things, to perform miracles in this world or to raise the dead; just learn that I am gentle and humble in heart. Would you like to be in a high position? Start from the lowest level. If you are thinking of starting to build the tall building of sanctity, be aware that you must lay the foundations of humbleness first. The bigger and taller the building one is planning to build is, the deeper the foundations must be. While the building is being built, it goes up towards the sky; but he who has to dig the foundations will have to go down. Before going up, a building goes down. Only afterwards the top can be placed.”*⁴⁴

St Augustine’s exegesis well summarises the core of Chapter 11 of St Matthew’s Gospel, opening with the Baptist’s question: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect someone else?” (11:3) Jesus’ reply plainly describes the identity of a Messiah exceeding any expectations: “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.” (11:5-6) Jesus is the poor and humble Messiah, in line with Zechariah’s prophecy (9:9), quoted by Mt 21:5: “Say to the daughter of Zion: Look, your King is approaching, humble and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.” 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, quoted by Mt 12:18-23). He heals men, not by amazing miracles, but by carrying our diseases (cf Mt 8:17). Jesus is “the least in the kingdom of Heaven” (Mt 11:11), who does not save men by His powerful gestures, rather by becoming a friend of tax collectors and sinners (cf Mt 11:19), thus revealing God’s mysterious wisdom.

The commentary to the Magnificat gives Luther an opportunity to specify the meaning of ‘humilitas’. Indeed, the commentary can be defined a little essay on humility. Previously, in his commentary to the Letter to the Romans (1515-1516) Luther had established a link between faith and humility: man can establish a genuine relationship with God only after getting rid of his natural capabilities. He has to recognise before God that he is wretched, poor, sick, humiliated, hollowed, dull. And God will look for him, He will free him, make him rich, heal him, exalt him, fill him, build him up. In the end, Luther formulates a new philosophical principle: “A substance cannot get a new form, unless it gets rid of the old one”. Thanks to this kind of ‘humility’, i.e. being aware of one’s own emptiness and lowliness, man can realise what his deeper nature is.

What Luther means by ‘humilitas’ is clarified by the term he chooses to render it in German: ‘nothingness’. Mary is showing off neither her worthiness nor unworthiness, rather she is proclaiming the greatness of God’s consideration for her, who is just one of His little creatures, and

⁴⁴ Discourse 69, 2, in *Works of St. Augustine*, XXX/1, Città Nuova, Rome 1982, p. 383.

the greatness of the grace He has filled her with. “According to Holy Scripture,” Luther highlights, “*humiliare* means ‘to lower’ as well as ‘to empty’.” A proof of this can be found in Psalm 115:10 [116], “Credidi, propter quod locutus sum; / Ego autem humiliatus sum nimis.” which means, “My trust does not fail even when I say, ‘I am completely wretched.’” Luther concludes that ‘humilitas’ is nothing but a contemptible, mean and lowly condition, that of the poor, the sick, the prisoners, the hungry, the suffering and the dying. The Bible confirms that the term ‘humble’ does not refer to those who first acquire the virtue of humility, then in this humble state of mind face God; rather to all those who are able to recognise their own unworthiness and meanness. “This is Mary’s view too: God has looked upon me, a poor handmaid of His, wretched and despised, even though He could have looked upon wealthy, noble and powerful queens, or princes’ and great lords’ daughters.” Mary is a proof that there is absolutely no relation between the virtue of humility and what Holy Scriptures define as ‘humilitas’. St Paul would agree: in his theology, ‘humilitas’ is ‘tapeinophrosyne’, that is, “a wish for mean and contemptible things”. Now, let us quote again from Luther’s Commentary to the Magnificat: “Those who do their best to look humble are not really so. Only those who – according to what the world says – are ‘non-entities’, [...] those who gladly accept to be humiliated and emptied and never try to improve their position, [...] those who do not just happen to be in- but gladly accept their wretched and despised condition for the sake of God’s Word, all those are really humble. In the end, it can be said that the verb ‘respexit’ (has looked) is definitely more important than the word ‘humilitatem’ (humility). In fact, the object of praise is not Mary’s nothingness, but rather the attention God pays to her. It is exactly the same as when a prince gives his hand to a beggar... Nobody would praise the beggar’s nothingness, but rather the prince’s goodness and favour.”⁴⁵

Maybe that the Lutheran idea of man is too pessimistic; we may not agree with his underlining man’s nothingness. What we are interested in is to highlight that Mary’s lowliness is not a human virtue, rather a gift from God: we should be aware that we owe Him everything; we should be grateful for His gifts and joyful.

God’s great things

“The Almighty has done great things for me.” Mary’s certainty should be also our own. We should believe that God can do great things in our lives too.

“You should consider God’s will for your life with no doubts and uncertainties, and firmly believe that He will do great things for you. This kind of faith burns like a fire, pierces through man and utterly transforms him. Whenever you are raised high, this kind of faith urges you to fear; and whenever you are brought low, it urges you to trust in God. The higher you get, the more you should fear; the more humiliated you are, the more you can rest assured. [...] This kind of faith can do anything, as the Lord says (Mk 9:23); this is the only real faith. By experiencing God’s work, it can come to the love of God, to praise and extol Him. And man can proclaim God’s greatness.”⁴⁶

God can do great things for me as well, provided that I humbly welcome the gift He has placed within myself, and also that I long to give my whole life to Him as a gift. “Mary sings the wonders God has done for her. Thus, she is teaching us two things: in the first place, that each of us should pay more attention to what God is doing within himself, than to what God is doing in other people. In fact, blessedness is not to be found in what God does in other people, but in what God does in myself. In this respect, when St Peter asked Jesus what would happen to St John (cf Jn 21:21 ff), Jesus replied, ‘What does it matter to you? You are to follow me,’ as if He wanted to say

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

that John's works would be of no help to Peter, and that Peter should do what was his own as well as welcome Jesus' will for him. Indeed, at present good deeds are greatly misused everywhere, up to the point that they are sold and distributed. By doing so, some conceited minds presume they can help other people, in particular all those who have never performed good deeds during their life or at the moment of death: maybe they think they have got too many good deeds and they can give them away. However, St Paul clearly states (1 Co 3:8): "Each will have the proper pay for the work he has done," not for the work others have done. If these people prayed or interceded for others, and offered their good deeds to God on behalf of others, the fact could be overlooked. But they behave as if they were distributing gifts, and it is really shameful. What is even more detestable is the fact that they give away their deeds even though they do not really know how God values them. In fact, God does not care for deeds; He cares for man's heart and faith, through which He is working in us. [...] Be careful to let God work in you and find your blessedness only in the good deeds God will perform in you, and in nothing else, as the Virgin Mary did. If you like, you can ask other people to help you by their intercession. It is good and right to do so: all of us should pray – as well as work – for one another. But nobody can rely on other people's deeds if he does not perform good deeds himself. Everybody must commit himself fully to pay attention exclusively to himself and to God, as if nothing else did exist either in Heaven or on earth, and as if God's one and only activity were to take care of him; later on, he will be allowed to pay attention to other people's deeds.

Here we get a second lesson from Mary. Everyone must give praise to God personally and proclaim first the works He has done for him; then he will give praise to God for the works He has performed in others.

We can read in Acts 15:12 that Paul and Barnabas proclaimed to the apostles the signs and wonders God had worked through them, and the apostles in their turn what they had done themselves. According to Luke 24:34 ff, after the resurrection, the disciples told the apostles the story of Jesus' apparition. Then, with the deepest joy they gave praise to God, as each of them was celebrating the grace others had received, but in particular the grace he had received himself, even though it was less important than other people's, given that they did not wish to be first as far as goods were concerned, but rather as far as praise and love of God were concerned. Indeed, even though the gift they had personally received was small, they were happy with it and grateful to God for His goodness: in fact, their heart was simple. On the contrary, those who are selfish can never be satisfied, unless they have been given more goods than others. They will complain instead of giving praise, as it is recounted in Matthew 20:11 ff: the workers grumbled at the landowner, not because he had been unjust to them, but because he had chosen to pay the latecomers exactly as much as he had paid them. In the same way, at present, there are some who do not give praise to the divine goodness because they realise that they have not received as much as St Peter or another saint or a common man."⁴⁷

The "great things" God works in us should never be compared to those He works in other people: in fact, they show God's mercy to us, as it is specified in verse 50: "...and His faithful love extends age after age to those who fear Him." The last two verses of the Magnificat deal specifically with mercy:

“54 He has come to the help of Israel His servant,
mindful of His faithful love
55 – according to the promise
He made to our ancestors –
of His mercy to Abraham
and to His descendants for ever.”

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-47.

These verses introduce the theme of the relationship between God and Israel. Here mercy – exactly as in verse 50 – is described as never ending. God’s mercy extends age after age; He will always be mindful of His mercy. The divine mercy will never end; everything else passes away. Thus the ending of the hymn introduces us to the very core of the gospel, which is the good news: God is just pure mercy and always will be merciful. Israel is His servant not because he performs special services, rather because he recognises that whatever he might own comes from pure grace. Luther states:

“This is the reason why Mary says: ‘mindful of His mercy’. She does not say: ‘mindful of our merits and of our worthiness’. We used to be in need, but utterly unworthy to receive. We should give Him the credit for this as well as honour Him. Our own pride and presumptuousness should stay silent. He did not need anything to be moved to pity; he was moved to pity because of His mercy. He also decided that His mercy was to be revealed. Why does Mary say that he was ‘mindful’ of His mercy; why doesn’t she say simply that He kept it in mind? Because He had promised it earlier, as the following verse will state. He had kept men waiting for it for ages, so it looked as if He had completely forgotten about it, and about us too, given that all His works seem to come late. But when He came down to us by Christ, then it was clear to everybody that He had not forgotten about His promise; indeed, He had been thinking about it all the time, and about how He could fulfil it.”⁴⁸

Gratefulness

The greatest gift God gave to Mary is our Lord Jesus. This is the reason why she sings and invites us to give praise to God for this gift, a gift that will never be taken away from us. This gift is all that we can expect and wish for, as St Paul says: “Since [God] did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for the sake of all of us, then can we not expect that with Him He will freely give us all His gifts?” (Rm 8:32) Given that God gave us everything in Christ, we must be immensely grateful from the bottom of our heart. Our Rule of Life urges us to this spiritual attitude more than once. N° 16 invites us to be grateful: “You shall be grateful for whatever you may receive from God and from your brothers and sisters. You shall be happy about the gifts others have received... you shall put your trust in the power of the Lord who does great things for the humble, and praise Him constantly.” Here Mary’s song resounds for the second time. The lowly man or woman God does great things for, is the one who welcomes life gratefully, giving thanks for all the gifts he / she has received – be they either small or great. And he / she gives thanks not only for the gifts he / she has received personally, but also for the gifts other people have received. She is happy about these gifts as if they were his / her own, with no envy or jealousy.

The Rule of Life couples God’s gifts with joy again in art. 8 (“You shall embrace this gift [chastity] with gratitude and joy.”), art. 53 (“You shall regard friendship as God’s gift. You shall welcome it joyfully...”), and art. 60 (“Take part in group meetings which will help you to grow in the awareness and the joy of the gift of the vocation you have received...”). Everything in our lives should become a joyful thanksgiving to the One who gave Himself to us wholly: “You shall carry out everything in the name of the Lord Jesus. It is by sharing in His priesthood, that your life may become prayer and praise to the Father.” (art. 29)

This close relation between God’s gift and joy-thanksgiving is of course one of the most beautiful features of the Rule of Life. In fact, discovering that life is a gift is the best way to enjoy life to the full, with that joy which excludes any selfish claims, as well as sadness for not possessing as much as we want, or jealousy for other people’s possessions. God gave us His own Son, His Word, His life. Mary’s song reveals to us that only a life lived with joyful gratefulness for the gift, only a life given away as a gift, can become for us as well as for others a means of salvation. Saint

⁴⁸ Cf. *Commentary to the Magnificat*, pp. 91-92.

Paul exhorts us so: “Always be thankful.” (Col 3:15) This means: “Always sing your own Magnificat, like Mary did.” Here the Apostle is not referring to prayer of thanksgiving, but – as an exegete correctly highlighted – “to that attitude by which one does recognise the gifts he has received as well as his benefactor. It is a way of feeling and thinking more than behaving, according to which we relate to God and neighbour.”⁴⁹ I believe this attitude is of fundamental importance not only as far as a Christian, but also as far as a truly human life is concerned. Saint Paul deals with it more than once: “... always and everywhere giving thanks to God who is our Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Ep 5:20) “Never worry about anything; but tell God all your desires of every kind in prayer and petition shot through with gratitude.” (Ph 4:6) “Always be joyful; pray constantly; and for all things give thanks; this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.” (1 Th 5:16-18) This means that the fact that I receive something is more important than the fact that I do something. The gift I receive is more important than what I can lend others. It is true that St Paul, quoting one of Jesus’ ‘loghia’ [words] that cannot be found in the gospels, states: “There is more happiness in giving than in receiving.” (Ac 20:35) But in this kind of giving St Paul speaks of, there is no room for proud presumptuousness. In fact, one gives because he is aware of being poor himself and wishes to share all that he owns with the poor, and recognises that the gift comes from God, and God only. It is by recognising this that our life can become ‘grateful’ and ‘reconciling’. It is not by chance that the summit and source of our Christian life is the Eucharist, i.e. the thanksgiving for that immense gift which is Jesus, a gift we cannot give anything in return for. What we can do is to humbly give thanks to the Lord all the time. And we can also help others understand that life is wonderful if it is lived as a gift. This is a basic duty of all those who chose to fulfil their consecration to the gospel in their own environment, doing an ordinary job, as ordinary people do.

⁴⁹ J. N. ALETTI, *Saint Paul. Èpître aux Colossiens [Saint Paul. Letter to the Colossians]*, Gabalda, Paris 1993, p. 241.

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Gratefulness

“

**Draw inspiration from the service
that Mary rendered and still renders to the world,
and work in peace, without the risk
of becoming anxious,
typical of those**

”

who do confide only in their own efforts

- from *Regnum Mariae Rule of Life* -

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.