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TO THE VERY ROOTS OF OUR CHARISM

4

Secular Dimension

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GENERAL OUTLINE

1. *The “Legend of the Origin”*

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

2. *St Augustine’s Rule*

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

3. *The Mother of Jesus*

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

4. *Secular Dimension*

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

1. «Everything has been made for a purpose» (Si 39:21)

Lectio Divina: «God saw all He had made, and indeed it was very good.» (Gn 1:31)

Rule of Life RM 46: «...let us live according to our consecrated secularity, soiling our hands with the temporal realities we are part of, so that they may be ordered to God through Christ.»

This year's biblical-theological essay will focus on the world, made by God and “indeed, very good”, as well as on our personal relation with it. This is one of the basic themes of our own charisma, given that we try to devote our lives to the Gospel while soiling our hands with the temporal realities we are part of. This essay is consistent with the past three years' programme. In the first year we tried to understand, by going through the Legend of the Origins, how our secular vocation to “silently announce Christ” to the world can be matched to the spiritual heritage of the Servite family. In the second year St Augustine's Rule, which is the very basis of our own Rule of Life, was our source of inspiration, for us to lead a life of service in the world and to the world, being guided by the contemplation of that Beauty which is a free gift from above. In the last year it was Our Lady herself who guided us to the very sources of Life and of a New Creation: our family strives to make present in the history of salvation her active and silent presence.

This Unit will gather from Chapter 1 of Genesis all the elements that may help us understand and put into practice art. 46 of our Rule of Life.

Chapters 1-11 of Genesis give an account of the origins of the world: their aim is not to present scientific truths – all scholars would agree that the Bible is not a scientific text, rather a theological one. Their aim is to convey the meaning of the universe and of man, through stories couched in the remote past, but relevant to every phase of human history, even our own. This is the reason why we chose Si 39:21 as a heading for this Unit. The origins of the world may open us up to the present, to the environment we have been called to live and work in.

The Biblical narrative makes use of a scenario familiar in the polytheistic myths of the ancient Near East. ‘Myth’ is not equal to ‘fiction’: it is a story which explains concepts or beliefs about the early history of a race. It is – as the philosopher P. Ricoeur puts it – “a narrative interpretation of the mystery of life”. Why does man exist? Why does the universe exist? The Bible answers these questions not by making use of philosophical ideas, rather by telling a story. In fact, Semitic culture is alien to abstraction; its language is at the same time both symbolic and realistic; it conveys ideas by relating facts.

In order to explain difficult ideas such as ‘creation’ or ‘nothing’, the Bible adopts the mythological language of the civilizations surrounding Israel. The first chapter of Genesis does not make use of the metaphysical concept ‘creation from nothingness’. This will be formulated only much later, and occur in the second Book of Maccabees (2nd century before Christ), when the encounter with the Greek civilization will provide new expressive means: “Look at the earth and the sky and everything in them, and consider how God made them out of what did not exist...” (7:28).

The Desert and the Spirit

As our aim is not to go through complicated matters, we will not discuss the ‘documentary theory’, a theory on how the Pentateuch came to be written, a theory which has often been called into question or modified or even rejected by scholars. We will just say that Chapter 1 of Genesis

belongs to the so-called 'priestly tradition', that is, a corpus of texts composed by the priests of the Temple of Jerusalem and edited after the exile, around 400 b.C.¹.

"In the beginning God created heaven and earth. Now the earth was a formless void ('waste', *Heb.*), there was darkness over the deep, with a divine wind sweeping over the waters." (Gn 1:1-2) Thus the author describes the chaotic emptiness of the beginnings: the earth was a 'trackless waste' (Hebrew), a kind of platform completely covered by the waters, resting on columns rising from the abyss, in complete darkness. Psalm 104 states: "You fixed the earth on its foundations, for ever and ever it shall not be shaken; You covered it with the deep like a garment, the waters overtopping the mountains." (5-6) The waters are the symbol of nothingness; nothingness is the arch-enemy of creation, an enemy always on the prowl, which can be kept at bay only by God. "Who pent up the sea behind closed doors when it leapt tumultuous from the womb, when I wrapped it in a robe of mist and made black clouds its swaddling bands; when I cut out the place I had decreed for it and imposed gates and a bolt? 'Come so far,' I said, 'and no further; here your proud waves must break!'" (Jb 38:8-11; see also Pr 8:29).

"Over the waters" sweeps God's Spirit². The Hebrew term 'ruach' may refer both to the 'wind' and to the 'spirit', that is, to the vital breath, divine or human alike. Some exegetes prefer the former meaning and, taking into consideration that Hebrew often makes use of the phrase 'of God'³ to represent the superlative, they render the sentence so: "...a blustering wind, a hurricane was sweeping the waters". In this respect, then, 'ruach' would refer to the primeval chaos again. In fact, this negative character of the wind cannot be found in any other near eastern cosmogony: the wind is always an ally of the creative powers in their struggle against chaos. The traditional rendering "Spirit of God" is then to be preserved here; moreover, it can be found also in many other Old Testament passages.⁴ In this respect then, the 'waste', 'darkness' and the 'abyss' of verse 2 are in opposition to the Spirit of God. The verse can be translated so: "The earth was without shape and empty, and darkness was over the deep, but the Spirit of God was sweeping over the waters."

The Holy Spirit, that is, God's Love, pervades even the primeval chaos, and the history of creation is already a history of salvation, our own history, the history of God's Love for man, who lives in darkness. St Augustine's exegesis of this passage of Genesis focuses on man's reality, made of nothingness and darkness, on which the creative Spirit of God sweeps. "Here the Trinity looms up: my God, You are the Father who in the Beginning (that is, in Your Son, Your Wisdom who is equal to You and co-eternal) made Heaven and earth. I have already written at length about the heaven of the heavens, as well as on the invisible and chaotic earth, and on the dark and formless abyss, with no living creature in them. And on how this life, any life, addressed its Creator and was enlightened, thus becoming a wonderful life, and giving rise to that heaven of the heavens which then turned into water and more water. When I spoke about God who created all these things, I was just referring to the Father; and to the Son, hinted at in the word 'Beginning', by whom the Father created them. And, given that I believed that my God was a Trinity, I was looking for it in His holy words, until I came across the Holy Spirit 'sweeping over the waters'. Now, here is my Trinitarian God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Creator of every creature."⁵ "Given that Your Spirit was sweeping over the waters, Your mercy did not desert our own misery. You said: 'Let there be light. Repent, because the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent. Let there be light.' (...) We could not

¹ cf the *Introduction to the Pentateuch*, New Jerusalem Bible.

² The verb indicating this action of the Spirit could also mean, according to all possibilities given by Syrian language and known by St. Gerome, "to hatch", with a relationship to other cultures, the cosmic egg hatch by the Almighty power.

³ Hebrew, not having a superlative, uses frequently this expression. Then "hills of God", "flames of God", means very tall hills or a very vivid flame. (Ct 8:6) Nineveh is a "big city in front of God" that means a very big city. (cf. Gn 3:3)

⁴ Cf. Ps. 104 where the creative function of the Spirit is very clear: "Turn away Your face and they panic; take back their breath and they die and revert to dust. Send out Your breath and life begins; You renew the face of the earth." (29-30; see also Ps 33:6; Jb 33:14-15).

⁵ *Confessions*, XIII, 5 in *Works of St. Augustine*, I, Città Nuova, Rome 1965, p. 455.

bear our own darkness any longer, we turned to You and there was light. In the past, we used to live in darkness, but now we are light in our Lord.”⁶

The Creative Word

The desert, the waste, the abyss, the waters and darkness: all these things refer to an appalling nothingness, over which God’s creative Love sweeps. Now God speaks, and His word vanquishes nothingness. “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” (Gn 1:3) The world comes out of nothingness by God’s ‘speech’: the whole first chapter of Genesis focuses on this divine speech (cf verses 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 28, 29). God’s Word is present at the beginning of Creation, and God’s Word will be present in the fullness of time, when Creation will be fulfilled. “The Word became flesh, He lived among us...” (Jn 1:14) The Word is the Father’s beloved Son, the Son the Father bids us to listen to (cf Mt 17:5).

From its very beginning, the Bible clearly states that ‘seeing’ is not important at all; only ‘listening’ to the Word of God will give life to man. For this very reason Moses, who is God’s friend and speaks to Him “mouth to mouth” (Nb 12:8), cannot see Him (cf Ex 33:20-23). For the same reason Jesus proclaims, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe” (Jn 20:29). God speaks and man listens to Him: indeed, life consists in this dialogue. The world exists because God spoke. The world exists out of God’s free will. It is His property. God is its Lord (cf Ps 33:6; 148:5). Only by recognising this, salvation can be achieved.

It must be said that God did not limit His creative work to the origins of the world. His Word is eternal and eternally goes on working, creating new heavens and a new earth, creating a new people that can free itself from its slavery. This was the experience of the nameless prophet, known as ‘the second Isaiah’. He realized that in Israel’s return from exile, and consequently in the restoration of the people, God the Creator was at work (Is 41:8-20; 45:8-13; 48:12-15; 65:17-18). Some scholars suppose that the second Isaiah might have prophesied even before the time Genesis 1 was written: if this were indeed the case, faith in God as the Creator of the world would have been aroused by the experience of personal renewal. Life renewed by God’s Word is an even greater miracle than the creation of the world: “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.” (Is 55:10-11)

Division

In the first chapter of Genesis, the divine Word’s creative work is expressed by different verbs: God ‘made’ the vault of the heavens (1:7), the great lights (1:16), the wild animals and cattle (1:25), man (1:26), and the whole cosmos (1:31); He ‘created’ heaven and earth (1:1), the winged birds and fish (1:21), man and woman (1:27); He ‘set’ the lights in the vault of heaven (1:17) and ‘gave’ all the seed-bearing plants and all the trees and their fruit to man as food. (1:29)

Not only does God create all things, He also ‘divides’ them: light from darkness (1:4), the waters under the vault from the waters above the vault (1:6-7), the dry land from the sea (1:9), while the lights in the vault of heaven divide day from night (1:14, 18). And the different kinds of plants and animals are created ‘each corresponding to its own species’ (1:11-12, 21, 24-25). Division is highly significant because it highlights that diversity is part of God’s plan. God’s creation is

⁶ *Confessions*, XIII, 12, *ibid.*, p. 463.

manifold and various. Now, if we want to have the correct relation with God and with the world, we must recognise this diversity. It is diversity that creates the harmony of the cosmos; when diversity is not recognised any longer, the world goes back to undifferentiated chaos and nothingness again. The waters submerge everything: the flood wipes out every living being on earth: "... all the springs of the great deep burst through, and the sluices of heaven opened... And all living things that stirred on earth perished; birds, cattle, wild animals, all the creatures swarming over the earth, and all human beings. Everything with the least breath of life in its nostrils, everything on dry land, died." (Gn 7:11, 21-22) Uniformity and its power of destruction prevent man from communicating and living in communion with other men, as the story of the tower of Babel implies (cf Gn 11:1-9).

We should also bear in mind that this verb 'to divide' ('*bdl*') is used in the Bible to convey the idea that the people of Israel is distinct from any other people. "Since I, the Lord your God, have set you apart from these peoples... Be consecrated to me, for I, the Lord, am holy and I shall set you apart from all these peoples, for you to be mine." (Lv 20:24, 26; cf also Ezr 9:1; 10:11). This separation is a distinction that derives from the Covenant: it makes of Israel "a people that dwells on its own, not to be reckoned among other nations" (Nb 23:9). The reason for this is not that it should be isolated from them, rather that it should be – thanks to its own diversity – the yeast for a new life. But should it forget its own identity, it would be led into the desert and there it would lose its way (cf Ezk 20:32-35).

This separation is also God's first step to liberate man. As we have already mentioned, in the ancient Near East as well as in the Bible waters are a symbol of evil. By dividing them from dry land, God gives man the first sign that in the future He will save him from the negative powers of evil. We have already quoted Job 38:8-11. Please cf also Ps 104:9 ("You made a limit they were not to cross, / they were not to return and cover the earth") and Jeremiah 5:22 ("Will you not tremble before me / who set the sand as limit to the sea, as an everlasting barrier it cannot pass? / Its waves may toss but not prevail, / they may roar but cannot pass beyond."). Destruction does not loom on the horizon of the history of the world any longer. Man can still cause it by wrongly using his powers; anyway, the end of time and history will be decided by God, and God only, as Revelation clarifies: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; the first heaven and the first earth had disappeared now, and there was no longer any sea." (21:1)

The creation of man

Chapter 1 of Genesis regards man as closely linked with other animals: in fact, he was created on the same day as cattle (cf Gn 1:24-31), he received a blessing that even fish and birds received, so that they could multiply (cf Gn 1:22, 28), he was given the same food as cattle (Gn 1:29-30). Despite all this, there are many differences that highlight man's special place in the order of creation.

"Cattle, creeping things and wild animals" were produced by the earth: "God said, 'Let the earth produce every kind of living creature in its own species'" (Gn 1:24). On the contrary, man was 'made' thanks to a decision of God's: "Let us make man in our own image..." (Gn 1:26) And verse 27 insists that man was created with no intermediaries. : "God created man in the image of Himself, / in the image of God He created him, / male and female He created them." (Gn 1:27)

The blessing that man receives does not refer to reproduction and fruitfulness only, as is the case for all the other animals; it refers also to his rule over the whole of creation: "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it." (Gn 1:28; see also 1:26) In the second unit we will deal at length with man's rule over creation; here we just add that with the phrase "in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves", the sacred text highlights the fact that man has a share in God's being in a very special way. It is an indelible mark God set on us. Man may follow wrong paths, taking him far away from God, but this mark cannot be removed, given that it is the mark of God's faithful

Love for us. In fact, it must be noted that even after the Fall man is still the image of God (cf Gn 5:1-3; 9:6). “There is no change of mind on God’s part about the gifts He has made or of His choice.” (Rm 11:29) “If we are faithless, he is faithful still, for He cannot disown His own self.” (2 Tm 2:13) God created man so that he could have a share in His eternal life: “For God created human beings to be immortal; He made them as an image of His own nature.” (Ws 2:23) God created us and we are His for ever.

Indeed it was very good

The refrain “God saw that it was good” occurs seven times in Chapter 1 of Genesis (cf Gn 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). God is similar to an artist who every now and then stops in order to examine his work, then expresses his satisfaction about it. The Hebrew term ‘tob’ (‘good’) can convey many different meanings⁷. More often than not, in the Bible it is closely linked with the concept of ‘beauty’. The repetition of the refrain “God saw that it was good” highlights the fact that no evil can be found in the world that God created, just harmony and beauty. The world expresses Goodness, that is, God Himself. “Those who seek the Lord lack nothing good.” (Ps 34:10) “This I believe: I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” (Ps 27:13) Man has the duty to love and respect this harmony. From the beauty of creation he can come to contemplate the Creator, and give praise to His goodness, in conjunction with the whole creation (cf Ps 148). He can give praise to God’s goodness, for He is always creating a new world and a new history, as the great ‘hallel’ of the Passover sings: “Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, for His faithful love endures for ever.” (Ps 136:1)

Chapter 1 of Genesis culminates in the refrain, “God saw all He had made, and indeed it was very good.” (1:31) What does this final superlative mean? Let us follow St Augustine’s lesson again. “You, O God, saw all You had made, and indeed it was very good. We see it too, and it is very good. You examined the different species of your works, one by one, after making them, and they were good. The Bible reports that seven times⁸ You saw that it was good; and then that all You had made was very good, as if at the end You had seen all the things that You had created as a whole. When considered one by one they were good; when considered as a whole they are very good. In the same way, we can say that the more beautiful the different members of a body are, the more beautiful that body as a whole is: however beautiful its members might be, one by one, they jointly contribute to complete the body and make it even more beautiful.”⁹ Each thing is “beautiful” in itself; but all things taken as a whole – when their different features are in harmony one with the other – are “very beautiful” indeed.

Service in the world

So far, we have gathered all the following points from Scripture:

- creation opened up a history of salvation;
- God goes on speaking and creating all the time: there can be always a new beginning for history;
- the harmony of the cosmos is based on the diversity of beings;
- in spite of his mistakes and failures, man does not lose his dignity.

⁷ Cf. *Dictionary of Theology of the Old Testament* [Italian Version], I, Marietti, Turin 1978, p. 566.

⁸ In fact, Genesis uses the adjective ‘good’ six times, and the superlative ‘very good’ once.

⁹ *Confessions*, XIII, 28 in *Works of St. Augustine*, I, p. 495.

Now, in the light of what we gathered from Genesis 1, we can try to understand how, according to our Rule of Life, our service in the world should be done.

Art. 46 entrusts to each and every Sister the duty to order the temporal realities to God through Christ. This means that we should help our fellow men and women discover God's plan of love in their personal history as well as in the history of the world. This is the reason why "each of us is led to understand, alleviate and make the most of human sufferings" (art. 7), as well as to be "at the poor's side in their laborious march towards freedom" (art. 52), fighting against all kinds of evil that may oppress man, and "to be prompt to welcome, provide accommodation to and lovingly care for those Sisters who are experiencing suffering in their lives" (art. 38).

At the very core of this loving and merciful service will be the Word of God, applied to the real situations of our everyday life (cf art. 22). The Word will teach us the meaning of our participation in society (cf art. 7), as it will provide us with a new way of evaluating things and, indeed, a better ability to discern.

Our service to the world should not be afraid to come to terms with diversity. Diversity is the real test, thanks to which we can learn "to live as one in mutual love" (art. 3), "to feel ready to exchange views with everybody in charity" (art. 12), "to be happy about the gifts others have received" (art. 16), "to help one another to discover the charisms we have received from the Lord, so that they may bear fruit" (art. 37), "to establish a dialogue with the different cultures we come across... to prophetically discern what in them is in conformity with the Gospel, and to carry it out, while firmly believing that God is leading mankind and human history towards its fulfilment in the Kingdom of God" (art. 62).

As a theme for meditation, we may focus on what has been said about the meaning of the verb 'to divide': God divided all the living beings one from the other, so that each of them might be itself; and separated Israel from all the other peoples so that by its peculiar identity of "people of God" it could help the world grow into a new reality. The Rule of Life reminds us that we must be faithful both to our own identity and to separation; thus each sister's life will be an alternative to what society is imposing on people. Art. 18 states: "You shall lead a simple life in your own environment, always choosing the evangelical simplicity." And art. 54 shows us Christ's very way: "Like Him you may be at times a stumbling stone for others, up to the point of losing your life for love's sake."

2. IN THE IMAGE AND LIKENESS OF GOD

Lectio Divina: «The Lord God took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden to cultivate and take care of it.» (Gn 2:15)

Rule of Life RM 48: «...You shall turn your work into a liturgy...»

There is a close link between the fact that man has been made in the likeness of God and the task he has received as far as creation is concerned. By saying that man has been made in the image and likeness of God, Holy Scripture tells us that we have to conform to our original image, and – consequently – that our relation with God’s creatures must conform to God’s behaviour. God blesses everything, and states that everything He has made is good, i.e., He respects everything for what it really is, He cares for its liberty and well-being. Man should do the same, too.

Power and meekness

In the first chapter of Genesis, God blesses man and woman, saying to them: “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all the living creatures that move on earth.” (1:28) By His blessing, God entrusts them with the task of subduing the earth and being masters of all the animals living in it. It is important to find out what the true meaning of these verbs might be, so that we can understand how we have to work on earth in order to make it more and more human and harmonious.

The first chapter of Genesis describes God as powerful but at the same time as meek. In the previous unit we focussed on God’s creative work, especially on the various elements of the primeval chaos: darkness, the abyss and also the wind, maybe. God’s creative word does not get rid of all these elements. In fact, He sets limits for them, and places them in the general order all the living beings find their proper place within. God’s word rules over chaos: it makes the violence of chaos progressively turn into light and life. God’s power comes from His Love, overcoming evil and disorder.

God’s meek power is revealed by the refrain, occurring seven times: “God saw that it was good.” As we have already written in the first unit, God stops in order to admire what has just come out of His hands. He looks at His creature and sings in amazement. Israel will use the same words in its liturgical prayer: “Give thanks to the Lord for He is good!” (Ps 100:5; 106:1; 136:1; 1 Ch 16:34). In fact, even when He is looking at and admiring the beauty of His work, God is creating. Creation does not originate solely from an act of His divine power. It also comes from His gaze: He lets it rest lovingly and respectfully upon His creature. Unless he is looked at by somebody else, unless he is regarded as a person, man could never exist.

After completing His work, God rests: “On the seventh day God had completed the work He had been doing. He rested on the seventh day after all the work He had been doing.” (Gn 2:2) Creation is complete when God can ‘rest’: this fact reveals God’s meekness too. God rests so that, by his activity, man can take over from Him. “God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on that day He rested after all His work of creating.” [literally, “...for on it He ceased from all His work which God created to make,” which means, “...which God creatively made.”] (Gn 2:3) God creates “to make”, i.e., He creates so that man can freely make in his turn. God’s meekness is revealed by the fact that He hands His creation over to man and to his free activity. It is as if God left His creation unfinished, in order for man to complete it.

This idea of incompleteness may be inferred from the fact that the refrain “God saw that it was good” has been omitted twice: the first time after God has divided the waters under the vault from the waters above the vault (Gn 1:8); the second time after man has been created (Gn 1:26-27). The first omission is justified by the fact that the division of the waters is complete only after the waters under heaven have come together into a single mass (the sea), and dry land has appeared (Gn 1:9-10). The second omission, concerning man, may suggest the idea of incompleteness too. There is another element to confirm this theory. “God said, ‘Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves...’” (Gn 1:26) Ancient scholars such as Origen and Basil of Caesarea understood this passage to mean that man has been created in the image of God, but his ‘likeness of God’ is yet to be achieved. Man has to strive in order to become more and more similar to the image he bears in himself.

To sum up what we have said so far, the first page of the Bible presents God as both powerful and meek. God alone can create: the Bible applies the verb ‘bara’, ‘to create’, exclusively to God. Still, He does not make everything. Man, made in His image and likeness, is entrusted with a task concerning both his own personal growth and creation. God blessed man and woman and said to them: “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all the living creatures that move on earth.” (1:28) “To subdue” and “to be masters”: these two verbs can be understood only in the light of God’s image, as it has been sketched out in the first chapter of Genesis.

Man’s rule

In the Bible, the verb ‘to subdue’ (‘kabas’) usually implies violence and brutality, given that as a rule it refers to the conquest of a territory (cf Nb 32:22, 29; Jos 18:1; 1 Ch 22:18) or a nation (cf 2 S 8:11), or to the reduction to slavery (cf Jr 34:11, 16; 2 Ch 28:10; Ne 5:5), or to rape (cf Est 7:8). There is only one passage where the verb is referred to God’s merciful action: “What god can compare with You for pardoning guilt and for overlooking crime? He does not harbour anger for ever, since He delights in showing faithful love. Once more have pity on us, tread down our faults; throw all our sins to the bottom of the sea. Grant Jacob Your faithfulness, and Abraham Your faithful love, as You swore to our ancestors from the days of long ago.” (Mi 7:18-20)

The second verb ‘to be masters’ (‘radah’) is referred to violent actions and war too: the enemies’ yoke (cf Lv 26:17, Nb 24:19; Ne 9:28; Is 14:2; Ezk 29:15); Babylon’s rule, pursuing without respite (cf Is 14:6); the merciless rule of Israel’s shepherds (cf Ezk 34:4) and priests (cf Jr 5:31); or even God’s harsh judgement, compared to someone who treads the grapes in the winepress (cf Jl 4:12).

Holy Scripture reminds us also that Israel is neither allowed to rule over its own brothers, taking advantage of their poverty, nor over foreigners: “If your brother becomes impoverished while with you and sells himself to you, you will not make him do the work of a slave... You will not oppress your brother-Israelites harshly.” (Lv 25:39, 43, 46, 53) And, lastly, there is the King-Messiah’s rule, which is the rule of justice and peace: “In His days uprightness shall flourish, and peace in plenty till the moon is no more. His empire shall stretch from sea to sea, from the River to the limits of the earth.” (Ps 72:7-8; cf also Ps 110:2)

All these positive meanings confirm that the verbs of Gn 1:28 do not imply violence. We should also highlight that, according to the Bible, man has been a vegetarian (Gn 1:29-30) up to the Flood (Gn 9:1-3). The seed-bearing plants and the trees with seed-bearing fruit are to be man’s food. As this order comes immediately after the order to be masters of all the animals, it does suggest the idea that man can rule over animals without killing them. No violence is allowed; life must be respected anyway. His rule is justified by the fact that man, even though he has been shaped from the soil of the ground exactly as animals have (cf Gn 2:7, 19), is the only one that has received God’s breath of life into his nostrils: this breath of life makes of him a living being, able to

speak in the image of that God who creates by His word. Then man gives a name to each and every animal, thus recognising that they are 'living being' (2:20) and giving them their own living space.

Animals receive a vegetable kind of food too: "all the foliage of the plants" (cf Gn 1:30). But this vegetable food is different from man's. In fact, man and animals are not supposed to fight against one another for food. Of course this is a metaphor to represent the idea that both the human society and the animal world must be full of meekness, peace and harmony.

Work as service

Genesis' story gives us further details about man's rule over the world.

"At the time when the Lord God made earth and heaven there was as yet no wild bush on the earth nor had any wild plant yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth, nor was there any man to till the soil. Instead, water flowed out of the ground and watered all the surface of the soil." (Gn 2:4-6) At the beginning of creation there were neither wild bushes and plants, nor rain and men on earth. Rain can water the desert, but man is necessary to till the soil. It is not by chance that here 'tilling the soil' is portrayed as the one and only activity giving meaning to man's presence on earth. It is also closely linked with creation.

The verb 'to till the soil' is used again when Genesis deals with man's activity within the garden of Eden. "The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, which is in the east, and there He put the man He had fashioned... The Lord God took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden to cultivate and take care of it." (Gn 2:8, 15) The primary meaning of the Hebrew term 'avad', 'to work' [or 'cultivate' as the Bishops' Conference Bible puts it], is 'to serve' and, as far as religion is concerned, 'to worship'. It defines the relation between servants and master, subjects and king, the faithful and God.

In particular, the Old Testament worship is often designated by the verb 'to serve' ('abad') or the noun 'service' ('abada'). Liturgy is the service par excellence. It follows that worship is relevant to man's life; it includes obedience and loyalty. In Joshua 24, the Israelites' thorough commitment to God is expressed by the verb 'to serve' (cf Jos 24:14 etc.).

One can meet God at the temple, but the Bible insists that God is interested in what happens out of the temple too, He is interested in man's life and in the life of the world. When the Israelites go up to the Lord's temple, singing for joy because they are going to meet the Lord very soon (cf Ps 84), they do not wonder whether their behaviour in the temple has been correct; they wonder whether they have been upright in their everyday lives (cf Ps 24; 15; 40:7-9; 50). The point is that we have to serve God by our whole lives. "Is the Lord pleased by burnt offerings and sacrifices or by obedience to His voice?" (1 S 15:22; cf also Am 4, 5; Hos 6:6; Mi 6:7-8; Is 1:10-20; Jr 7; Is 58; Pr 15:8; Si 34:18-35, 24). We are not denying the value of worship, but worship must become part of our lives. Worship must be the expression of a life given over to service.

To sum up what we have just said, the verb 'abad' of Gn 2:15 does not imply the idea of power, but rather, the idea of service. The garden of Eden is not a special place, but the earth itself as God conceived and created it with its luxuriant richness. Man is welcomed by this earth as by his own home: it protects him and gives him safety. Man in his turn has to serve the earth, which is to take care of it and defend it. Man lives in symbiosis with the cosmos, he is its 'ally'. God gave the creation to man as a gift: man's task is to work in order to preserve the earth.

This task is not over: man has not yet reached its goal, though. In fact, selfishness has strained the relations of solidarity and communion between man and creation. St Paul states that "the whole creation, until this time, has been groaning in labour pains," (Rm 8:22) because "it was not for its own purposes that creation had frustration imposed on it, but for the purposes of Him who imposed it, with the intention that the whole creation itself might be freed from its slavery to corruption and brought into the same glorious freedom as the children of God." (Rm 8:20-21) Who reduced creation to slavery? It should have been the garden cultivated and cared for by man,

shouldn't it? Biblical exegesis answers these questions so: it was man himself who reduced creation to slavery. Still, we have got reasons to hope while being in these "labour pains". Creation hopes "to be freed from its slavery... we too, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, even we are groaning inside ourselves, waiting with eagerness for our bodies to be set free. In hope, we already have salvation; in hope, not visibly present, or we should not be hoping – nobody goes on hoping for something which is already visible. But having this hope for what we cannot yet see, we are able to wait for it with persevering confidence." (Rm 8:21-25) The whole creation is groaning and hoping, and man together with it, given that salvation is not visibly present as yet. But the Holy Spirit of God Himself – this is the decisive aspect of the matter – "personally makes our petitions for us in groans that cannot be put into words; and He who can see into all hearts knows what the Spirit means because the prayers that the Spirit makes for God's holy people are always in accordance with the mind of God." (Rm 8:26-27) The Spirit's voice is petitioning the Creator for salvation on the cosmos' behalf. This Spirit is the Spirit of Christ (Rm 8:9), as well as the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead (Rm 8:11). The Trinitarian structure which lies under this text is clear: the divine life of communion and life is creation's very destiny.

By living in this communion, the likeness of God in us can be restored. "You have stripped off your old behaviour with your old self, and you have put on a new self which will progress towards true knowledge the more it is renewed in the image of its Creator." (Col 3:9-10) This new man is Jesus Christ: He is the true image of God (cf Col 1:15; 2 Co 4:4), the image we put on at Baptism. Thus Gn 1:26-28 is fulfilled in Christ: by conforming to Him, through our own activity and work in the world, we reproduce God's image, the image of the powerful Creator as well as of the meek Lord who respects man's freedom.

Work as a liturgy

Man's work is regarded as a service, a holy service, a liturgy. One of the articles of our Rule of Life is based on this very idea: "You shall turn your work into a liturgy, in the awareness that even the humblest of services has a redemptive value for your brothers and sisters, and also that it is worship and praise of God. You shall commit yourself responsibly to your professional activity and also regard the thorough fulfilment of any deriving duties as your first apostolate." (art. 48) Underlying this article are some passages from the Letters of St Paul to the Philippians and to the Romans, which make use of the Old Testament terminology referring to worship, to the life of faith and to the mutual service that the brothers offer to one another. "Indeed, even if my blood has to be poured as a libation over your sacrifice and the liturgy of your faith, then I shall be glad..." (Ph 2:17) Epaphroditus is "a messenger and a minister [Greek, 'leitourgon', 'liturgical minister'] to look after my needs" (Ph 2:25). "It was for Christ's work that he came so near to dying, risking his life to do the duty ['liturgy'] to me which you could not do yourselves." (Ph 2:30) Epaphroditus' presence and the offering he gives to Paul on behalf of the Philippians are "a pleasing smell, the sacrifice which is acceptable and pleasing to God" (Ph 4:18). The service of love is equal in dignity to liturgy.

This idea of life which has to be lived as a liturgy is further expounded in the Letter to the Romans, in particular in the 'Exhortation': "I urge you, brothers... to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, dedicated and accepted to God – which is your reasonable kind of liturgical service." (Rm 12:1) Liturgical service must be 'reasonable' ['logical'], that is, in conformity with the Word ['Logos'] of God, fulfilling God's will. Man's worship must be 'logical', as it was 'logical' God's eternal Logos' worship, fulfilled by His taking flesh. There is no break between the Old and the New Testament. But the novelty of the New Testament is Christ, who is at the same time God's definitive act and man's perfect response to it. On the cross, God died for us and sealed His eternal covenant; while man gave himself as a gift to God, utterly obedient. The sacrificial offering of His 'body' – that is, of the whole person – truly turned His whole life into a liturgy. Offering our life to

God has nothing to do with individualism; and it does not make us loose touch with reality. If we offer our life to God we have to resist the lures of the world, that is, anything that might be contrary to the Gospel (“Do not model your behaviour on the contemporary world...” – Rm 12:2a). In fact, we have to be transformed by the renewing of our mind, so that we may discern for ourselves what is the will of God (cf Rm 12:2b).

The Letter to the Romans, in the light of this kind of worship which is equal to life, urges us to love “without any pretence” (Rm 12:9), and also to be part of society (cf Rm 13:1-7) as well as of the Christian community (cf Chapters 14 and 15). In the community, it is of fundamental importance to respect our brothers and sisters whose faith is weaker than ours. Our love must not be focussed on ourselves, rather on others. Our brothers and sisters are more important than us (cf Rm 14:1 ff). “Christ did not indulge His own feelings...” (Rm 15:3)

Capable of welcoming everybody

In this unit, we started by dealing with Genesis and the work we have been entrusted by God. Now we have come to what the Rule of Life states: work is a liturgy. This statement is very demanding. It comes from the roots of the Servite Order, as well as from St Augustine’s Rule, that regards work as a powerful force, a force that creates the community when the fruits of our labours become a common property. On the other hand, that statement is the very core of our secular vocation: by living our hidden lives, we contribute to renew the humankind in the image and likeness of God.

As far as this unit’s theme is concerned, please see also the following articles of our Rule of Life:

Art. 4: “Each of us will fulfil her consecration in her own environment, doing an ordinary job, as ordinary people do. In conformity with our apostolic witness, we shall live all of life’s situations in Christ, and carry out our social mandate in a spirit of service, with responsibility and competence.”

Art. 17: “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 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. 18: “You shall earn your living by your work, even if it is hard, thus experiencing the same hardships and difficulties which are man’s common lot. You shall lead a simple life in your own environment, always choosing the evangelical simplicity.”

Art. 19: “The Family’s goods are our joint property: they are placed at our service, as well as at the service of the poor. You shall commit yourself to contribute money to the Family, as a sign of communion, as well as to all those who are in need within your environment, as a sign of compassion.”

* * * *

My exegesis of Genesis 1-2 has been mainly based on:

G. VON RAD, *Genesi. Traduzione e commento [Genesis. Translation and commentary]*, Paideia, Brescia, 1978.

A. WENIN, *Non di solo pane... Violenza e alleanza nella Bibbia [Not only of bread... Violence and Covenant in the Bible]*, EDB, Bologna, 2004.

3. TEACH US TO COUNT UP THE DAYS THAT ARE OURS

Lectio Divina: «God blessed the seventh day and made it holy...» (Gn 2:3)

Rule of Life RM 47: «You shall work in all peace, with no anxiety, which is typical of those who do confide in their own efforts.»

This third unit will focus on the importance of ‘time’, and ponder over it thanks to some elements gathered from Scripture. The Bible is constantly reiterating that time is God’s property and also that our own life is His: in the first place, this belief provides a very solid foundation for our hope; in the second place, it helps us see God’s work in time, that is, what He set as the ultimate goal of human history.

The seventh day

Year, month, week, day, hour: in all of them the faithful has to meet God, not according to a regular and repetitive schedule, but to the never-ending novelty of God’s intervention. In particular, “day” is the most recurrent term. And the seventh day, Saturday (‘Sabbath’), takes pride of place. The most ancient wording of the commandment to observe the Sabbath goes: “For six days you will labour, but on the seventh day you will rest.” (Ex 34:21) The Sabbath is the day of rest, “for in six days the Lord made the heavens, earth and sea and all that these contain, but on the seventh day He rested.” (Ex 20:11)

According to the account of Creation in Gn 1:1-2, 3, on the sixth day God made man, then on the seventh He rested. Thus, man’s first day on earth was a day of rest; he started working only after resting. The time devoted to work is meaningless, unless it is preceded by the day of rest, during which every human activity must be suspended, and in which every human activity appears to be of relative importance. The rest rule after the six days of creation sets man’s claim to rule the world in the right perspective. It reminds man that he is not the owner of the world, rather its caretaker. And it reminds him also that he can exercise even a greater power, the power not to be the ‘slave’ of his own work, rather its master.

The Book of Exodus goes on: “That is why the Lord has blessed the Sabbath day and made it sacred.” (Ex 20:11) This blessing can be linked to Gn 2:3. Earlier, God had blessed the sea creatures, the birds and man (cf Gn 1:22, 28), all of which got from it the power to be fruitful and multiply. God’s blessing gives its life-giving power to the day of rest too. And time can be always fruitful and full of novelty. As a consequence, our own time is never meaningless, rather purposeful. “The Lord has blessed the Sabbath day and made it sacred.” To make the Sabbath day sacred means to divide it from all the other days, as light was divided from darkness. Light opened up the way to creation; similarly, the Sabbath day opens up the source for man’s life to be constantly renewed.

The Book of Deuteronomy states all the reasons why the day of rest should be observed: “Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Labour for six days, doing all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath for the Lord your God. You must not

do any work that day, neither you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your servants – male or female – nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your animals, nor the foreigner who has made his home with you; so that your servants, male and female, may rest, as you do. Remember that you were once a slave in Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with mighty hand and outstretched arm; this is why the Lord your God has commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.” (Dt 5:12-15) The Sabbath day is also a memorial of the freedom that we have received from the Lord. This freedom makes all men equal, with the same human dignity and with the same rights. This freedom frees us from all the enslavements we might be dominated by; and from an idea of time that might enslave us, while time has been created so that man can grow to maturity.

The commandment to observe the Sabbath is a liberating one. Each and every of God’s commandments liberates man. They are never impositions, rather gifts. That is the reason why, as St John puts it, “His commandments are not burdensome.” (1 Jn 5:3) Their aim is not to burden us, but to liberate us from every possible burden.

It must be pointed out that God’s work of creation on the seventh day does not end with an evening, like any other of the previous six days: “Evening came and morning came...” (Gn 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31) On the seventh day the sun never goes down, this day has no twilight: it is perfect, and this perfection is a ‘sign’ of something different. This sign takes us beyond time’s precariousness, and makes us take part in that fullness that can be found in God, and God only. “Between myself and the Israelites, this is a sign for ever, for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He rested and drew breath.” (Ex 31:17) There is a very relevant detail: the sacred text points out that God drew breath, in addition to resting, at the end of His work of creation, as if He heaved a sigh of relief. In fact, He had really done all that was necessary for man; He infused all His love into His creation, He gave man all of Himself, according to that fullness which is exclusively divine, and which Jesus would seal by His death on the cross: “It is fulfilled.” (Jn 19:30) If God gave everything, now it is our own turn to give, by serving, loving, respecting creation and, above all, by sharing its gifts. In fact, on the Sabbath day, not only will men and animals have to relax; they will have also to breathe deeply. “For six days you will do your work, and on the seventh you will rest, so that your ox and your donkey may rest and the child of your slave-girl have a breathing space, and the alien too.” (Ex 23:12; cf. 2Sm 16: 14)

The commandment to observe the Sabbath highlights that our life is not dependent on our own activity, rather on God’s. That is why the prophets, however hard they argued against pilgrimages and Temple worship, always required that the Sabbath should be observed. Amos condemned all those who were waiting for the Sabbath day to be over, so that they could crush the needy and reduce the oppressed to nothing (cf Am 8:4-6). And the anonymous post-exilic prophet, that conventionally goes under the name of ‘Third Isaiah’, proclaims: “If you refrain from breaking the Sabbath, from taking your own pleasure on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath ‘Delightful’, and the day sacred to the Lord ‘Honourable’, if you honour it by abstaining from travel, from seeking your own pleasure and from too much talk, then you will find true happiness in the Lord...” (Is 58:13-14).

The message we can gather from chapter 16 of Exodus is that working all the time, unceasingly, will never offer us true security; on the contrary, it will make us poorer and poorer. Moses ordered the people that on the day preceding the Sabbath they should collect twice as much of manna as they used to collect on ordinary days – so that they could stay at home on the Sabbath day. “Tomorrow is a day of complete rest, a Sabbath sacred to the Lord.” (Ex 16:23) However, “on the seventh day some of the people went out to collect it, but they found none.” (Ex 16:27) Unceasing activity is pointless. Selfish activity is pointless too: Exodus relates that those who collected more manna than they needed to eat, on the following day found it smelling foul (cf Ex 16:17-20). Work can be fruitful if it is done according to those principles that make the world more humane: gratuitousness, trust, sharing. Therefore, we must leave room for God’s work in our own activity. Thus we can be freed from our own selfishness, and can be at other people’s service.

There is a season for everything

Every moment of our lives can be of the utmost importance, provided it is a meeting with God and also with our neighbour. One of the most significant biblical passages about this, is chapter 3 of Qoheleth [Ecclesiastes]. “There is a season for everything, a time for every occupation under heaven: a time for giving birth, a time for dying; a time for planting, a time for uprooting what has been planted...” (Qo 3:1 ff) Time is never empty, as it is usually filled with events. “All that He does is apt for its time; but although He has given us an awareness of the passage of time, we can grasp neither the beginning nor the end of what God does.” (Qo 3:11) God has established that there should be a season for everything: every occupation can be rewarding if it is done at the right time. He rules over time and has given us the awareness of the passage of time, moment after moment. I render the Hebrew term *‘olam* as ‘awareness of the passage of time’. This term does not refer to eternity. It is a typically human dimension, still it transcends man’s existence. God made man able to reflect on his past as well as future; but this opportunity may turn into something painful, given that we are very often unable to fully comprehend God’s work in its entirety, as well as the ever-changing times. “Another thing I have observed under the sun: that the race is not won by the speediest, nor the battle by the champions; it is not the wise that get food, nor the intelligence wealth, nor the learned favour: chance and mischance befall them all. We do not know when our time will come: like fish caught in the treacherous net, like birds caught in the snare, just so are we all trapped by misfortune when it suddenly overtakes us.” (Qo 9:11-12) Some of the realities we get in contact with are higher than ourselves; we cannot explain them: “What has been is already defined – we know what people are: they cannot bring to justice one who is stronger than themselves. The more we say, the more futile it is: what good can we derive from it? And who knows what is best for someone during life, during the days of futile life which are spent like a shadow? Who can tell anyone what will happen after him under the sun?” (Qo 6:10-11)

With his radical impossibility to control the ordinary course of events, what can man do? But faith opens us up to God’s mysterious work. Faith is what Qoheleth calls ‘fear of the Lord’: “I know that whatever God does will be for ever. To this there is nothing to add, from this there is nothing to subtract, and the way God acts inspires dread.” (Qo 3:14) And again: “Consider God’s creation: who, for instance, can straighten what God has bent? ... In my futile life, I have seen everything: the upright person perishing in uprightness and the wicked person surviving in wickedness. Do not be upright to excess and do not make yourself unduly wise: why should you destroy yourself? Do not be wicked to excess, and do not be a fool: why die before your time? It is wise to hold on to one and not let go of the other, since the godfearing will find both.” (Qo 7:13, 15-18) Qoheleth concludes: “To sum up the whole matter: fear God and keep His commandments, for that is the duty of everyone.” (Qo 12:13; see also 5:6)

The passing of time is still for man inexplicable; but thanks to faith we can discover a loving and caring plan lying behind the tangled web of events. That is the reason why Qoheleth is, in the end, a powerful invocation to God for help. And the reason why the voice of this sage, apparently a sceptic and a pessimist, has been welcomed into the Scripture as the voice of a faith, however hard and tormented, but always ready to yield to God’s mysterious action. In his voice the psalms resound:

“Lord, let me know my fate,
how much longer I have to live.
Show me just how frail I am...
So now, Lord, what am I to hope for?
My hope is in You.” (Ps 39:5, 8)

“But my trust is in You, Lord;
I say, ‘You are my God,’
every moment of my life is in Your hands...” (Ps 31:14-15)

From eternity to eternity You are God

Qoheleth’s voice resounds especially in Psalm 90, which is more or less his contemporary. This psalm is one of the very few passages of the Old Testament dealing specifically with time. We will read verses 1-12.

“Lord, You have been our refuge from age to age.
Before the mountains were born,
before the earth and the world came to birth,
from eternity to eternity You are God.” (Ps 90:1-2)

The introductory verses of this psalm present the human generations, quickly passing one after the other, as opposed to God, who is eternal and unchanging. To His eternity is compared man’s existence, which is insubstantial, just ‘dust’:

“You bring human beings to the dust,
by saying, ‘Return, children of Adam.’
A thousand years are to You like a yesterday which has passed,
like a watch of the night.
You flood them with sleep
- in the morning they will be like growing grass:
in the morning it is blossoming and growing,
by evening it is withered and dry.” (Ps 90:3-6)

It may be useful to recall that the term ‘dust’ (Hebrew, *dakka*) refers to the whole process of the human existence, destined to return to dust. Man’s life is fragile, poor and wretched; for this very reason both the Greek Bible and the Vulgate render the Hebrew term ‘dust’ as ‘humility’, ‘poverty’, ‘wretchedness’. A wretched life is propped up by the power of the Word of God. “Return, children of Adam”: even death is brought about by the Word of God.

The ratio between one thousand years and one day or a watch in the night is perfect to express the infinite distance between God’s eternity and man’s mortal condition. No one can live for a thousand years, but a thousand years are to God like a yesterday which has passed; in fact, like something even shorter, a watch in the night. Man’s life is short, and ending in death, which is similar to sleep. Death is man’s main frailty: in the morning he is like growing grass; by evening He is withered and dry (see also Jb 14:1-2; Ps 102:12; 103:15-16; Is 40:6-8).

“For we have been destroyed by Your wrath,
dismayed by Your anger.
You have taken note of our guilty deeds,
our secrets in the full light of Your presence.
All our days pass under Your wrath,
our lives are over like a sigh.” (Ps 90:7-9)

Man can experience his own frailties, both as a creature and as a sinner. This second case can cause man a great deal of pain and suffering. God’s wrath, however, is not the final word. He judges man’s sins by shedding on them the light of His face. This light is in fact His merciful love,

lasting for ever, as Psalm 30 states: “His anger lasts but a moment, His favour through life. In the evening come tears, but with dawn cries of joy.” (Ps 30:5)

Man’s life remains precarious: but these should not be regarded as obstacles on the road to God, given that, on the contrary, they help us to open up to Him, and to trust more and more in Him.

“The span of our life is seventy years -
eighty for those who are strong -
but their whole extent is anxiety and trouble,
they are over in a moment and we are gone.
Who feels the power of Your anger,
or who that fears You, Your wrath?
Teach us to count up the days that are ours,
and we shall come to the heart of wisdom.” (Ps 90:10-12)

If we accept that the span of our life is limited, and also that we are sinful and weak men, we can discover God’s presence in our lives, and let Him show His mercy to us.

Jesus’ day

I think that we could learn a lot from Mark’s description of a typical day of Jesus’ (Mk 1:14-45).

At the very beginning of the day, there was a time for proclaiming the message: “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the gospel.” (Mk 1:15) The time is fulfilled because God is coming to meet us in Christ, who powerfully proclaims repentance. God’s gift – the ‘good news’ that He loves us – should prompt us to head in the right direction... Here lies the importance of the time God grants us: time helps us discover and welcome God’s love in our own lives.

Then there was a time for calling His disciples (Mk 1:16-20). Jesus’ proclamation resounded in the very place where men lived and worked, and transformed their activities: “Come after me and I will make you into fishers of people.” (Mk 1:17) This is a new kind of activity, at the service of people, and it lasts for life. It will be successful at times, but most of the times unsuccessful and disappointing. Achievements will be hard to get, and a lot of patience and trusts will be required in it.

Then there was a time for signs and wonders, a time for Jesus’ word to perform miracles as the sign that He shared human sufferings and problems. In the synagogue of Capernaum He cured a demoniac, restoring to him his peace of mind (Mk 1:21-27). Then He went with James and John straight into the house of Simon and Andrew. He cured Simon’s mother-in-law and she began to serve them (Mk 1:29-31). The whole town came crowding round the door, and Jesus cured many who were sick with diseases of one kind or another, and drove out also many devils (Mk 1:32-34). To cut a long story short, He taught people God’s truth by serving, healing, taking upon Himself other people’s burdens.

Then there was a time for solitude and prayer. In the morning, long before dawn, He got up and left the house and went off to a lonely place. Simon and his companions set out in search of Him, as they could not understand His behaviour, and when they found Him they invited Him – well, they ordered Him – to go back to town, as everybody was looking for Him. But Jesus replied: “Let us go elsewhere, to the neighbouring country towns, so that I can proclaim the message there too, because that is why I came.” (Mk 1:38) When prayer expresses our earnest wish to do the Lord’s will without reservation, God’s plan for our life will be revealed in it.

According to Mark, Jesus performed His ministry in many different occasions and places with nothing in common apart from being touched by God's grace, which was made visible thanks to Jesus' words and loving gestures. In a society like ours, where time is uniform and meaningless (working days and feasts are more or less similar!), we should be aware that each and every occasion is of remarkable richness and diversity. Each and every occasion should challenge us. In the midst of all our activities we will be able to listen to its message and requests, only if we make room for that very silence in which Jesus Himself made His choice and strengthened His faithfulness, and if we leave room for God to talk to us.

“Active and silent presence...”

Now, as usual, we will briefly go through the Rule of Life, so that we can draw inspiration from it, exactly as we did from Holy Scripture. Our Lady leads us into the Rule right from its prologue. RM's members – the Rule states – “wish to make present in the history of salvation the active and silent presence of the Mother of Jesus”. These two adjectives – ‘active’ and ‘silent’ – were not combined with each other by chance. In fact, the most distinctive feature of Mary's activity is silence: her whole life was a ‘Sabbath’, a day of rest in honour of the Lord. Our whole life should be the Lord's too.

Love for our Sisters should increase day by day; and our Family “should be loved both in good times and in bad” (art. 2).

The vows we have taken, the vows by which we have become attached to the Lord, help us welcome each and every of life's situations as an occasion for meeting Christ. Consecrated chastity, given that it is the “gift of a wholehearted love” (art. 10), is “a call for all people to live waiting for the Lord's return” (art. 8). Poverty, which means relying on God, and God only (cf. art. 14), makes us “ready to face with simplicity all of life's events” (art. 16). Obedience, which means “constantly searching for, as well as faithfully carrying out God's loving and salvific plan” for our life (art. 21), becomes real “by lovingly welcoming, day after day, the various situations of life” (art. 23).

Then there are the articles dealing with prayer and meditation: they are very important, as they remind us that our ‘secular’ consecration would be meaningless, if our lives were found lacking as far as prayer is concerned. Prayer was an essential part of Jesus' daily activity that He carried out among people. “So that you may live in a constant spirit of prayer, you shall schedule in your daily routine and in your life some time to be devoted exclusively to your personal meeting with God.” (art. 30) “In order to bring about Christ's salvific work, you shall take part in the prayer of the whole Church: a) you shall live the various seasons of the liturgical year wholeheartedly; b) you shall sanctify mornings and evenings by celebrating Lauds and Vespers; c) you shall have as the core of your daily life the Eucharistic celebration...” (art. 31) Again, it is Our Lady to guide us into silence and solitude: we cannot grow to maturity without them. “You shall be faithful to your daily, long, personal meeting with the Lord... Following the example of the Virgin, meditation will help you see into the meaning of the Scriptures so that you may be able to discover in them God's warnings as well as His love, and not only in them but also in humankind, in events and in all creation.” (art. 32)

Do not forget especially art. 59!

Our Lady, “active and silent”, is the inspiration for our service to the world: “You shall draw your inspiration from the service that Mary rendered and still renders to the world; you shall work in all peace, with no anxiety, which is typical of those who do confide in their own efforts.” (art. 47) Saint Augustine would say this is the very peace of the Sabbath rest, the peace of those who do not rely on their own efforts, but on God's work. We should bear witness by a life “upright in faith, patient in hope, and persevering in charity” (art. 56).

4. LOYALTY TO THE WORLD

Lectio Divina: «As You sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.» (Jn 17:18)

Rule of Life RM 68: «A prospective candidate, who wishes to consecrate herself to God in the world, according to Regnum Mariae's ethos, must... perceive the summons to lead a hidden life in the world, while deeply appreciating the genuine human values one can find in it, and believe that she will be able to give her solitary witness.»

The world is the very place where we should carry out our secular vocation, with its hidden and silent witness. In order for us to fully comprehend its importance, as well as the big commitment it involves, in this unit I will gather some elements from Chapter 17 of St John's Gospel: verses 9-20 deal with the world ('kosmos'). This term occurs very frequently in Johannine works: in his gospel, about 80 times, while in his letters, 24 times.

The glory of the Father and of the Son

Chapter 17 is usually called 'Jesus' priestly prayer'. This is due to the fact that Jesus is interceding on behalf of His people as a priest would do. This prayer provides a wealth of inspiring suggestions for all those who have chosen to live out their consecration to the gospel in the world and who, thanks to their secular vocation, "participate in Christ's one, prophetic and royal priesthood" (Rule of Life, art. 6), thus offering the Lord the world redeemed by love, a love so powerful that it can triumph over evil. "You shall carry out everything in the name of the Lord Jesus," art. 29 adds. "It is by sharing in His priesthood, that your life may become prayer and praise to the Father."

The prayer of Jesus deals with some of the themes of Chapter 13, with which it constitutes a kind of 'frame' surrounding Chapters 14-16 (Jesus' farewell discourse), and is closely related to the Prologue (Jn 1:1-18) too.

Jesus' farewell discourse focuses on His departure from the world, as well as on the assurance that the disciples' communion with Him will still be possible despite His physical absence. The discourse ends with a wonderful word of hope: "In the world you will have hardship, but be courageous: I have conquered the world." (16:33) Jesus was conquering the world even though He was on His way to His passion, which is on His way to a defeat, according to human standards. He was conquering the world exactly because He was offering His life for the salvation of the world. Love is stronger than hate. This is the reason why "light shines in darkness, and darkness could not overpower it." (Jn 1:5) "Unless a wheat grain falls into the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest." (Jn 12:24) Exactly as Jesus, His disciples can conquer the world too: "This is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith. Who can overcome the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? He it is who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with water alone but with water and blood..." (1 Jn 5:4-6) Jesus came with water and blood: this means that the whole of His life, from baptism to passion, was a real sharing of the life of the world. Thus He conquered the world, thus we can conquer the world in our turn too.

Jesus' prayer to the Father – and our own prayer as well – is based on the certainty of His victory. This is its beginning: "Father, the hour has come: glorify Your Son so that Your Son may

glorify You; so that, just as You have given Him power over all humanity [*Greek, 'all flesh'*], He may give eternal life to all those You have entrusted to Him.” (Jn 17:1-2) The hour has come to pass from this world to the Father: it is Jesus’ Passover, Jesus’ Easter (Easter means Passover), fulfilled by loving those who were His in the world, up to giving Himself as a gift to men. “Before the festival of the Passover, Jesus, knowing that His hour had come to pass from this world to the Father, having loved those who were His in the world, loved them to the end.” (Jn 13:1) This is the hour of God’s glorification (cf Jn 12:23; 13:31), that is of the full revelation of God’s life, shining in the life of the Son. “We saw His glory, the glory that He has from the Father as only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.” (Jn 1:14) The Father’s glory shines through Jesus’ love, faithful to the last. This is definitely not the worldly glory, the glory one may seek for himself (cf Jn 7:18; 8:50), rather the glory deriving from the gift of His life. This is “the power over all flesh” that the Father has given to the Son: a salvific power, a life-giving power. The Word became flesh Himself (cf Jn 1:14). He became one of us, taking all our sins upon Himself and giving His life to all men, giving eternal life, that is, life in its fullness, the only one that can be defined as such.

“And eternal life is this: to know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” (Jn 17:3) Man lives so that he can personally know God – “To know Your power is the root of immortality,” the Book of Wisdom states (15:3). Jesus could communicate this knowledge to man, as in Him was life, life that was the light of men (cf Jn 1:4). Coming into the world, the Word received from God a work to do. In His prayer to the Father, Jesus declares that He has finished the work that the Father gave Him to do. “I have revealed Your name to those whom You took from the world to give me.” (Jn 17:6) The name is the same name God revealed to Moses at the burning bush: “I AM that I AM”, and also, “I will be with you” (cf Ex 3:14, 12). The true meaning of this name becomes clear in Jesus: “I have made Your name known to them and will continue to make it known, so that the love with which You loved me may be in them, and so that I may be in them.” (Jn 17:26) God’s name, that is, His innermost reality, is love (see also 1 Jn 4:16): an infinite mystery that will never be known by man to its very depths. In fact, Jesus states that He has made God’s name known to them and will continue to make it known; this knowledge will ever increase. This knowledge can be gained only through Jesus: “No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart (*Greek, 'in the bosom of the Father'*), who has made Him known.” (1:18) No one has ever seen God: He is the Invisible One, the Unfathomable One. Jesus is the only one to be in the bosom of the Father, in an intimate and deep communion with Him, the only one that can show us the way to know that God is love, and that only by loving we can come to know Him. “My dear friends, let us love each other, since love is from God and everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. Whoever fails to love does not know God, because God is love... and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him.” (1 Jn 4:7-8, 16)

“Now, Father, glorify me with that glory I had with You before ever the world existed.” (Jn 17:5) Once finished His work, Jesus returned to the glory He enjoyed as the pre-incarnate Son. By His life, He gave His glory as a gift of salvation to the whole humankind. The Father is the origin and the ultimate end of Jesus’ mission: “I came from the Father and have come into the world and now I am leaving the world to go to the Father.” (Jn 16:28) The human life of the Word is defined by His utter obedience to the Father.

He came to His own...

Jesus states that He revealed the Father to those whom the Father took from the world to give Him. Here it is clear that there is a distinction between those who belong to Jesus and the world. It must be highlighted though that distinction neither means ‘opposition’ nor ‘dualism’. Both are far from the evangelist’s way of thinking.

In the fourth gospel, the term ‘world’ first and foremost refers to the whole of creation, which God made through His Word: “In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and

the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things came into being, not one thing came into being except through Him.” (Jn 1:1-3) Given that it has been created by God, the world is a good thing. It is one of God’s works and exists thanks to God. This Johannine idea of ‘world’ is very far from Gnostic theories about the ‘kosmos’ as the work of evil and demonic forces. The gospel describes the world according to the perspective of Chapter 1 of Genesis (1:1-5). Everything is good, because everything is the product of God’s hands.

The world is often seen also as the land where man lives between birth and death. Man is born into the world (cf Jn 16:21); man passes from this world (cf Jn 13:1). The world has a transient nature, still its most relevant feature is that it is ordered to the service of man. Everything has been made for man. As Genesis 2:7-20 and 1:27-30 do, the very beginning of St John’s gospel proclaims that life, whose origin is in the Word of God, is the light of men.

The world is first and foremost the place that the Word chose as His dwelling. “The Word was the real light that gives light to everyone; He was coming into the world. He was in the world that had come into being through Him...” (Jn 1:9-10) This is Martha’s confession of faith: “Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, the One who was to come into this world.” (Jn 11:27) The world is the place where Christ bears witness to the truth: “I was born for this, I came into the world for this, to bear witness to the truth.” (Jn 18:37) It is the place where He brings life into: “God sent His only Son into the world that we might have life through Him.” (1 Jn 4:9) The world is the place of life and salvation, the place where God reveals Himself to man, and where we have to choose whether to stand for or against Him. That is why the meaning of the term ‘kosmos’ cannot be limited to ‘inhabited world’, but must include the idea of the whole ‘humankind’, which is the object of the love of God, a God who creates and saves (cf Jn 1:13; 3:17; 13:1; 1 Jn 4:8-10, 14-16).

The term ‘world’ has therefore a positive connotation in the fourth gospel, given that it is exactly in the world that the love of God, creating and saving man, can be revealed. This love needs man’s response, and divides those who welcome it from those who rejects it. The negative connotation of the term ‘world’ derives from that very fact: the world can also be the place of unbelief and hate towards God. The world is not evil in itself; but it may become evil, depending on our personal choices. “... Though the light has come into the world people have preferred darkness to the light...” (Jn 3:19) “The world hates me, because I give evidence that its ways are evil.” (Jn 7:7) Every man is free to plunge into darkness (cf Jn 3:19; 9:39) or to come out into the light (cf Jn 3:21; 8:12); to stand with God’s retribution hanging over him (cf Jn 3:36) or to avoid being judged (cf Jn 3:18; 5:24); to die in his sins (cf Jn 8:24) or to pass from death to life without being brought to judgement (cf Jn 5:24).

It is a tragedy when man tries to resist God, when he does not respond to God’s calling and prefers to dwell in his own darkness (“Judas’ night”, cf Jn 13:30): “Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a branch – and withers; these branches are collected and thrown on the fire and are burnt.” (Jn 15:6)

Chosen by the world

Jesus’ disciples have to pass – in a kind of new ‘Exodus’ – from this world of unbelief to the awareness that they are the Lord’s exclusive property. “They were Yours and You gave them to me, and they have kept Your word.” (Jn 17:6) Moreover, all those who have welcomed the Word become children of God, “who were born not from human stock or human desire or human will but from God Himself.” (Jn 1:13) There is a hard struggle between the children of God and the unbelieving world: they cannot but be natural enemies. The world hates them as it sees that they oppose it: “If the world hates you, you must realise that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you do not belong to the world, because my choice of you has drawn you out of the world, that is why the world hates you.

Remember the words I said to you: A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too; if they kept my word, they will keep yours as well. But it will be on my account that they will do all this to you, because they do not know the One who sent me.” (Jn 15:18-21)

This opposition is well described in the prayer of Jesus: “It is for them that I pray. I am not praying for the world but for those You have given me, because they belong to You.” (Jn 17:9) Unbelief proves to be an insurmountable barrier; if man does not open himself up to God, the Word will not penetrate into him. “Though they had been present when He gave so many signs, they did not believe in Him... Indeed, they were unable to believe because, as Isaiah says again: He has blinded their eyes, He has hardened their heart, to prevent them from using their eyes to see, using their heart to understand, changing their ways and being healed by me.” (Jn 12:37-40)

In fact, this kind of world is just a consequence of the hardening of man’s heart. Nobody in particular can be identified with ‘this world’. From an historical point of view, one might say that certain people or groups belong to this world, but their belonging is and remains temporary. In St John’s gospel the Jews, Jesus’ enemies and persecutors, are the symbol of man’s final rejection of Christ, a rejection that cannot be attributed to the Jews of Christ’s time only though.

The ‘world’ includes all those who oppose light (Jn 1:5) and walk in the dark (Jn 8:12, 23; 12:35), who do not recognise the Word (Jn 1:10), who can never accept the Spirit of truth (Jn 14:17), who cannot see the Risen Christ (Jn 14:17), who did not listen to His words nor kept them, who did not understand His works (Jn 8:23-24, 47-48; 14:22; 16:8-11). The world includes those who hate His disciples and rejoice in persecuting them (Jn 16:20), and who love their own disciples only (Jn 15:19). If the Christians themselves refuse to believe, they will behave exactly like the ‘world’. The disciples cannot be overconfident... St John’s gospel as well as his Letters often hint at the converts’ betrayal. “Did I not choose the Twelve of you? Yet one of you is a devil.” (Jn 6:70; see also Jn 6:64-65; 13:21, 38; 18:15-27; 1 Jn 2:18-19; 4:1-3) Man’s heart is fickle, always wavering between good and evil. People cannot be deemed to be good or evil once and for all. The world is ruled by darkness, which becomes apparent when both Jesus and His community are condemned to death: “I passed Your word on to them, and the world hated them, because they belong to the world no more than I belong to the world.” (Jn 17:14; 1 Jn 3:10-15) All the believers are always at risk of being separated from Christ (cf Jn 6:59-60, 66-71; 12:48; 13:21; 15:6) and of destroying – by their behaviour – the unity of the fraternal life (cf 1 Jn 2:19).

The believers – Jesus states – “do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world.” “I am not asking You to remove them from the world, but to protect them from the Evil One” (cf Jn 17:15-16). In this prayer, echoing the Lord’s Prayer [the Our Father] (cf Mt 6:13), Jesus suggests that we are not to live in the world as exiles would live in a country different from their own, as strangers. The world we live in was created by God so that it could be at the service of man. Therefore we should commit ourselves to transform it according to the Lord’s will. On the other hand, we should be careful not to conform ourselves to the mentality of this world, rejecting God and His gift. That is why Jesus goes on praying to the Father, and says: “Consecrate them in the truth; Your word is truth. As You sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world, and for their sake I consecrate myself so that they too may be consecrated in truth.” (Jn 17:17-18) ‘To be consecrated’ means ‘to be different’: we live in this world but our own Christian identity distinguishes us from all the rest. We should not isolate ourselves from them, though. We should live in their midst in order to bring them the novelty of our new life.

We should therefore commit ourselves to being faithful to our own identity: we are people consecrated in truth, God’s friends, members of Jesus’ community, where the first commandment is to love: “This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you. No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends, if you do what I command you. I shall no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know the master’s business; I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father.” (Jn 15:12-15) Jesus revealed the name of the Father to His friends. He prays that this knowledge may steadily

increase: “I have made Your name known to them and will continue to make it known, so that the love with which You loved me may be in them, and so that I may be in them.” (Jn 17:26) This love of the Father for the Son is the Holy Spirit Himself: the Love of the Trinity in which the community of believers lives, moves and grows.

Perfected in unity

God’s love is stronger than hate and rejection. Jesus says that He is not praying for the world, but for those that His Father has given Him (Jn 17:9). By this statement, He does not condemn the world once and for all: in fact, there is still room for conversion, and God’s calling keeps on resounding: “The light will be with you only a little longer now. Go on your way while you have the light, or darkness will overtake you, and nobody who walks in the dark knows where he is going. While you still have the light, believe in the light so that you may become children of light.” (Jn 12:35-36; cf also Jn 7:31, 40, 41, 50-51; 8:30-32; 10:21; 11:45; 12:9). Jesus is the Day of Salvation that Abraham saw and was glad about (cf Jn 8:51-57); what Moses wrote about Him (Jn 1:45) is being fulfilled now (Jn 5:45-46; 19:36); He comes as the Light of the world: “I have come into the world as light, to prevent anyone who believes in me from staying in the dark any more.” (Jn 12:46) God would like us to be saved; He would not like anything else: “The Word was the real light that gives light to everyone; He was coming into the world.” (Jn 1:9; cf also 6:14; 11:27; 18:37; 1 Jn 4:8-10, 14, 16)

Jesus is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, that is, unbelief (cf Jn 1:29). Only love can save the world. “For this is how God loved the world: He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life. For God sent His Son into the world not to judge the world, but so that through Him the world might be saved.” (Jn 3:16-17)

This love is stronger than death. Jesus entrusts it to His disciples, for them to bring into the world the novelty of the gospel by their fraternal life. “With me in them and You in me, may they be so perfected in unity that the world will recognise that it was You who sent me and that You have loved them as You have loved me.” (Jn 17:23) Jesus does not pray for the world: it would be useless, given that the world has already rejected His salvation. Still, He entrusts us the task to win the world over to Him by our love. “I pray not only for these but also for those who through their teaching will come to believe in me.” (Jn 17:20) God’s love is for everybody. It is the power of this kind of love that can conquer the whole world: “There are other sheep I have that are not of this fold, and I must lead these too. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be only one flock, one shepherd.” (Jn 10:16)

Witnessing to the gospel... while living in this world

Witnessing to the gospel, while living in this world: this is the commitment that each and every sister makes – as our Rule of Life states, right from the start (art. 1) – when she chooses to be part of Regnum Mariae. The phrase “while living in this world” has to be highlighted as it denotes that we should not turn our back on the world, or on any of life’s situations, but transform them thanks to the love of Christ, as arts. 4, 28, 46 and 55 state: “Each of us will fulfil her consecration in her own environment, doing an ordinary job, as ordinary people do. In conformity with our apostolic witness, we shall live all of life’s situations in Christ, and carry out our social mandate in a spirit of service, with responsibility and competence.” (art. 4) “You wish to love the world as Christ Himself does.” (art. 28) “Let us live according to our consecrated secularity, soiling our hands with the temporal realities we are part of, so that they may be ordered to God through Christ.” (art. 46) “We commit ourselves to follow Christ in the world.” (art. 55).

As we have already seen from Chapter 17 of St John's Gospel, unity is the way to make God present in the world. "Mindful of Christ's words, 'It is by your love for one another, that everyone will recognise you as my disciples,' (Jn 13:35) we shall live as one in mutual love." (art. 3) It is by our very unity that the world will recognize that it has been called to universal fraternity too. "You shall carry out your service in the world as the expression of that universal fraternity which is a bond between you and every creature, due to our common origin in God the Father and to communion brought about by Christ's reconciliation." (art. 54)

If we live as one in love, our relationship to the world will be renewed. "Each of us will lovingly live in the mystery of the Church, so that our example may be conducive to the ever new relationship of the Church to the world." (art. 5) The mystery of the Church is the communion with Jesus Christ and with the members of His community. Communion is the hidden yeast that may transform the world and make it more and more similar to God's design. Communion with Jesus shapes the Christian identity, and gives Christians the strength necessary to win the world, the strength not to be shaped by the mentality of this world. Our Lady can teach us all that: in fact, "from Her life with Jesus at Nazareth, each of us will learn the meaning of her participation in society." (cf. art. 6)

'Consecrated secularity' silently brings into the world Christ's mystery, it announces it silently by its very life. "You shall be mindful that, when you silently announce Christ, you will be able to help Him see the light in your brothers' and sisters' hearts. You will be for them a haven where God never stops reconciling them to Himself, in order for them to have a share in His glory." (art. 11)

5. LOYAL TO CHRIST AND HIS MISSION

Lectio Divina: «For Christ is the peace between us... to create a single New Man out of the two of them.» (Ep 2:14-15)

Rule of Life RM 54: «You shall carry out your service in the world as the expression of that universal fraternity which is a bond between you and every creature...»

In the previous units we have dealt with the goodness of creation as it came out of God's hands; we have dealt with our task as creatures made in the image and likeness of God, and with the importance of time thanks to which we can discover both God's love and our own shortcomings. In the fourth unit, reflecting on St John's gospel, we highlighted the fact that we can be genuinely part of the world by rejecting its mentality and calling it to a new way of life instead, so that the humankind may be one and live in harmony. In this unit we will keep on dealing with this subject, but this time we will analyse St Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, which should be of paramount importance to all RM sisters, given that the epilogue of the Rule of Life is in fact a quotation from Ep 3:14-21 (in one of the next units we will go through this passage in detail).

The roots of the Church

The Letter to the Ephesians – it is irrelevant whether it was written by Paul or by one of his disciples – explores the theme of the Church: 'ekklesia' does not refer to the single local community, but to the totality of believers, making up one big community. In this universal community there is room for people from different religious and cultural backgrounds: they fall into two main categories, respectively defined by the two pronouns 'us' and 'you' (cf Ep 1:12-13; 2:1, 3, 11, 17, 22; 3:1). 'Us' identifies the author of the letter as well as the group he belonged to, that is the Christians coming from Judaism; 'you' identifies the Christians who were formerly Gentiles. There was a risk that one group might prevail over the other, and that the community might break up. The author's main concern was its unity. We must note that this term, 'unity', occurs only in Ep 4:3, 13 and nowhere else.

It is likely that the group coming from paganism was larger than the one whose members were Jews. There was a real risk that the community would forget its roots (cf Rm 11:18). That is why St Paul kept on insisting on the great dignity of Israel within God's salvific plan. "Do not forget, then," he reminded former Pagans, "that there was a time when you who were gentiles by physical descent, termed the uncircumcised by those who speak of themselves as the circumcised by reason of a physical operation, do not forget, I say, that you were at that time separate from Christ and excluded from membership of Israel, aliens with no part in the covenants of the Promise, limited to this world, without hope and without God." (Ep 2:11-12) Here St Paul lists all the gifts which God gave Israel and which He will never take away, given that He is faithful. Now the Christians who used to be Gentiles are given a share in these gifts too. God's gifts are: the Christ, that is, the Messiah; membership of Israel, defined as taking part in the covenants of the Promise; hope, that is, the expectant longing for Christ's return and the fulfilment of the history of salvation; God Himself.

Unbelievers live in darkness because they are far away from God. In this respect, St Paul exhorts the Ephesians thus: "So this I say to you and attest to you in the Lord, do not go on living the empty-headed life that gentiles live. Intellectually they are in the dark, and they are estranged

from the life of God, because of the ignorance which is the consequence of closed minds.” (Ep 4:17-18) “They are estranged from the life of God”: this is their major source of unhappiness and confusion. To remedy the situation, they have to share in Israel’s privileges, that is, in the deep and close relationship between God and man. In fact, Israel is the sign of the fullness deriving from faith; Israel is the symbol of faith as the deep communion with the invisible God. According to Philo of Alexandria, the name ‘Israel’ means ‘the man who can see God’.

How often we do find in the Psalms an ardent longing for God as well as the joy deriving from communion with Him!

“One thing I ask of the Lord, one thing I seek:
to dwell in the Lord’s house all the days of my life,
to enjoy the sweetness of the Lord,
to seek out His temple.” (Ps 27:4)

“Who else is there for me in heaven?
And, with You, I lack nothing on earth.
My heart and my flesh are pining away:
my heart’s rock, my portion, God for ever!
...
my happiness is to be near God.” (Ps 73:25-27)

“God, You are my God, I pine for You...
better Your faithful love than life itself...
in the shadow of Your wings I rejoice.” (Ps 63:1, 4, 8)

“My whole being yearns and pines for the Lord’s courts,
my heart and my body cry out for joy
to the living God.
Even the sparrow has found a home,
the swallow a nest to place its young:
Your altars, Lord Sabaoth,
my King and my God.” (Ps 84:1-3)

“I rejoiced that they said to me,
‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’
At last our feet are standing
at your gates, Jerusalem!” (Ps 122:1-2)

Given that Israel has been granted the precious gift of faith, whoever is far away from Israel is also far away from God: “those who used to be far off” (2:13) used to be also “excluded” (2:12) and “separate” (2:12). A Pagan who wants to become a Christian does not need to convert to Judaism first. The barrier of the Law – that is, the corpus of human commandments and decrees that has been added to God’s Torah, and that has kept Israel apart from all the other peoples – has been broken down for the Jews too. This barrier has been broken down by Jesus Christ.

Christ is the peace between us

“Now in Christ Jesus, you that used to be so far off had been brought close, by the blood of Christ.” (Ep 2:13) God wills that everything would be brought “together under Christ” (1:10).

Christ reigns over the whole cosmos: “God has put all things under His feet.” (1:22) In fact, the Church is His special property, given that she is His Body (cf Ep 1:23; 2:16; 4:4, 12, 16; 5:23, 30). “The whole Body is fitted and joined together by Him, every joint adding its own strength, for each individual part to work according to its function. So the body grows until it has built itself up in love.” (4:16) Both the cosmos and the Church have been subjected to Christ’s lordship; but the Church only is “the fullness of Him who is filled, all in all” (1:23), the place where the power of Christ is at work (cf 3:20). This deep union is described by drawing a parallel with marriage (cf Ep 5:25-27) which makes use of the ancient prophetic language (cf Hosea), and with the “holy temple” (2:21) built up “on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets”. The ultimate goal of the life of the Church is to be “fully mature with the fullness of Christ Himself... If we live by the truth and in love, we shall grow completely into Christ...” (4:13, 15)

This Church is a reality which includes people coming from different religious and cultural backgrounds. All its members must strive to reach unity, as Christ “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, and through the cross, to reconcile them both to God in one Body; in His own person He killed the hostility.” (2:14-16) Christ is the peace between us: this phrase does not refer to our peace of mind, in a psychological sense; but rather, in a social and ecumenical sense, to the destruction of the hostility between the Gentiles and the Jews. The differences between different peoples can be overcome in Christ. No people can consider itself superior to another any longer. Once the religious, cultural and racial barrier has been broken down, all peoples can be one. This is the New Humankind created by Jesus Christ. This is the only passage of Scripture where Christ is described not only as the mediator of God’s creative work, but also as a creator in His own right.

Christ’s cross is the very beginning of this New Creation: thanks to Christ’s cross, the humankind is reconciled with God and at peace with itself. The Body where the two groups the humankind is made up of, divided by the barrier of hate, can be reconciled with each other, is also the Body where they can be reconciled with God. Maybe here St Paul echoes what the evangelical tradition says about the two commandments to love God and neighbour. A lawyer asked Jesus what he should do to inherit eternal life. And Jesus referred him to the Word of God which states: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with your entire mind, and your neighbour as yourself.” Then Jesus added: “Do this and life is yours.” (cf Lk 10:25-28 and parallels)

God’s family

Through Christ “we both in the one Spirit have free access to the Father” (2:18). In time, the Greek term ‘access’ came to express many different meanings: the landing of a ship, the admission of someone to the king’s presence, to bring someone to trial, and finally to be presented to the Lord as the offerings that were presented at the altar (cf Ex 29:4, 10; Lv 1:2; 8:24; Nb 8:9-10). The Letter to the Ephesians conveys this final meaning, as it can be gathered from the parallel passage of Col 1:21-22. “You were once estranged and of hostile intent... now He has reconciled you, by His death and in that mortal body, to bring you before Himself holy, faultless and irreproachable.” (Col 1:21-22) Here the language is clearly liturgical, similar to the one that can be found elsewhere in the Old Testament, with reference to things or people offered to the Lord (cf Dt 12:18; 16:16), or to the priests’ service in the Temple (cf Dt 10:8; 18:5, 7). Christ is the only one that can bring us before the Lord as a pure offering, purified by His blood. In fact, we can approach God only through Jesus. “In Him we are bold enough to approach God in complete confidence, through our faith in Him.” (Ep 3:12) All the believers now can “have no fear in approaching the throne of grace to receive mercy.” (Heb 4:16)

To find out that through Christ we can live in full communion with the Father, makes us jump for joy. The same joy resounds in the Letter to the Romans: “It is through Him [Jesus Christ], by faith, that we have been admitted into God’s favour in which we are living...” (Rm 5:2) And again, in the First Letter of Peter: “Christ Himself died once and for all for sins, the upright for the sake of the guilty, to lead us to God.” (1 P 3:18)

We can “approach” God through Christ not only in our liturgies, but also in the rest of our everyday life, when our whole life – thanks to the love of Christ – becomes a living liturgy itself. That is why the New Testament calls the Christian life “a spiritual sacrifice” (cf Rm 12:1; 1 P 2:5). Now we can approach the Father “in one Spirit”: this phrase points out that we can reach a profound communion with God. The epilogue of RM’s Rule of Life quotes the prayer that can be found in the Letter to the Ephesians (3:14-21): “In the abundance of His glory may He, through His Spirit, enable you to grow firm in power with regard to your inner self...” (3:16) The inner man is someone whose heart has been renewed by the Holy Spirit; the inner man is the New Man (cf Ep 4:24) who, thanks to the Spirit, is a son of God; who is no longer afraid of God, but rather very grateful to Him for all the love he has been showered with.

“In one spirit” may hint to the unity of all the members of the ecclesial community, which is one. In fact, St Paul’s exhortation insists on the new social relationships. The community sings psalms and hymns and inspired songs, singing and chanting to the Lord in their hearts, always and everywhere giving thanks to God... (cf Ep 5:19-20) But if God’s light were not shining in the believers’ hearts, all that would be absolutely pointless. “You were darkness once, but now you are light in the Lord; behave as children of light, for the effects of the light are seen in complete goodness and uprightness and truth.” (Ep 5:8-9)

After describing Christ as the very source of reconciliation and peace within a Church that tries to live deeply in communion, the Letter to the Ephesians’ author addresses the Christians who used to be Gentiles and concludes: “So you are no longer aliens or foreign visitors; you are fellow-citizens with the holy people of God and part of God’s household. You are built upon the foundations of the apostles and prophets, and Christ Jesus Himself is the cornerstone.” (Ep 2:19-20)

We must highlight the antitheses of verses 12 and 19:

“were”	/ “are”
“excluded from membership of Israel”	/ “no longer aliens... but fellow-citizens”
“aliens with no part in the covenants of the Promise”	/ “part of God’s household”.

Whoever reaches, through Christ, an intimacy with God, is no longer alien to anybody in this world. The statement, “you are no longer aliens or foreign visitors”, may seem to contrast sharply with what can be found elsewhere both in the Old and the New Testament, where ‘to be an alien’ is the very condition of all believers (cf 1 P 1:1; 2:1; Heb 11:13-14; 13:14) and of man as well (cf Ps 39:13). In fact, the statement of the Letter to the Ephesians refers to the barrier broken down by Jesus Christ’s love.

To live lovingly in the mystery of the Church

God the Creator, who brings everything together under the crucified and risen Christ as head, wants the Church to be the image of the reconciled humankind, as well as a prophecy of the Kingdom. This truth, the very core of the Letter to the Ephesians, should be especially meaningful to each and every of RM sisters: by loving the Church, by wishing to make it more and more beautiful thanks to the holiness of her life, each and every sister may be genuinely part of the world and convey to it the energy of goodness, thus opening the way for Christ.

Art. 5 states that each sister must love “the mystery of the Church”, the mystery that is being revealed in the Church. This mystery is the plan of God, who reconciled all men to Himself through Christ. Therefore we should never tire of striving for peace, for mutual understanding and support, and for forgiveness.

Our love for the Church should find expression in our co-operation with “the mission of those who have been called to exercise the ministerial priesthood in the Church” (arts. 6, 45), as well as in our “obedience to the Church’s Magisterium” (art. 25). Our love for the Church should be propped up by a deep inner life. As we have already seen, this is the main and fundamental need of the Church, which, in spite of being the Body of Christ, is not completely conformed to Him yet. She must therefore be submissive to the Holy Spirit’s action, in order to incessantly fill the gap between herself and her Lord. The Church can be herself when she lives an intimate relationship with God in the Spirit. This does not mean that the Church has to be ‘spiritualised’, that she should go back on her commitment to the world; on the contrary, she can be part of the world realistically, by remaining faithful to Christ and to His mission.

That is why the Rule of Life wisely suggests us not to neglect the inner spiritual dimension of our secular vocation. It is exactly because we live in this world, that our secular vocation needs the Gospel to penetrate deeply into our hearts. From arts. 9 and 10 we learn that by “the gift of a wholehearted, jealous and mutual love”, the sign that the Holy Spirit is actually working in us, we can “feel at peace with ourselves, with our brothers and sisters and with all creation”. “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 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) The “intimate and constant communion with the Lord” (art. 28) is nourished by prayer, that is, by incessantly looking for the face of the Father, urged by the Holy Spirit. Thus, prayer can turn our whole life into a liturgy. (cf. arts. 29, 48)

Given that our secular vocation “moves forward in a continual rhythm of invitation and response till it reaches the perfect stature of Christ” (art. 55; cf Ep 4:13), its main task is to “take part... in the humankind’s common journey towards that universal fraternity which will be perfect only in God the Father’s house” (art. 44). Our service in the world will be genuine, by being “the expression of that universal fraternity which is a bond between you and every creature, due to our common origin in God the Father and to communion brought about by Christ’s reconciliation” (art. 54). The message of the Letter of the Ephesians resounds everywhere in the Rule of Life: it reminds us about the reasons why we live as brothers and sisters in our religious Family, in spite of all difficulties. Should we be unfaithful to it, we would betray the world’s expectations.

6. WITNESSES OF HOPE AND CHARITY

Lectio Divina: «... always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you have.» (1 P 3:15)

Rule of Life RM 11: «You shall be mindful that, when you silently annunciate Christ, you will be able to help Him see the light in your brothers' and sisters' hearts.»

Christ is the true reason for the hope we are trying to bear witness to by our very words and deeds: this is one of the main themes of the First Letter of Peter, addressed to “all those living as aliens in the Dispersion... who have been chosen” (1 P 1:1), that is, to all of us who live in this world as strangers, and who are in search of a homeland. In fact, this Letter can be a source of inspiration for us, and encourage us to be faithful to our ‘secular’ vocation.

In a hostile world

The very aim of the Letter is revealed in the last words and greetings: “I write these few words to you through Silvanus,¹⁰ who is a trustworthy brother, to encourage you and attest that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it!” (5:12) The difficult situation the churches of Asia have to face is in fact this “true grace”, given that it holds out a promise too: “The God of all grace who called you to eternal glory in Christ will restore you, He will confirm, strengthen and support you.” (1 P 5:10) The difficult situation was not a real persecution in the strictest sense of the word, rather some kinds of suffering, due to the hostility of the environment they were living in. The Letter mentions them more than once: “This is a great joy to you, even though for a short time yet you must bear all sorts of trials.” (1:6) “The merit in the sight of God is in putting up with it patiently when you are punished for doing your duty.” (2:20) “Blessed are you if you have to suffer for being upright... And if it is the will of God that you should suffer, it is better to suffer for doing right than for doing wrong.” (3:13, 17) “Do not be taken aback at the testing by fire¹¹ which is taking place among you, as though something strange were happening to you; but in so far as you share in the sufferings of Christ, be glad...” (4:12-13) The First Letter of Peter can be defined as an exhortation to Christians needing encouragement and support. They are a minority with a lifestyle that cannot be appreciated by a society governed by utterly different rules and interests.

In order to give encouragement and support, very often the Letter makes use of the word of God, not only from the Old Testament, but also from the New: in some of its expressions, Jesus' own voice can be heard. The word of the Lord is the most reliable support, as well as the brightest light, on the dark ways of this world.

Many explicit quotations are from the Old Testament according to the Septuagint. Dealing with the “living and enduring Word of God” which can regenerate us and let us experience the genuine love of our brothers and sisters, 1 Peter 1:24 quotes Isaiah 40:6-8: “For all humanity is grass, and all its beauty like the wild flower's. As grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains for ever.”

¹⁰ Silvanus was the secretary who assisted Peter in writing or composing the Letter. His help may explain why Peter's Greek is rather accurate and fluent. Silvanus is usually identified with the Silvanus who had been a companion of Paul (cf Ac 15:40-18:5; 2 Co 1:19; 1 Th 1:1; 2 Th 1:1), and this may explain why some elements belonging to the Pauline tradition can be traced in this Letter too.

¹¹ Translation CEI adds “of prosecution”, but the term is not present in the Greek text.

In order to urge readers to commit themselves to holiness, “after the model of the Holy One who calls us”, 1 Peter 1:16 quotes Leviticus 19:2 and God’s request: “Be holy, for I am holy.” As God is holy because He is completely “Other”, so the Christians living in this world are holy because they are different; their difference gives rise to misunderstandings and hostility. Weren’t they different, they would not be yeast any longer.

In 1 Peter 2:6-7, Christ is the cornerstone on which the community can be built: here Peter quotes Isaiah 28:16... “Now I am laying a stone in Zion, a chosen, precious cornerstone, and no one who relies on this will be brought to disgrace.” ...as well as Psalm 118:22: “The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone, a stumbling stone, a rock to trip people up.” This community is “the chosen race, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, a people to be a personal possession to sing the praises of God” (1 P 2:9) What was once a non-people is now the People of God; what was once outside His pity, now has received pity. God Himself promised that, as it is stated in Ex 19:5-6; Is 43:20-21; Hos 1:6-9; 2:3, 25.

In this community God lavished His love on, the brothers never repay one wrong with another, or one abusive word with another; instead, they repay with a blessing. “That is what [they were] called to do, so that [they] inherit a blessing” (1 P 3:9). This is the poor and needy’s community, as Psalm 34:13-17 reminds us: they are humble; they look for God and fear Him; in Him they find their support; they turn away from evil and do good, they seek peace and pursue it. In order to exhort Christians to show “humility towards one another” (1 P 5:5), Proverbs 3:34 is quoted: “God mocks those who mock, but accords His favour to the humble.”

There are more quotes from Genesis (1 P 3:20), the Psalms (cf 1 P 2:3; 5:7, 9), the Proverbs (2:17; 3:15; 4:18), Ecclesiasticus (1 P 5:7) and again, the second Isaiah (1 P 1:19-21).

Noteworthy are the quotations from Matthew and Luke (cf 1 P 1:2, 4, 11, 12, 13; 2:4, 12, 23; 3:9, 13), while Jesus as the Good Shepherd (1 P 2:25) as well as the theme of the new birth (1 P 1:23) refer to the Johannine tradition.

The Letter makes a liberal use of Romans and Ephesians too, as well as of the Pastoral Epistles (cf parallel passages in the Jerusalem Bible). The main themes of Pauline theology – such as justification and the Law – are missing. Still, the author of 1 Peter knows Pauline terms such as grace, election, salvation, liberty and, above all, the phrase “in Christ”.

More important still are the similarities with the Letter of James: first of all, the very beginning (1 P 1:1 / Jm 1:1), but also 1 P 1:6 / Jm 1:2-3; 1 P 1: 23 / Jm 1:18; 1 P 2:1 / Jm 1:21; 1 P 2:11 / Jm 4:1; 1 P 2:19 / Jm 5:7-11; 1 P 4:8 / Jm 5:20; 1 P 4:13 / Jm 1:2-3; 1 P 5:5 / Jm 4:6-10. These similarities show that both authors were living in the same spiritual atmosphere, and were drawing material from the same tradition, adapted to their respective environments and needs.

Last of all, we must highlight that 1 Peter is closely linked to Hebrews, as regards the themes of the people walking towards perfection (cf 1 P 1:9; 2:11 / Heb 11), of the purifying blood (1 P 1:2 / Heb 12:24), of Christ’s salvific death, “once and for all” (1 P 3:18 / Heb 9:28).

This rich tradition is being used in 1 Peter and proposed to its addressees, so that they might be aware – in a time of difficulties caused by a hostile world – that they are vitally rooted “in Christ”, the source of all their hope.

Strangers and nomads

From its very beginning, the whole Letter is focussed on hope: “Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in His great mercy has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” (1:3) After being regenerated in Christ through baptism, we can start walking in this world, accompanied by this very hope: “Your minds, then, must be sober and ready for action; put all your hope in the grace brought to you by the revelation of Jesus Christ.” (1:13) Grace, that is, God’s free love given to us in Christ, is waiting for our own response. We can respond to God’s grace if we are willing to walk on His long and difficult path:

long, because God's gift is inexhaustible; difficult, because we have to generously adhere to it. "This salvation was the subject of the search and investigation of the prophets who spoke of the grace you were to receive, searching out the time and circumstances for which the Spirit of Christ, bearing witness in them, was revealing the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow them. It was revealed to them that it was for your sake and not their own that they were acting as servants delivering the message which has now been announced to you by those who preached to you the gospel through the Holy Spirit sent from Heaven. Even the angels long to catch a glimpse of these things." (1 P 1:10-12) St Thomas Aquinas explains verse 12 thus: the reality of God's love is so great that the angels permanently contemplate it, even though they cannot exhaust it. They have a burning desire to penetrate deep into this everlasting reality.

A similar burning desire should set our own life on fire, so that life itself can speak about Him. This desire for God makes us strangers in this world, a world whose priorities are very different from ours. According to the author of 1 Peter, life is "the time of our exile" (1 P 1:17). The Greek term 'paroikia' pictures the Christian's life in this world as a temporary stay in a foreign country. 'Paroikia' can be found once more in the New Testament, that is, in Acts 13:17, which constitutes the beginning of Paul's preaching in the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia: "The God of our nation Israel chose our ancestors and made our people great when they were living in Egypt, a land not their own ('paroikia'); then, by divine power He led them out ..." Paul's speech highlights the exodus from Egypt as the liberation from exile; in fact, according to Peter, the Christians still live as strangers in this world. The time of their exile here must be lived out "in reverent awe", yet keeping in mind that they have been set free by "the precious blood of a blameless and spotless lamb, Christ" (1 P 1:19). That is indeed the source of all our hope.

In Christ

The very last words of the First Letter of Peter are: "...in Christ" (1 P 5:14; cf 3:16; 5:10). As mentioned earlier, this brief but very deep phrase recalls St Paul's language and expresses the Christian identity: we are Christians because we are "in Christ"; in Him – the 'environment' in which we move, breath and live – we can find the true meaning of life. In Him we do find reasons to hope even when we are experiencing trials; and, above all, we do find that freedom and that courage which make of us humble and consistent witnesses of the truth we bear within us.

For Christ's sake we are respectful members of society, even though we are "slaves to no one except God; so let us behave like free people" (1 P 2:16).

Again, it is Christ's love that can transform all the relationships within the Christian family (cf 1 P 3:1-7) and that can give us the strength to reply meekly to all those who would like to get the better of us. In this respect, let us go through what 1 Peter writes about the relations between slaves and masters: "Slaves, you should obey your masters respectfully, not only those who are kind and reasonable but also those who are difficult to please. You see, there is merit if, in awareness of God, you put up with the pains of undeserved punishment; but what glory is there in putting up with a beating after you have done something wrong? The merit in the sight of God is in putting up with it patiently when you are punished for doing your duty." (1 P 2:18-20) "This, in fact, is what you were called to do, because Christ suffered for you and left an example for you to follow in His steps. He had done nothing wrong, and had spoken no deceit. He was insulted and did not retaliate with insults; when He was suffering He made no threats but put His trust in the upright Judge. He was bearing our sins in His own body on the cross, so that we might die to our sins and live for uprightness; through His bruises you have been healed. (1 P 2:21-24) Quoting Isaiah 53 (the Suffering Servant of the Lord), 1 Peter describes Jesus' behaviour in His passion, as related in the Gospels. Jesus is the innocent man, insulted by both Jews and Gentiles, by both leaders and the people (cf Mk 14:65; 15:16-20, 29-32); the innocent man who remains silent (cf Mk 14:61; 15:5; Lk 23:9) and who does not put up a resistance, faithful to what He taught His disciples: "Offer no

resistance to the wicked.” (Mt 5:39) He entrusts Himself wholly to God’s will, asking for His forgiveness – not justice! – on behalf of sinners (cf Lk 23:34, 46). As it had already been prophesied in the Old Testament, the Servant of the Lord’s death becomes a means of salvation and solidarity. Christ has become one with our human sinful condition to such a degree, that He gives His own life for us: this is the gift that can redeem us.

“Through His bruises you have been healed.” (1 P 2:24) After describing Christ’s behaviour, the author of the Letter addresses the slaves again: they have been healed by Jesus Christ’s love so that they can bear witness in their turn by an equally strong and faithful love. Please note that the Letter is inviting us neither to be resigned, nor to passively accept an unlawful or iniquitous system. In fact, it is inviting us to “follow in Christ’s steps” (2:21) – this phrase cannot be found elsewhere in the New Testament – that is, to follow Christ’s example, and to keep on loving in spite of men’s hate. We have to respond to evil by our good deeds. We should courageously try any possible way to overcome evil by love. Christ’s example may help Christians to welcome undeserved suffering, while this world’s ethos pretends that good actions are always rewarded, and bad actions are always punished.

Christians suffer in this world not only for bearing this name (cf 1 P 4:16) or for professing their faith, but also for their new ethos and consequent lifestyle. This is the true meaning of the phrase: “Blessed are you if you have to suffer for being upright.” (1 P 3:14) “As Christ has undergone bodily suffering, you too should arm yourselves with the same conviction, that anyone who has undergone bodily suffering has broken with sin, because for the rest of life on earth that person is ruled not by human passions but only by the will of God. You spent quite long enough in the past living the sort of life that gentiles choose to live, behaving in a debauched way, giving way to your passions, drinking to excess, having wild parties and drunken orgies and sacrilegiously worshipping false gods. So people are taken aback that you no longer hurry off with them to join this flood which is rushing down to ruin, and then abuse you for it.” (1 P 4:1-4) “They are taken aback”: this world cannot comprehend the Christians’ lifestyle; to its mind, they are just “strangers and nomads”.

‘Fraternity’

We are strangers, but not apart from this world. To be consistent with our faith is aimed at saving the world, not at affirming our selves. Consequently, we should “always behave honourably among Gentiles so that they can see for themselves what moral lives you lead, and when the day of reckoning comes, give thanks to God for the things which now make them denounce you as criminals.” (1 P 2:12)

We live in this world and have no bastions; our only defence is to do what is right, to live in Christ. “No one can hurt you if you are determined to do only what is right.” (1 P 3:13) And we are freed from fear. “Have no dread of them; have no fear. Simply proclaim the Lord Christ holy in your hearts, and always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you have. But give it with courtesy and respect and with a clear conscience, so that those who slander your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their accusations.” (1 P 3:14-16)

Those who are in Christ constitute in this world “the household of God” (1 P 4:17): they are the “living stones making a spiritual house as a holy priesthood to offer the spiritual sacrifices made acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 P 2:5). The term ‘spiritual’ is not opposed to ‘material’. Here ‘spiritual’ refers to all that we may do prompted by the Holy Spirit, that is, the Love of God. If it is prompted by love, all of our life will become a spiritual sacrifice, acceptable to God: “Above all preserve an intense love for each other, since love covers over many a sin. Welcome each other into your houses without grumbling. Each one of you has received a special grace, so, like good stewards responsible for all these varied graces of God, put it at the service of others.” (1 P 4:8-10) According to 1 Peter, the Church is – more than anything else – “agape”, that is, love without any

distinctions whatever, boundless love, as well as “fraternity”, a “community of brothers”, as 1 Peter suggests after inviting them to fight against the ‘enemy’: “Stand up to him, strong in faith and in the knowledge that it is the same kind of suffering that the community of your brothers throughout the world is undergoing.” (1 P 5:9) It is comforting to know that there are so many brothers and sisters fighting with us and walking on the same path towards adherence to the Gospel. Communion with them is the great bastion that can protect us from the hostile powers of evil. This is the message that the Church-fraternity delivers to the world. Even though we are stranger to the world, we should feel in communion with the whole humankind, and love it deeply “in Christ”.

“Prompted by Christ’s love...”

To be “in Christ” is the very core of 1 Peter. This idea can be found also in RM’s Rule of Life. In fact, nearly at its beginning, the Rule states that “in conformity with our apostolic witness, we shall live all of life’s situations in Christ” (art. 4). Christ’s name can be found everywhere in the Rule... Our hearts must be turned to Christ; “He is the One you shall love above all” (art. 9). It is Christ that we follow when we embrace poverty (art. 14); and following His example, “by the Vow of Obedience we offer our own will to the Lord” (art. 21). Thus, we “effectively contribute to the up-building of that unity willed by Christ Himself” (art. 24; cf also art. 36). As “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” (art. 26), each and every Sister, when she silently annunciates Christ, “will help Him see the light in our brothers’ and sisters’ hearts” (art. 11). It is Christ, in whom we live and in whose name we carry out everything (art. 29 and art. 61), who teaches us “to love the world as He Himself does” (art. 28): in fact, He “came ‘not to be served but to serve’ (Mt 20:28) and came also so that His own might have life to the full” (art. 39). Driven by Christ’s love and free from defence mechanisms and prejudices, we can welcome others in all simplicity and promptness (art. 52; cf. also art. 58).

Communion with Christ builds up that fraternity which is our true service to the world. This fraternity must not be just a vague feeling; rather, it should be conducive to our mutual growth, by being faithful to the Gospel. Therefore, as Christ, we “may be at times a stumbling stone for others”, and have to face hostility. But what really matters is that we become able to lose our life for love’s sake (art. 54).

7. MADE FREE TO LOVE

Lectio Divina: «He has let us know the mystery of His purpose... that He would bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth.» (Ep 1:9-10)

Rule of Life RM 62: «You shall try – as far as you can – to establish a dialogue with the different cultures you come across. You shall learn to prophetically discern what in them is in conformity with the Gospel, and to carry it out, while firmly believing that God is leading mankind and human history towards its fulfilment in the Kingdom of God.»

Let us go back to the Letter to the Ephesians (cf Unit 5.), which is and should be a great source of inspiration for RM. Apart from Ep 3:14-21, which is the epilogue of the Rule of Life, many more allusions can be found in it: see art. 5 (the mystery of the Church, indirectly quoting Ep 5:32); arts. 9 and 10 (Christ in our hearts: Ep 3:17); art. 21 (the plan of God's will: Ep 1:9 ff; 3:3-11); art. 36 (unity: Ef 4:2); art. 55 (the stature of the fullness of Christ: Ep 4:13); art. 58 (to put on Christ, the New Man: Ep 4:24).

Such a frequent occurrence of Ephesians in our Rule is not definitely by chance, given that the core of the Letter is the very idea that unity is the final destination the whole of creation is moving to, as well as the idea that the ecclesial community – thanks to its life of communion with Christ and with our brothers and sisters – is a sign of that very unity.

The Beloved's love

The verse this seventh unity focuses on is part of the prologue of the Letter (Ep 1:3-14), an opening hymn which is very unusual for a letter and whose syntax is highly problematic in many respects. Eph 1:3-14 comprises one long sentence in Greek, with six finite verbs and the rest linked up by non-finite verbs such as participles and gerunds. It is as if the author would like to present a far-reaching blessing which, going beyond the limits of time and space, can reach the infinity of God's plan of salvation.

In order to find our way in this single sentence – that has been broken up in English – we will follow Luis Alonso Schökel's remarks: according to this scholar, the sentence is made up of three major "waves", each of which ends with a note of praise for God (vv. 6, 12, 14). In the first one there are three references to Christ (v. 3: "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ... all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ"; v. 5: "through Jesus Christ"; v. 6: "His free gift to us in the Beloved"). In the second one there are two (v. 10: "bring everything together under Christ, as head"; v. 12: "chosen to be... the people who would put their hopes in Christ"). In the third one there is one (v. 13: "Now you too, in Him... have been stamped with the seal of the Holy Spirit of the Promise").

As far as the literary genre is concerned, this hymn is a *berakah* psalm, a song of praise common in Jewish worship: in it the worshipper gave praise to God, giving thanks to Him for the gifts he had received. This text focuses on the three members of the Trinity. Everything that exists has its origin in God, the Father of Jesus Christ and our own Father too, given that He has

predestined us to adoption as His sons. The Father fulfils His plan of salvation through Christ. In Christ we receive the Holy Spirit, “seal” as well as “pledge”.

The first “wave” starts with the title of Christ, that is, “Anointed”, “Messiah”, the long-awaited One. In Him, God has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of Heaven: all the richness of God has come down to us through His Holy Spirit, His love, for whom He chose us before the world was made. God’s Wisdom always thought of us men as part of Christ: we are not just creatures, as our being lives “in Christ”. From eternity we have been chosen by God to live in Christ, as well as to find in Him the meaning of our life.

We are chosen by God so that we may “be holy and faultless before Him in love”. To be holy means to take part in God’s own life, given that He is the Holy One. To be faultless hints at the animals offered as a sacrifice to God, which should be pure and immaculate: men have to offer God the best they can find in creation; by their offerings they bear witness to God’s absolute rule over it. God chose us to be His, as His is the holy people of Israel (cf Ex 19:6), as His are “the holy ones of the Most High” (Dn 7: 22, 27).

“By predestining us to adoption as His sons” (Ep 1:5). Predestination is neither an arbitrary choice on God’s part, nor a threat meant to scare man and to drive him to desperation. Predestination is God’s gift, a gift from a father to His sons. Israel is His son (cf Ex 4:23; Is 1:2; Hos 11:1 etc.), as well as all who believe in Christ, “who were born not from human stock or human desire or human will but from God Himself” (Jn 1:13). The author of the First Letter of John exclaims: “You must see what great love the Father has lavished on us, by letting us be called God’s children – which is what we are!” (1 Jn 3:1) As any other of God’s gifts, being sons is not just a fantastic privilege; it implies also a commitment on man’s part: “Everyone who does not practice righteousness and does not love his brother is not from God” (1 Jn 3:10). I underlined “and”, because this conjunction means “that is”: “...who does not practice righteousness, that is, who does not love his brother...” To practice righteousness – that is, God’s will – means to love our brothers and sisters. The gift that makes us sons is meant to open us up to fraternity. God’s grace is not just being communicated to us so that we can be brought to perfection, but also so that we can walk towards God together with all men, and grow. In fact, He has predestined us, each and everybody, to be His sons: it is love – not just purification rites – that makes us holy and immaculate before God.

“...to the praise of the glory of His grace, His free gift to us in the Beloved” (Ep 1:6). The stress here is on “free”. The Beloved’s gift is absolutely free. He was called “Beloved” at the time of His Baptism, when the Holy Spirit – that is, the fullness of God’s love – came down on Him: “You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on You” (Mk 1:11). In His prayer to the Father, Jesus states that we can be filled with that love too, exactly as He, who is the Son of love, was: “With me in them and You in me, may they be so perfected in unity that the world will recognise that it was You who sent me and that You have loved them as You have loved me.” (Jn 17:23) God loves us as He loves His Son; in the Beloved we can be His beloved too.

He would bring everything together under Christ, as head

The second “wave” (vv. 7-12) deals with the ransom paid through the blood of Christ, a ransom paid to free us from sin, paid “according to the richness of His grace (‘charis’, ‘free gift of love’) which He has showered on us in all wisdom and insight” (Ep 1:7-8). Thanks to these divine gifts we can comprehend the divine mystery, the “secret plan” as it is being fulfilled: “When the completion of the time came, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born a subject of the Law, to redeem the subjects of the Law, so that we could receive adoption as sons” (Ga 4:4-5).

God’s plan is “to bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth”. In Holy Scripture, Heaven and earth signify the whole cosmos – as, for instance, in Dt 32:1 (“Listen, heavens, while I speak; hear, earth, the words that I shall say!”) or in

Is 1:2 (“Listen, you heavens; earth, attend...”); or they can signify respectively the divine and human worlds, as in Ps 135:6 (“The Lord does whatever He pleases in heaven, on earth”) or in Is 55:9 (“For the heavens are as high above earth as my ways are above your ways”). The “mystery” is the plan to create in Christ a universal community of men, at peace with God and with their fellow men, a community that could be the sign of the unity of creation in spite of the infinite multiplicity of its elements.

The precise meaning of the verb ‘anakephalaïousthai’ is difficult to determine since it was used relatively infrequently in Greek literature. It may mean ‘to summarize, recapitulate’. It has been rendered into Latin as ‘to strengthen’. It contains the Greek term ‘kephalé’, ‘head’, which occurs more than once in the Letter to the Ephesians and defines Christ: “He is the Head of the Church” (Ep 1:22; cf Col 1:18); “If we live by the truth and in love, we shall grow completely into Christ, who is the head by whom the whole Body is fitted and joined together, every joint adding its own strength, for each individual part to work according to its function. So the body grows until it has built itself up in love.” (Ep 4:15-16) This sentence is a bit redundant; its style is typical of this letter. “Truth in love” refers to the truth of the Gospel which has to be proclaimed “in love”. In a similar way, the Body of Christ, the Church, can be built up only in love. The source of its unity is the Holy Spirit of God, His Love (cf Ep 4:3). Thanks to the love of Christ, who is the Cornerstone (cf Ep 2:20), the Body of the Church can grow and be built up in love, fitted and joined together while its different members co-operate with each other, each of them contributing towards the common good by its own activity and characteristics. As Paul states in his Letter to the Romans, everything can be summed up in love: “The only thing you should owe to anyone is love for one another, for to love the other person is to fulfil the law.” (Rm 13:8) All the commandments of the Law “are summed up (‘anakephalaïousthai’) in this single phrase: You must love your neighbour as yourself” (Rm 13:9). By putting this kind of love into practice – that is, by welcoming others with their own characteristics – we can “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 4:13). Our goal should be that kind of unity which derives from faith, that is, from knowledge of Christ and from the experience of His love. A Christian is really ‘perfect’ or ‘fully mature’ when he reaches that kind of unity; he is no longer a slave of his passions and feelings, and shares in Christ’s own fullness.

This is Jesus’ own message, the message of the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus highlights that the very essence of the Law, of the Word of God, is love and love only, a boundless love that must be showered even on our enemies, and that allows us to share in the Father’s very perfection (cf Mt 5:43-48).

The Pauline hymn goes on: “It is in Him [Christ] that we have received our heritage” (Ep 1:11). “We” refers to the people of Israel Paul is a member of. Israel has received the (Promised) Land as God’s heritage (cf Ex 23:30; Dt 19:3; Is 14:1). That gift was a figure of the gift of Christ. Indeed, “we [Israel]... were the first to set our hope on Christ” (Ep 1:12). The whole history of Israel speaks of Christ: He can be seen in the Law and in the Prophets (cf Rm 3:21), in the promise spoken to Abraham and his sons (cf Ga 3:16), in the Rock following Israel while they were wandering in the desert (cf 1 Co 10:4). Out of Israel, “so far as physical descent is concerned, came Christ” (Cf Rm 9:5).

“We have received our heritage”. The Greek sentence can also be interpreted thus: “In Christ we too have been claimed as God’s own heritage” (cf Dt 9:29; 32:9; Ps 78:71), the ones He has chosen for Himself, the ones who are His own possession. Now in Christ God’s own possession comes to include also the Gentiles, “you” (v. 13). This is the beginning of the third and last “wave” (vv. 13-14). The Gentiles could not hope in the promised Messiah, as they did not know Him; but now, after hearing the message of the truth and the gospel of their salvation, and having put their trust in it, they have been stamped with the seal of the Holy Spirit of the Promise – promised to both Jews and Gentiles – who is the pledge of the inheritance of all those whom God has taken for His own (cf v. 14). Christ has made the two peoples into one entity and created a single New Man (cf Ep 2:15), by destroying all religious, cultural and racial differences. Through Christ, then, “we both

in the one Spirit have free access to the Father” (Ep 2:18). Christ is the New Temple, where a reconciled and peaceful humanity can worship the Father.

The commandment to love

In order to reach our own perfection, we have to grow into the Perfect Man, Christ. In Him is the fullness of God’s love, in Him God is leading the whole universe towards unity.

Our own community can be built if its members are willing to love as Christ Himself does. This is the very reason why the Rule of Life very often quotes the commandment to love. At its very beginning, it reminds us that we are gathered together “in order to fulfil the commandment to love” (art. 1). We joined RM out of love and love only. And we decided to share our lives with our sisters and brothers so that love could be increased. Our “evangelical fraternity” can be built up only by our own love (art. 2) and by being mindful of Christ’s words, “It is by your love for one another, that everyone will recognise you as my disciples” (Jn 13:35). (art. 3)

Love makes us understand and live in the “mystery of the Church” (art. 5), which is itself a mystery of love, and the revelation of God’s plan for the humankind. This love becomes real through “service”, “even if this might mean giving up something of great value”: thus each and every sister, following in Our Lady’s footsteps, will “fulfil herself as a woman” (cf. arts. 5, 57), and will come to that maturity deriving solely from the power to love and to spend her life trying to help others.

The vows of chastity, poverty and obedience get their meaning from love. Chastity is “the gift of a wholehearted, jealous and mutual love”, through which our whole being “will be fulfilled”, and we will feel at peace with ourselves, with our brothers and sisters and with all creation (cf art. 10).

Like Christ, who “for love’s sake became poor” (art. 14), let us put ourselves “at everybody’s disposal” (art. 17). We do not have to give things to others; but rather, he have to give our own selves, our own energies, skills, and time.

Obedience is genuine when we “lovingly welcome, day after day, the various situations of life, and we responsibly co-operate in the life of our family, and of our civil as well as ecclesial community” (art. 23). Moreover, when we “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” (art. 24).

Prayer will nourish and support our love and commitment to the world, that must be loved “as Christ Himself does” (art. 28). Prayer “will help us see into the meaning of the Scriptures so that we may be able to discover in them God’s warnings as well as His love, and not only in them but also in humankind, in events and in all creation” (art. 32).

“Our deep love for the Family” must be “open and loyal” (art. 36). Each and every sister, “driven by Christ’s love and free from defence mechanisms and prejudices, shall welcome others in all simplicity and promptness” (art. 52). Thus, she will be able to engage in “a sincere and persevering dialogue with everyone” (art. 22; cf also art. 12), as well as “to establish a dialogue with the different cultures she may come across” in order to find in them the seeds of truth God’s Love has sown in them (art. 62). Our everyday task should be to get rid of all those prejudices preventing us from welcoming others. In fact, we should learn to regard ‘diversity’ as the true wealth of humanity...

This love, embracing the whole universe, must be put into practice in the environment we live and work: “The Local Group is the first place in which we put into practice our fraternal love” (art. 40).

“Remembering that we shall be judged by our love, you shall be prompt to welcome, provide accommodation to and lovingly care for those Sisters who are experiencing suffering in their lives” (art. 38). We sometimes find it hard to share our own occasions for rejoicing; “to

lovingly care for those who are experiencing suffering in their lives”, like Jesus did (cf Mt 8:16-17) may be even harder. In fact, this is the very purpose of our fraternal life: to help one another to heal our respective wounds, and to help one another to flourish as free people, willing to love more and more.

“The Family supports its members with faith and love” (art. 65). Their joint efforts are a powerful force providing comfort to all those who did fall or slip, and enabling them to start walking again.

“Whoever has been elected to an office, should remember that during her term she has to bear witness to Christ, who came “not to be served but to serve” (Jn 10:10) and came also so that His own might have life to the full.” (art. 39; cf. also arts. 64, 66)

We must become more and more willing to give away our life as a gift (cf. art. 63). In this respect, the Rule of Life reminds us that we have to “apply ourselves with love to a thorough study” of the Holy Scriptures, of the Liturgy, of the History of the Church and of the world, and of our own environment and society (cf. art. 56). We must always strive to understand the world we live in, to renew ourselves, to get rid of our prejudices. This is our great hope; this is the deepest yearning of our souls: to know and to love God above all things.

8. «LOOK, I AM MAKING THE WHOLE OF CREATION NEW» (Rv 21:5a) A COMMUNITY GATHERED IN FAITH AND IN LOVE

Lectio Divina: «Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; the first heaven and the first earth had disappeared now, and there was no longer any sea... Then the One sitting on the throne spoke, ‘Look, I am making the whole of creation new.’» (Rv 21:1-5)

Rule of Life RM 50: «You shall feel responsible for becoming an expert in your branch of work, and you shall keep up-to-date in the fields of theology and social studies, depending on your personal aptitudes, abilities and possibilities. You shall do that in order to have an ever more thorough and prompt share in God’s redemptive plan, fulfilling itself in the ever changing human history.»

We started this year’s essay by exploring Chapter 1 of Genesis, in order to reflect on the world, that was created by God and was “good”, as well as on our own position in relation to it: this theme is very relevant to us and to the roots of our own charisma, given that we are people who are trying to live up to the Gospel values in a secular environment. This unit will focus on the end of time and of history, when a new heaven and a new earth will finally meet the demands of their Creator’s plan.

A new creation

“I saw...” The seer takes a look at the very depths of creation, highlighting the core of Holy Scripture as well as the hidden meaning of history. We need ‘new eyes’ to see beyond what is visible, and to become aware of all the good that God placed into the world, so that we may regard nothing in our lives as insignificant, however small or trivial it may seem.

“I saw a new heaven and a new earth; the first heaven and the first earth had disappeared now, and there was no longer any sea...” (Rv 21:1) The “first heaven and the first earth” refer to the present ones, which are destined to pass away, or – better – to be transformed into a “new creation”. The sea, the symbol of evil and of chaos, has been dried up by the breath of the Holy Spirit. All the evil powers which make man unhappy have been vanquished by Love: “He will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness or pain, The world of the past has gone.” (Rv 21:4)

“I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride dressed for her husband.” (Rv 21:2) The holy city of Jerusalem, God’s community, is new exactly as the heaven and the earth are, imbued with the novelty of Christ. It comes down out of heaven because it is not the work of human hands but a gift from God. Its origins are in God, while its mission is in the world; it is permanently coming down, because its reality must slowly spread throughout the world, in order to recreate it afresh as the dwelling place of God. “Look, here God lives among human beings. He will make His home among them; they will be His people, and He will be their God, God-with-them.” (Rv 21:3) God’s desire is not simply to be ‘God’, but rather ‘God-with-us’. This is His true name, His true being, foreshadowed by Isaiah (cf Is 7:14), the name given to Jesus at the time of His birth (cf Mt 1:23), a name whose prophecy He has fulfilled by His resurrection: “I will be with you always, up to the end of time” (Mk 28:20). The New Jerusalem,

that is, the community of peoples originating from our Lord's Easter, has been given the task to make God's love present in this world. It will make God's love present and real, in so far as it will be able to welcome mankind's misfortunes: "He will wipe away all tears from their eyes..." (Rv 21:4) "Don't cry" (Lk 7:13); "Stop crying..." (Lk 8:52); "Why are you weeping?" (Jn 20:12): so many times Jesus met unhappy and sad people, and stopped on His way to welcome their sorrow and console them by His words. Where God is there is no room for despair; in fact, it is my love for others that can make God present in their lives.

"Then the One sitting on the throne spoke, 'Look, I am making the whole of creation new.'" (Rv 21:5a) God is always making the whole of creation new; He is the Creator, and never stops creating; He creates and recreates in His eternal Word: "Through Him all things came into being, not one thing came into being except through Him." (Jn 1:3) "So, for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation: the old order is gone and a new being is there to see." (2 Co 5:17) Who lives in Christ can be a new creature, even in this present time. Christ's novelty does not cause a major cosmic upheaval, the end of this world; it involves the innermost life of a person. The new creation is born within the person.

"Write this, 'What I am saying is trustworthy and will come true'" (Rv 21:5b) "Trustworthy" and "True" are two of the Word of God's names'. He rides a white horse and His cloak is soaked in blood (cf Rv 19:11-13). He is trustworthy and true, given that God is faithful to His promises: "Here is a saying you can rely on... 'If we are faithless, He is faithful still, for He cannot disown Himself'" (2 Tm 2:11-13) Christ's novelty will be fulfilled in human history, according to God's promises.

What great hope, indeed, certainty, is in store for us! And what great commitment is required from us! God is faithful, His word is trustworthy, He will never renege on His life-giving promise. Consequently, creation will never end up in nothing, even though it is possible for man – owing to his selfishness – to destroy this wonderful world God created. The appalling prospects of an ecological catastrophe ('apocalypse') are looming on the horizon. This will be a man-made apocalypse. But the Biblical apocalypse is completely different: it is the revelation of a God who is eternally faithful to His creation, who is present in history as its first beginning and its end. Once God has given life to His creation, He will never take it back. Death is powerless; indeed, as the preface of the funeral mass puts it, "life is not taken back, rather transformed". It is this very certainty that supports our patient struggle to improve living conditions, and that gives us hope in our commitment towards life.

According to Scripture, history opens with God's blessing on His creation and ends with the word of the One sitting on the throne: "Look, I am making the whole of creation new." "I am making": always, continually... Creation is an on-going process. The psalms state:

"My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." (Ps 121:2)

"Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth." (Ps 124:8)

"May the Lord bless you from Zion, He who made heaven and earth." (Ps 134:3)

"...the Lord bestows His blessing, everlasting life." (Ps 133:3)

We believe in this life-giving promise, and want to be generously at its service.

"It has already happened." (Rv 21:6a) What does 'it' refer to? To the promises mentioned above. They have already been fulfilled, whatever their deadline might be, because God is present in history. He is "the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End" (Rv 21:6b). It is His presence that gives meaning to history. But His presence demands our spiritual commitment: "I will give water from the well of life free to anybody who is thirsty." (Rv 21:6c) "Let all who are thirsty come: all who want it may have the water of life, and have it free." (Rv 22:17) "Who is thirsty...": the Samaritan woman's desire can be satisfied only by Jesus (cf Jn 4:4); it is the desire to plunge into "the river of life, rising from the throne of God and of the Lamb, and flowing crystal-clear" (Rv 22:1), the desire to be transformed by Christ's novelty.

The city-bride

This raging thirst finds expression at the end of the Book of Revelation in the following invocation: “Come... Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rv 22:17, 20) It is the famous Aramaic phrase “Maranatha”¹², which can be found at the end of 1 Corinthians: “If there is anyone who does not love the Lord, a curse on such a one. Maranatha. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” (1 Co 16:22-23) The presence of an Aramaic phrase is a bit strange in a letter addressed to Christians who were not Jews. But this phrase was familiar to everybody, given that it had passed into liturgical use. This phrase occurs in another text of the early Christian generations – the Didaché – when it deals with the Eucharistic liturgy: “If there is anyone who loves the Lord, let him come! If there is anyone who does not love the Lord, let him be *anathema*, a curse on such a one! Maranatha!” It is clear that St Paul is quoting the formula of the Didaché, the core of the Eucharistic liturgy, a prayer for the coming of the Lord or the statement of His presence. The invitation, as well as the warning or threat, find their justification in the fact that, in the Eucharist, man meets his Lord, and He is at the same time Saviour and Judge. Therefore, Christians are invited to receive the gifts the Lord is offering to them, present in the consecrated bread and wine; but, at the same time, they are warned because, as the Apostle says, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily is answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. (cf 1 Co 11:27)

In Revelation too, the cry, “Come, Lord Jesus!”, is raised by a community gathered together for the Eucharist. The whole book of Revelation has indeed the structure of a Sunday liturgical celebration, during which the Word is proclaimed and listened to, and God is praised. From the Eucharistic celebration, the community draws light in order to understand the environment they live in, and strength so that they can be faithful to the gospel, in the face of hostility and persecutions.

Revelation describes the beauty of this community, the city-bride reflecting the light of the new creation, the place where God will be all in all. “It had all the glory of God...” (Rv 21:11) “The city did not need the sun or the moon for light, since it was lit by the radiant glory of God, and the Lamb was a lighted torch for it.” (Rv 21:23) God is indeed its wealth; the community has nothing to give away as a gift but the love of God.

“Its wall was of great height and had twelve gates... The city walls stood on twelve foundation stones, each one of which bore the name of one of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.” (Rv 21:12, 14) The city is founded on the Word of the Lord proclaimed by the apostles. The Word of God is the foundation of its unity.

“The plan of the city is perfectly square, its length the same as its breadth... equal in length and in breadth, and equal in height.” (Rv 21:16) The city is the symbol of perfection: all the perfection willed by God resides in the community bound together by faith and love.

“The wall was built of diamond, and the city of pure gold, like clear glass. The foundations of the city wall were faced with all kinds of precious stone... The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate being made of a single pearl, and the main street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass.” (Rv 21:18-19, 21) The city is precious beyond compare: nothing that has been created is more worthy than a community where mutual respect, esteem and understanding rule.

“I could not see any temple in the city since the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb were themselves the temple.” (Rv 21:22) The whole city is a temple, a holy place, because God is present in it as well as in each and every of its members. Let us keep in mind the end of Chapter 1 of St Augustine’s Rule: “You shall honour one another, as you are a temple of the Lord.”

“Down the middle of the city street, on either bank of the river were the trees of life, which bear twelve crops of fruit in a year, one in each month, and the leaves of which are the cure for the

¹² Made up of two words, which can be combined in two different ways: either ‘Marana tha’, in which case it is an invocation, ‘Come, Lord!’; or ‘Maran atha’, in which case it is a statement, ‘The Lord has come / or the Lord is present’.

nations.” (Rv 22:2) Life in common is an everlasting novelty, an inexhaustible fruitfulness. A life-giving power issues from the community, a power capable of healing: it is the power of love, the same power going out from Jesus when He was walking through the crowd and healing all the sick.

Responsibility

Soiling our hands with the temporal realities we are part of, so that they may be ordered to God through Christ [cf. Rule of Life, art. 46] is the hidden work that each and every RM’s sister does, faithful to her “secular” vocation. According to God’s plan, the world must be made new in Christ, so that it may recover in love that unity it was created for. “In order for us to have an ever more thorough and prompt share in God’s redemptive plan”, the Rule of Life demands that each and every sister may become an expert in her branch of work, and may keep up-to-date in the fields of theology and social studies, depending on her personal aptitudes, abilities and possibilities (cf. art. 50). Our secular vocation, as it is the commitment “to witness to the Gospel and to be at the service of the Church and of mankind, while living in this world” (art. 1), involves the arduous task of living all of life’s situations in Christ (cf. art. 4), in order for us to be like yeast and bring into them the novelty of the gospel. Consequently, we must commit ourselves to a thorough study, leading to a deeper understanding (cf art. 56), as already mentioned in Unit 7: this study will enable us to discern in our society as well as history the good seeds the Holy Spirit has planted in them. In this respect, I’d like to quote some passages from the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation ‘Vita Consecrata’ (1996), paragraph 98:

“...within the consecrated life itself there is a need for a *renewed and loving commitment to the intellectual life*, for dedication to study as a means of integral formation and as a path of asceticism which is extraordinarily timely, in the face of present-day cultural diversity. (...) With all respect for the diversity of charisms and the actual resources of individual Institutes, the commitment to study cannot be limited to initial formation or to the gaining of academic degrees and professional qualifications. Rather, study is an expression of the unquenchable desire for an ever deeper knowledge of God, the source of light and all human truth. Consequently, a commitment to study does not isolate consecrated persons in an abstract intellectualism, or confine them within a suffocating narcissism; rather, it is an incentive to dialogue and cooperation, a training in the capacity for judgment, a stimulus to contemplation and prayer in the constant quest for the presence and activity of God in the complex reality of today’s world.

When they allow themselves to be transformed by the Holy Spirit, consecrated persons can broaden the horizons of narrow human aspirations and at the same time understand more deeply people and their life stories, going beyond the most obvious but often superficial aspects. Countless challenges are today emerging in the world of ideas, in new areas as well as those in which the consecrated life has traditionally been present. There is an urgent need to maintain fruitful contacts with all cultural realities, with a watchful and critical attitude...”

We devote ourselves to study because we have a strong desire for knowledge and understanding. Only the one who loves wants to know what he loves better and better, to get to its heart, to make it his own. Only the one who loves may free himself from his own prejudices and personal opinions and attitudes, in order to “understand more deeply people and their life stories”. This is the reason why love for study should not be alien to a vocation which longs to love the world with God’s same love.

INDEX

Book 4

1. *«Everything has been made for a purpose»* (Si 39:21)
 - The Desert and the Spirit
 - The Creative Word
 - Division
 - The Creation of man
 - Indeed it was very good
 - Service in the world

2. *In the image and likeness of God*
 - Power and meekness
 - Man's rule
 - Work as service
 - Work as a liturgy
 - Capable of welcoming everybody

3. *Teach us to count up the days that are ours*
 - The seventh day
 - There is a season for everything
 - From eternity to eternity You are God
 - Jesus' day
 - "Active and silent presence..."

4. *Loyalty to the world*
 - The glory of the Father and of the Son
 - He came to His own...
 - Chosen by the world
 - Perfected in unity
 - Witnessing to the gospel ... while living in this world

5. *Loyal to Christ and his mission*
 - The roots of the Church
 - Christ is the peace between us
 - God's family
 - To live lovingly in the mystery of the Church

6. *Witnesses of hope and charity*
 - In a hostile world
 - Strangers and nomads
 - In Christ
 - Fraternity
 - "Prompted by Christ's love..."

7. *Made free to love*

The Beloved's love

He would bring everything together under Christ, as head

The commandment to love

8. *«Look, I am making the whole of creation new» (Rv 21:5a)*

A community gathered in faith and in love

A new creation

The city-bride

Responsibility

“

**...we shall live all of life's situations in Christ,
and carry out our social mandate in a spirit of service,**

”

with responsibility and competence.

- 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.