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SUPERIOR GENERAL

THE DISCIPLE TOOK HER TO
HIS OWN HOME . . .

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THE DISCIPLE TOOK HER TO HIS OWN HOME

(Jn 19:27; cf. M 1:20)

"The Brothers venerate Mary in the mystery of Christ and of his Church. In the handmaid of the Lord, fully docile to the Holy Spirit and totally devoted to the person and the work of the Lord, they see the outstanding model of the consecrated life of chastity, obedience and poverty" (D:12).

Brothers,

For some considerable time I have been longing to speak about the Blessed Virgin for it does not seem possible to lead a deeply religious life without a corresponding depth in our devotion to the mother of God. The ideal occasion was the Marian Year 1987-'88 but the papal encyclical, *Redemptoris Mater* proving so rich in content, it seemed wiser to allow ample time for its assimilation rather than circulate another text.

The current occasion may allow us, if need be, to rekindle our devotion to Mary on the threshold of the Church's millenium. In this last decade of the twentieth century, we are already standing on this threshold, full of hope at the unprecedented efforts for "the fresh evangelization" of the world. At a time of such expectancy, how could Mary fail to be present just as she was at the first evangelization from the feast of Pentecost to her glorious Assumption into heaven?

To speak of Mary is a heartfelt pleasure; what Brother could fail to love her? We have known her from our earliest childhood and our remembrances are charged with joy, peace and childlike love. They may linger on the place of honour which her statue enjoyed in our home, on the flowers we placed at her shrine, on certain family prayers, on the lady chapel of the parish church or the public pilgrimages to a local shrine. They may recall our daily recitation of the rosary in the family circle, the three Hail Mary's we offered at our bedside, the May processions with their candles, flowers and

popular hymns, all symbolizing and voicing our devotion, our trust, and our pain.

We may think of Mary as the simple maid whose beauty brings wonder and peace, or as the mother whose smile radiates love and understanding, or as "our tainted nature's solitary boast," whose compassion embraces every sinner, as the Pieta who shares all our suffering, as our harbour in the harshest of storms. She is the beloved mother of all: of the young who entrust their innocence and their future, of the mature who seek her help as burdens grow heavier, and of the elderly to whom she offered consoling hope. "Maria, socia senis" . . . She is the friend and comfort of the aged, as Claudel would fondly call her.

As a child, John de la Mennais learned the love of Mary from his mother. The eve of her feasts meant fasting; the feast itself, the greatest joy. Each day he prayed the rosary; often, his sermons dwelt on her; repeatedly, his zeal made her sodalities more vibrant. And so often, he would join with his saintly friend, Gabriel Deshayes, in exhorting their Brothers to a greater love of their protectress. Thus, in the first edition of the Rule of Life (1823), our Founders prescribed the daily rosary. Just as their own spirituality made generous provision for devotion to Mary, so does that of their sons.

This is evident from the Superiors General who followed in their Founders' wake. Three of them have left us circulars treating exclusively of the Blessed Virgin from three quite different perspectives; Devotion to Mary (120) by Bro. Abel; Days Spent with Mary (196) by Bro. Etienne; and Our Quest of God and Mary (225) by Bro. Elisée.

Today, Mary is honored and loved throughout the world. Indeed, the second Vatican Council had more to say about her than all preceding Councils collectively. "It was the first time that an ecumenical Council presented such a vast synthesis of catholic doctrine on the place that the Blessed Virgin holds in the mystery of Christ and of his Church" (Paul VI, Closing Message of the 3rd session of the Council, Nov. 21, 1964). His Holiness has left us an

extraordinary encyclical, Marialis Cultus (February 2, 1974), on a topic he dearly cherished, while his successor has left us another, Redemptoris Mater (March 25, 1987), which dwells on Mary's participation in her son's redemption.

Seeing in Mary the perfect image of itself, the Church offers her as a model for all christians "since in the specific details of her life, she was the most perfect prototype of the disciples of Christ" (Marialis Cultus: 35).

In his letter to all religious during the Year of our Redemption, John Paul II went on to say that "if Mary is the primary model for the Church at large, how much more so for those persons and communities whose consecration puts them at the heart of the Church." That is why his Exhortation Redemptoris Donum (17) urges them to revive the grace of their religious consecration on the model of Mary's consecration as mother of God. In the same spirit, the Code of Canon Law requests that "they are to have a special devotion to the Virgin Mother of God, the example and protectress of all consecrated life" (Can. 663).

In May, 1983, the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes produced Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life in which it asserted that "It is especially in Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church that religious life comes to understand itself most deeply and finds its sign of certain hope."

The highest authorities of the Church are of one voice in urging us never to exclude Mary from our life. While Joseph was the first to respond to the message: "not to be afraid to take Mary home" (Mt 1:20), John later responded to Our Lord's dying wish and also "made a place for her in his home" (Jn 19:27). In this circular, I should like to impress each Brother with the importance of dwelling close to Mary in the spirit of these saintly forerunners. The first segment considers why we should do so; and the second, in which way. The obvious answer to the first is that Christ has given Mary as mother and model to his Church, to every christian, and in a special way to every religious. The answer to the second is by

praying to her, by following her example, by dwelling at her side, and by promoting her veneration.

To speak worthily of the Blessed Virgin, one must be both saint and poet; a saint, to enter into her heart, see things with her penetrating vision, understand her thoughts and feelings, share her joys and sorrows; and a poet, to breathe words suited to her maiden purity, a zest revealing her mystery in unique yet simple idiom, and a style rich in harmony and strength.

Daunted by the challenge, should we not be silent? Far better, you will agree, to look into our own hearts and entrust our efforts to the Holy Spirit. In seeking the guidance of the Spirit and Mary, I make Petrarch's plea my own: "Fairest maiden, though love drives me to speak of you, I can utter no thought without your help and the help of him who, in his love, lay cloistered in your womb" (Canzone VIII).

PART I

WHY "WE DWELL CLOSE TO MARY"

It is not easy to assess the quality of a whole Congregation's devotion to Mary. In our own, for instance, has it grown or shrivelled since the promulgation of our new Rule of Life? Ten different constitutions refer to her and half of them do so exclusively (C:5,44; D:12, 93, 118). Though this is a distinct increase on the preceding Rule, we cannot easily assume that prescription has blossomed everywhere into practice. Hence, we need to ask ourselves whether our lived experience accords with the text.

Throughout the ages, devotion to the Blessed Virgin in the Church at large has had its crests and troughs. Our own century, for example, has passed through several critical times, and the reverberations have doubtlessly influenced our Congregation. Though the second Vatican Council may have resolved these crises in theory, the practical outcome is less assuring.

Devotion to Mary, and more particularly the external expressions of such devotion, are spiritually more attuned to some sensibilities than to others. Some people, for example, are so intent on honouring the primacy of Christ that they choose to leave Mary in the distant background. They cannot accept even her title of mediatrix despite the example of Lumen Gentium (62) or the lengthy reflection of John-Paul II on "the maternal mediation of Mary" in Redemptoris Mater (38-50). There is only one mediator between God and mankind," they assert, "himself a man, Christ Jesus" (1 Tm: 2-5). For this reason, they hesitate to accord any special privileges to Mary. She is a woman like any other woman, a simple creature like the rest of us whose example, in consequence, falls more easily within our scope and practice. Why should we extol her in any way more likely to estrange than to draw us closer in love?

Such questions arise sometimes quite legitimately, in view of certain extravagances, during ecumenical exchanges with Protestant denominations, and it is important to distinguish what is essential

from what are mere appendages to the faith. In this connection, we remark how highly sentimental devotions dear to certain temperaments prove quite repulsive to others—sometimes for good reasons. Whenever, for example, the gospels take second place to the writings of “holy men and women,” whenever there is busy pre-occupation with private revelations full of doom for a sinful world, with apparitions unapproved by the Church, we may well question whether true devotion or mere curiosity provides the motive.

In community life other forms of devotion can prove detrimental to the Brothers’ veneration of Mary. Wherever, for example, the recitation of the rosary lacks decorum and harmony, many will find it a burden. When each one sets his own pace and the words become “a pious torrent,” prayer becomes more a competitive exercise than a joint tribute; it is quite unlikely to nurture devotion to Mary...

How regrettable if any Brother were to neglect this devotion, to fail to enter into Mary’s spirit, to ignore her importance in the scriptures, or to turn instinctively to her in praise or supplication. For her place in our daily life has already been determined by the Father. In choosing her as the mother of his Son, he made her the mother of us all since each of us is the brother or sister of Christ. Did not Christ re-emphasize the mystery in that tragic scene on Calvary, whose import Tradition so nobly fathoms?

It is consoling to perceive how many Brothers sustain a fervent and balanced devotion to our Blessed Mother. Their devotion, according to André Frossard, “is a reliable index of their simplicity and humility, and a sure sign of the divine favour extended to all men but particularly to those who honour his mother. Indifference or opposition to her honour is a sure sign of spiritual insipience...”

Part I of this circular dwells on article 53 of the document addressed to institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate (Essential Elements, 1983), which is essentially based on Scripture. It is helpful to keep this document at hand as we examine its structure, responding to the Church’s hope that, in a fuller understanding of Mary’s life, we may have a better grasp of our

own religious commitment. Article 53 reads:

Mary, joy and hope of religious life

"It is especially in Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, that religious life comes to understand itself most deeply and finds its sign of certain hope" (cf. LG: 68).

She who was conceived immaculate because she was called from among God's people to bear God Himself most intimately and to give Him to the world, was consecrated totally by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. She was the Ark of the new covenant itself. The handmaid of the Lord in the poverty of the anawim, the mother of fair love from Bethlehem to Calvary and beyond, the obedient virgin whose 'yes' to God changed our history, the contemplative woman who "kept all these things in her heart," the missionary hurrying to Hebron, the one who was sensitive to needs at Cana, the steadfast witness at the foot of the cross, the center of unity which held the young Church together in its expectation of the Holy Spirit—Mary showed throughout her life all those values to which religious consecration is directed. She is the Mother of religious in being Mother of Him who was consecrated and sent, and in her fiat and magnificat religious life finds the totality of its surrender and the thrill of its joy in the consecratory action of God.

The text thus allows us to see:

- I. Mary, consecrated to God in the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, as the model of all who lead the consecrated life.
- II. Mary and the values upheld by religious consecration:
 - A. Mary and the vows of religion.
 - B. Mary and prayer.
 - C. Mary and religious mission. To which we might add:

D. Mary, the educator of Christ and of his Church. Though the document,—which is intended for all kinds of ministries—makes no explicit reference to her formative work in this respect, the latter has special interest for all who teach.

III. Mary, the mother of religious, because she is the mother of Him who was consecrated and sent.

Part I finally examines the importance of Mary's Fiat and Magnificat in the religious life of a Brother.

I

MARY, MODEL OF RELIGIOUS: THE INITIAL FLAT

A. "Mary, consecrated totally by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit"

Mary enters history on the day of the Annunciation. If the Angel Gabriel had not visited her, she would probably have lived unknown. There would have been no record of this young Jewish girl from an unknown little village whose life followed customary patterns. But God's preference changed everything; and the girl of humble background became the woman whom "all generations will call the blessed" (LK 1:48). Surprisingly, Luke provides very little detail in presenting Mary to his readers; he says nothing of her appearance, her family background or special characteristics, and keeps to the bare essentials: "In the town of Nazareth, the angel appeared to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph . . . and the virgin's name was Mary" (Lk 1:27). We first encounter her bending her ear to the messenger.

We begin to understand why Mary "was deeply disturbed by the words," "Rejoice, so highly favored," as we reflect that the greeting had already been addressed in the Old Testament to the daughter of Sion, that is to Sion itself, to Jerusalem where God was to build or rebuild his dwelling, to the hill where the Temple proudly stood (cf. Zp 3:14, Is 66:10, Zc 9:9). It was a messianic greeting last given in the ages of the prophets, and now addressed to and fully understood by a simple girl. "It is the opening word of the New Testament," writes Georges Blaqui re, "the first sound to greet us at the dawning of a new world."

By replacing the virgin's name with the title "highly favored," the Greek word specifies a person endowed with favour or grace in a permanent fashion. The Old Testament applied it to one who had earned the favour of the king (Is 16:22, 2S 14:32; 16:4; IR 11:19; Est 2:17), or to the love in which the suitor held his beloved (Sg 8:10; Est 2:17; 5:8; 7:3; 8:5). On the lips of Gabriel it expresses the unspeakable tenderness of God for Mary, and the fullness of the

grace with which he endowed her.

In assuring her that "The Lord is with you," he was expressing the traditional hope that those chosen by God would never stray from his side but constantly abide in his comfort and under his protection.

We may sometimes wonder how Mary could be "troubled" by the simple words we use so often that we lose sight of their radical meaning. We fail to perceive how she catches the messianic resonances and sees so clearly how the message is charged with a singularly personal import. "Her bewilderment," says Angel Pardilla, "springs from the sublimity of the greeting both in its origin and its content. For it can be given only to a creature of special eminence in the eyes of God."

In meditating on this pivotal episode on which the whole life of Mary revolves, we derive insights into the mystery of our own vocation. For us, as for her, the Lord's call becomes the crucial point determining the course of our relationship with the living God. A new perspective opens up giving our Christian life a new sense and further dimension. (cf. John-Paul II, *A Letter to all Religious on the occasion of the Marian Year*, May 22, 1988).

In every vocation, we detect two movements:

- *God's initiative*

In Luke's brief narrative, we note the two movements which characterize every vocation: God's initiative and Mary's response, the invitation and the "Fiat mihi." It was God who made the first move in sending the angel Gabriel (Lk 1:26) and commissioning him to speak: "Rejoice, so highly favoured: The Lord is with you . . . You have won God's favour" (Lk 1:28,30). It was God who consecrated her: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the powers of the Most High will cover you with its shadow" (Lk 1:35). In choosing her as the mother of his only begotten Son, the Father gives proof of the boundless love he has for her, a gratuitous love which floods and transforms her being. It is true, of course, that

Mary belonged unreservedly to God from the moment of her immaculate conception in the womb of Anne, while we, with the burden of original sin, were mysteriously separated from him. It was the blood of Christ which brought us back to him in baptism and gave us the indelible "character" of Christian. But Mary was "filled with grace" from the very moment of her conception, "another way of saying that she was conceived immaculate, without all taint of original sin" (John-Paul II, Dec. 8, 1983). She belonged unto God who, through the merits of his Son, graciously preserved her from Adam's blemish. What Paul said of the Church, we can say of Mary: "Christ made her clean ... so that when he took her to himself she would be glorious, with no speck or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and faultless" (Eph 5:27).

"While no infant can select its own mother," writes Fr. Martelet, "and still less endow her with the most enviable gifts," with the Son of God it was quite otherwise. From among all women, he selected Mary and gave her the perfection he cherished. It is this divine preparation of Mary for the incarnation of Christ that we know as her immaculate Conception. It is more a matter of purity than of purification, of total and absolute freedom from all that taints, darkens or vitiates, and of communion with all that enlightens and beautifies. It is a sharing in the very life of God which has been granted to her by the favour of the Son who would take flesh and blood in her body (cf. Bernard Martelet, Mary of Nazareth, pp. 40-41).

Whenever we think of this favour or privilege given to the mother of Christ,—who is also mother of us all—we must recall that the marvelous outpourings of God's love are also intended for us, for our salvation and joy since "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3:15).

Though Mary in her infancy enjoyed this close communion with God, she had no premonition of how the word of Scripture would be sublimely vindicated in her: "I am my Beloved's and his desire is for me" (Sg 7:10). If her earliest consecration be considered as genus, her vocational consecration may be considered as species. That is the mystery of the Annunciation.

It is not a question of a new consecration any more than religious commitment is a new baptism; but it is a new awakening which revitalizes and gives a fresh orientation to the primary consecration. Whenever God calls man or woman and sets them apart for his own service, he effects an interior transformation and gives them the graces they need in their call to holiness and a specific mission. For God never looks with love upon his creature without effecting some change. The gardener and poet, of course, do not change the blossom they admire and love. But a human being is not a blossom; those who are loved know how their hearts are transformed by those who love them, the fiancée knows how the gaze of her suitor moves as does no other.

The sign of Mary's transformation is the new name by which God calls her for the name in Hebrew is closely and inseparably allied to the person or thing it signifies. It is tied to their deepest nature and function. To call somebody by name is to identify his or her unique identity. It is a form of procreation. Thus, Mary became "full of grace," "most highly favoured"; Simon became "Peter, the Rock"; Jacob became "Israel," and Abram, "Abraham." Such is the significance of the new religious name formerly bestowed in the novitiate and still assumed in monastic life.

Mary received from God a new name whose precise form had not previously been recorded in Scripture (Vid. Si 18:7; Eph 1:6); it is a name which evades precise translation, yet its meaning is clear: Mary is the object of God's especial love. The Father beholds her, knows her by name, and finds delight in her presence. She fills him with joy and experiences a love unknown by any other creature. Between the Father and her comes the breathing of the Holy Spirit which allows her to see into the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. We too have been called each by a particular name: "I will give a white stone—a stone with a new name written on it, known only to the man who receives it" (Rev 2:17). To know this name, we must remember that God sees each of us in his Son; in his eyes, each of us bears the features of Christ though often, alas, they are the disfigured features of the passion where "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by being cursed for our sake" (Gal 3:13). It is in his Son that the Father gives us a name, just as it is in the Son

that he sees and loves himself. The Patriarchs and Judges of the Old Testament like the Prophets and whole people of Israel all bore names which his Son would later assume since they all mysteriously prefigured him.

The name which the Father gives us, in one way or another, reflects the name of Jesus. It may be "the well beloved son," "the Rock," "the Light," "the Citadel," "the Way,"—all variations of the title given at Jordan: "This is my Son, my beloved; my favour rests on him" (Mt 3:17).

We received this "new name" (Rev 2:17) on the day of our profession, as Mary received hers at the Annunciation. In the full meaning of the word, it became our 'proper' name for it became our property. If we could grasp that truth, we should have food for life-long contemplation: I am the object of the privileged love of God! I am loved by him in a way he loves no other! To know and experience such love is to share the amazement of Mary. It allows us to overcome all fear and, discerning God's power in our very weakness, to answer his call.

With God's call and consecration I have been transformed, for the word of God, once answered, becomes instantly efficacious; it is no dead letter but alive and active, engendering new creation. The call of God transforms.

Just as the power of the Spirit overshadowed Mary, so it overshadows us. We are flooded and overwhelmed by his grace, empowered to live in the vocation to which we have been called.

In his Letter to Religious and Secular Institutes of May 22, 1988, Pope John-Paul II recalls that God's choice prompts us, as it prompted Mary, to rediscover ourselves in the eternal mystery of God who is Love. When Christ called us, when he told us, "Come, follow Me," it was at that very moment, according to the Letter to the Ephesians, that "God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ... chose us in Christ." "Before the world was made, he chose us... determining that we should be his adopted sons ... to make us praise the glory of his grace, his free gift to us in the Beloved." Finally, "He has let

us know the mystery of his purpose, the hidden plan he so kindly made in Christ from the beginning" (Eph 1:4-6; 9). The words of Paul, "the life you have is hidden with Christ in God," now bear a clear and immediate truth. Our vocation, which had been hidden in the eternal mystery of God, now asserts itself as an interior fact amenable to our human acquiescence, choice and decision. With the Blessed Virgin in the mystery of the Annunciation at Nazareth, we should prayerfully ponder the mystery of the vocation which is our "part" in Christ and in the Church.

- Mary's response

The second movement, concomitant with the first, arises from earth to meet the God who descends to earth. Thus, Mary welcomes the voice of God without the slightest reservation: "I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let what you have said be done to me" (Lk 1:38). She submits the whole of her being, body and soul, to the will of God. Her "yes" is the total surrender of the beloved to the voice of her lover. It is willing submission to every detail of God's plan for her. The grace which floods her soul in no way diminishes her personal freedom in responding to the enlightenment and power of the Holy Spirit. Consumed by interior love, she freely and willingly disposes her mind and heart to all that is asked of her.

"By a profound and free self-surrender" (Essential Elements: 5), Mary not only accedes to the divine initiative but embraces it with joy; in return for God's gift she offers all she is and has. Her own "Fiat" mysteriously corresponds with the human "Fiat" of the Word now enfleshed in her womb. "You took no pleasure in holocausts or sacrifices for sin; then I said, just as I was commended in the scroll of the book, God, here I am! I am coming to obey your will" (Heb 10: 5-7). The voice of the mother is the voice of her child, bringing joy and salvation to our fallen earth.

Our own "Fiat" is given on the day of our religious profession when we, too, respond to the loving invitation, "Come, follow me," and to the divine assurance, "I am with you." That is the day of our own annunciation, when we offer ourselves entirely to God: "I am the servant of the Lord; let what you have said be done to me." From

that moment, "The Brother belongs to God in a new way, as a living parable of the love relationship between God and regenerated mankind: 'I will espouse you forever ... I will espouse you in fidelity'" (D:24). This consecration affects our relationship with the Almighty, deepening and broadening what we already enjoyed. Mary, the child of God, becomes the mother of God. Of the whole human race, she alone gains special access to the life of the Trinity. He who was begotten from all eternity by the Father, was born in the fullness of time of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our frail imagination falters at the depths of love creating these new bonds between God and Mary, the infinite and the finite. Though it is a fathomless and unspeakable mystery, we can receive glimpses since "nothing is impossible with God."

God has exalted us as well! He has transformed us by his spirit and built a new relationship of "pure gift. It is a covenant of mutual love and fidelity, of communion and mission, established for God's glory, the joy of the person consecrated and the salvation of the world" (Essential Elements, 5). This covenant can be compared to the bonds of marriage implying as it does a unique and undefinable love and the commitment to lifelong fidelity (cf. Is 62:4).

B. Mary, Ark of the New Covenant

In his Annunciation narrative, St. Luke offers a brief but dramatic account of what religious vocation means. His tersely profound statement opens up whole vistas of contemplation.

Our first observation is that Mary's gift of self is unreserved and absolute. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you," reveals the angel, "and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow." Though she cannot understand, true daughter of Abraham as she is, she accepts these words in faith. She puts herself into the hands of God, confident that his word will be vindicated. The faithful handmaid stands in God's service, prompt to meet his every request. His wish is her command; his slightest gesture elicits instant response.

Mary's disposition, both initially and throughout her life, is the disposition a religious should emulate on the threshold and throughout the course of his commitment: loving acceptance of God's will with total fidelity of mind, heart and body to whatever God asks of him, and absolute confidence in the fidelity of God.

Every vocation comprises areas of the unknowable. Who knows what the morrow has in store? Today, perhaps more than ever before, the future is clouded in fear. Yet, when a vocation has been well discerned, no fear of the unknown can deter us since we have the assurance of God's grace in all eventualities: "Do not be afraid" (Lk 1:30). The word of God, creative yet disconcerting, is at the same time recreative and full of encouragement. Those experiencing it discover a new basis for their courage in the fathomless majesty and fidelity of our God. In acknowledging our dependency, we find ourselves secure. We surrender ourselves completely and allow God's power to act upon and through us. With the recognition of a sign from God, we give ourselves heart and soul to what he asks of us. It is no longer we who choose since ours is not a profession but a divine call and mission.

Consecration by God is wholly interior. No outward sign is there to prove it; it is known only by faith. Without such faith, religious life is void of meaning. The unbeliever finds it senseless, as irrational and foolish as self-mutilation. Faith is its sole justification.

It was not easy for Mary to see how she, a virgin, could be with child, and that child the son of God, the long expected Messiah of her people. Still, she believed.

From then on, she was "the chosen dwelling place of the Lord," where heaven and earth embraced, where God and man held tryst. Out of his whole vast cosmos, God chose Mary as his abode, the place most suited to the start of a new creation.

Under the loving care of the Holy Trinity, she consecrated her body and soul to her mission as mother. At Bethlehem, she gave the Son of God, now her own offspring, as Saviour of the world.

Forty days later, as she presented him to the Father, she learned from the lips of Simeon about her own sorrowful participation in our redemption. Then, for thirty years she raised and educated her child in the solitude of Nazareth, with the love and wisdom all other mothers would admire and envy.

With a due sense of proportion, we too can trust in the reality of our own call and consecration. God has chosen us and made us his own. He has marked us with his seal, given us a name that is uniquely our own, signifying call and mission, love and grace. This is cause for great joy, a spur to fidelity, and a prompting to repeat with Mary, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit exults in God my saviour ... for the Almighty has done great things for me."

Without reservation, let us give all our time and energy to our calling as religious educators and offer the world the Christ-like image which is ours to give. In obeying the Father's will, we become like Mary "servants of the Lord"; we resemble her Son who became the Servant of servants; we grow worthier of the name which the Father has given us in his Son, the name he loves to call us by.

II

MARY AND THE VALUES OF RELIGIOUS CONSECRATION: The Daily "Fiat"

Mary, the model of religious in accepting her vocation, is likewise their model in abiding by its values. Our own consecration, coming from God and freely accepted at our profession, expresses itself in deeds which daily proclaim its reality. What better exemplar could we find than Mary in her daily life? Though we should like to read about events in her family circle, to listen in to her conversation with Joseph and Jesus, to know about her life in her neighbourhood, the Gospel gives no word. Its purpose is to focus not primarily on the mother, but on her son, the sole redeemer of the world. Mary, she who derived the greatest benefit from his redemption, is there to lead us to him. The scanty details of the Gospel give us this assurance.

A. Mary and the religious vows

**"The handmaid of the Lord
in poverty of the anawim."**

We do not know whether Mary endured grinding poverty though it is clear that she lived in a very modest home in Nazareth; it was a grotto or cave carved from the rock and therefore dark and humid. Many will have seen dwellings of the kind in Galilee and must have been struck by their stark simplicity. Yet Mary had to leave such a home and to lay her new-born baby on the straw! Forty days later, in his presentation in the Temple, all she could offer was "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons," the humblest oblation permitted by the law. We cannot conclude, however, that she lived in penury since Joseph had one of the better trades in the village, far superior for example to that of the shepherd, and could provide for the simple needs of his family.

When Jesus took up his public life, Mary must certainly have gone with him on several of his missions; in that way, she would

share the fate of the redeemer who had "nowhere to lay his head" (Mt 8:20; Lk 9:58). Later, she appeared to lack all security since her dying son confided her to the care of the beloved disciple. For all this, this poverty was not so much a material deprivation as a spirit of utter detachment from all that was not God. She lived the poverty of the "Anawim," "the poor of Yahweh," whose confidence in the messianic promises remained unshaken by evil times and the long silences of their God. Their unassailable faith kept them true to Abraham who, though it seemed his hope could not be fulfilled, continued to hope and believe (cf. Rm 4:18). Stripped of everything, they lived in full and confident dependence on the loving providence of God. They had no power, no riches and no ambition, and set their eyes solely on the saving love of God. In Jesus' day, the "anawim" were no other than Elizabeth and Zachary, Simeon and Anne, the shepherds and magi. Then, there were the Apostles, the disciples who heeded his words, those humble people to whom he promised the kingdom of heaven—the Samaritan, Zaccheus, the woman taken in adultery, the widow who gave her mite, the sick and disabled, and pre-eminently the sinners, all in fact who founded their hope not on themselves but on Jesus. We find no politicians among them, whether Roman or Hebrew, none of the religious leaders whether of the sanhedrin or the authorities on the Law, and no pharisees with the rare exception of a Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea. What distinguished "these little ones," as Jesus called them, was their interior attitude of detachment, self-dispossession and freedom from all forms of power; they recognized their lowliness, their dependence, and were open to Him who would lead them to question their certitude, reform their way of living, and finally acknowledge Him as their Lord and redeemer.

Among them is our Blessed Mother who "stands out among the poor and humble of the Lord, who confidently await and receive salvation from him" (LG: 55). That was true at the Annunciation when she promptly forsook her own designs to follow those of God. It was true at the finding of the child Jesus in the Temple when his mysterious rebuke left her puzzled and speechless. It was also true at Cana, where Jesus drew attention to the distance between her and himself. And it was true throughout his public life: "Who are my mother and brother?" "Blessed are they who hear the word

are my mother and brother?" "Blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it." But the truth is most compelling when we see her at the foot of the cross where she loses her Son and commits him to his Father.

Her intent to remain a virgin was an important aspect of her poverty. Though virginity has been highly honoured in the New Testament and our catholic tradition, this was not the case in preceding ages. There, procreation had been a sacred obligation, and a woman's sterility was both a private sorrow and a public shame. Voluntary virginity was unthinkable—a form of destitution and the sacrifice of every woman's dream to be the ancestor, perhaps the mother, of the long-awaited Messiah. The Gospel reveals Mary as a self-effacing woman of few words, completely detached from self-interest and self-aggrandizement. Nowhere does she seem pre-occupied with her own well-being, happiness or the gifts she received from God. On the contrary, she returns all things to their source: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord for he has looked with favour on his lowly servant." There is nothing acquisitive about her, even in the boundless love for her Son whom she yields unreservedly to God's glory and the welfare of man. The greatest "treasure" is sacrifice.

Mary shows us what we should be: open to the word of God, empty-handed, detached from self, "enjoying all things as though we did not enjoy them," aware of our utter impotence in the order of salvation but firmly confident of the promise and gift of God. That, after all, is the meaning of religious poverty: to stand before God as a child before its father, possessing nothing, capable of nothing, but lost in joy and wonder at all his father gives him. To be, like Mary, always available yet fully conscious that we can do nothing of ourselves.

"The mother of fair love"

The distinctive feature of Mary's love is that it was fully given to God and fully given to Joseph; to God, because her child was the Son of God, conceived of the Holy Spirit; to Joseph, her spouse whom "she knew not," because he supplied in a visible

manner the place of the Invisible spouse, and assured that Jesus was acknowledged "of the house of David" as the scriptures had foretold.

This allows us to see how virginity for the sake of the kingdom is real fecundity: on the physical level since, by the promise of the Holy Spirit, the love which Mary reserves for God engenders a child who is the true Son of God; and on the spiritual level since it is the mystery of the incarnation which wrought our redemption. Hence, our Directory (39) assures us that the virginal birth of Jesus by Mary is the sign that all virginity for the sake of the Kingdom is "a singular source of spiritual fertility."

It is difficult to have any accurate idea of Mary's love for Jesus since no child has ever been more like his mother and, at the same time, so different: "Woman, why turn to me?" (Jn 2:4). Meanwhile, we cannot conceive of his public life without the earlier love of parents, and especially of his mother. A mother's love responds to her infant's needs. In Mary's case, these were the needs of a child who was both human and divine! Her love, like herself, was "full of grace," in full harmony with the divine, so that it could measure up to the eminence of Jesus' status and yearnings.

The miracle of the annunciation enabled Mary to accept her vocation as mother of God, while the ever-active grace of the spirit guided her in raising the child who "increased in wisdom, in stature, and in favour with God and men" (Lk 2:52). What we find in bud at the annunciation, we later see in bloom "at Bethlehem, Calvary and beyond" as she answers the daily needs of her son: her tender love first witnessed by the shepherds in the poverty of the stable; her courageous love in the face of sarcasm and shame; her faith-inspired love which outlives the physical disappearance of Jesus at his Ascension. Her love was stronger than hatred, stronger than death, a "Love no flood can quench, no torrents drown" (Sg 8:7). The consecrated virginity of Mary springs from no passionless misgivings but from the ardent and total giving of herself to God. She embraces virginity to love Jesus more fully and in him to love all others; her reach is not limited but universal, given to each and everyone redeemed by her son.

What tender and inexpressible love she must have given to him who was chosen as guardian and foster father of that son; how sensitive she must have been to his earlier bewilderment and to the trials entailed by his sublime vocation. Her love for him, as his love for her, was perfected in their mutual commitment to the person and mission of the Christ child. With what wonder and humility must Joseph have received God's favour: to live in prolonged and closest intimacy with the source of all love and holiness, and with the holiest and loveliest of all his creatures.

Her unparalleled love is equally active and inclusive today. Like her son, she knows and loves us, each in particular as all in general. "Does a woman ever forget her baby?" asks Isaiah (Is 49:15), and we all know the answer.

That is why we turn to her in love as "the purest, most innocent, most perfect of God's creatures, the most worthy of the first definition God applied to man at creation: the image and likeness of Himself" (Paul VI, Sept. 8, 1964, at Castelgandolfo). With Claudel, we venerate her as "the woman full of grace, preeminent in her origins, preeminent in her life and death, born without blemish and forever untainted by evil."

What inspiration we find in contemplating her beauty. It is a beauty which reflects the purity of her being, which chastens the hearts of all who love her and tames those passions which so easily lead astray. When those passions threaten us, "let us in loving confidence have recourse to her" (cf. C 14); she is "our tainted nature's solitary boast" yearning to bring peace to our troubled souls. We need her womanly influence in all its untiring gentleness and love.

**The obedient maiden whose
"Fiat" changed our history**

Obedience means correspondence with the will of God, and this entails attentive listening

to his word. Mary was born of the people who listened to his voice (Dt 6:4), and strove to follow it ... In his presence, she was all ears,

the docile representative of humanity responding to whatever he wanted. "Let what you have said be done to me..." Her stance at the Annunciation was the stance she assumed as "the handmaid of the Lord" throughout her life. She exults because God "has looked upon his lowly handmaid" (Lk 1:48). That is her role: not to wield authority but to remain at the service of others, above all at the service of the Father in his loving designs for man.

Despite her uncertainties about what lay ahead and the apparent disruption of her own arrangements, she embraced the will of God with the confidence that it would work to her own good; her "Fiat" spoke more of active cooperation than passive submission, for true freedom implies the willing of what we do rather than doing what we wish. It is not only power to say 'yes' or 'no' to God, but whole-hearted adherence to God's will which we recognize as our greatest good, the most precious possession of a heart that is free. Since we have been created in the image and likeness of our Creator, the attunement of our will to his spells not frustration but true fulfillment. For Mary, the word of God implied no debasement of her dignity. She was his creature; the closer she drew to her Creator, the more vibrant grew her personal freedom. For liberty, after all, depends on the perception and acknowledgement of who and what we are.

Mary's "yes" to the angel's message was prompt, free from the hesitation and doubt we note in the case of Zachary; it was joyous, without hint of self-pity; it was total and unconditional. Mary committed herself for life and never faltered in her commitment. Her "yes" was the "yes" of a loving obedience, with the Holy Spirit prompting her to answer Love himself with the fullness of her own love.

She made obedience so much a part of herself that she could only tell the servants: "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:6). These few words, the last that the Gospel speaks of her, are like her final will and testament. In view of the importance of the event as symbolizing the mystical marriage of Christ to his Church,—with the gift of his own water and wine,—we have added incentive to heed her words.

These are more than a simple invitation to obey orders. They re-echo the cry of the Israelites as Moses came down from Sinai and they made their covenant with God: "All that Yahweh has said, we will do" (Ex 19:8). We see Mary, then, as the woman of that covenant, the Daughter of Zion who stands for the whole Jewish people; now, she offers her son as the one who will make a new and everlasting covenant with us: "Do whatever he tells you."

The spirit of obedience would later lead her to Calvary where her "Fiat" became one with her son's: "Father ... let your will be done, not mine." Inevitably, the mystery of obedience leads to the cross since Jesus is the Way to the cross; "although he was Son, he learnt to obey through suffering" (Heb 5:9); being as all men are, "he was humble yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross" (Phil 2,8).

For a religious, obedience is the most crucifying of the vows. In offering God his personal freedom, he makes a total sacrifice of himself and, like Mary, "he enters more completely into the obedient attitude of Christ the Saviour" (C:28), "into the mystery of Christ's obedience" (D:55). "Fiat" at the annunciation, at Cana, and at Calvary; the "fiats" in the course of one's life are numerous, but there are some which govern and testify to all the others. These occur at certain crossroads of life, whenever our deepest vocational values are at stake, whenever we must give evidence of what we are and stand for, and most of all, whenever we are called to plunge more deeply into the mystery of the cross.

* * *

In poverty with Mary, a Brother lives detached from the things and events of his daily life. In chastity with Mary, he lives in detachment from his neighbours whose well-being he promotes without self-interest. In obedience with Mary, he lives in the self-detachment implicit in his "yes" to God.

Article 12 of the Directory gives an excellent synopsis: "The Brothers venerate Mary in the mystery of Christ and of the Church. In the handmaid of the Lord, fully docile to the Holy Spirit and totally devoted to the person and the work of the Lord, they see the

outstanding model of the consecrated life of chastity, obedience and poverty" (D:12).

B. Mary and prayer

"As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Lk 2:19).

The Gospel gives us a glimpse into Mary's interior attitude and of its external manifestations. It is an attitude of attentive, receptive listening to the Word of God, listening inspired by faith.

The first image is that of a young girl absorbed in the message of the angel; Fra Angelico depicts her bending in wrapt attention to Gabriel's word and lost in what he reveals. The focus of this "annunciation" is on the spoken word and not, as in Zachary's case, on the angelic appearance. Mary is all ears for whatever God has to tell her—the result of acquired habit, which enables her to interpret the words of scripture by which the angel communicates. She is bewildered or "troubled" precisely because she catches the import of his words, "She is, in truth, the Virgin who listens, *Virgo audiens*" (*Marialis Cultus*: 17).

This interior attitude, which was to characterize her whole life, is noted in two particular Gospel instances, the first during Jesus' infancy and the second during his adolescence. At the news given by the shepherd, "Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Lk 2:19). At the finding in the Temple, "she stored up in her heart" the words her son had spoken (Lk 2:51).

The same words apply to incidents twelve years apart—she treasured, stored them, and pondered them in her heart. For prayer is of the heart rather than of the intellect. "It is only with the heart", said the fox to the little Prince, "that one sees rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye". It is, indeed, the understanding of the heart that allows us to grasp the things of God. "Prayer," wrote Theresa of Avila "is a matter, not of profound thought, but of profound love." It is the conforming of our heart with God's.

There is much in the infancy narrative of the Gospel that puzzled Mary. How, for instance, could the Creator of the world stoop to birth in a stable? How could he live with the indifference or enmity of those he came to redeem? His own earliest words were themselves so wrapped in mystery that "they did not understand what he meant" (Lk 2:50). Only gradually did Mary and Joseph learn what his Messiahship involved, and these were stages in the process. Unlike ourselves, Mary showed no frustration or disgruntlement when the meaning of scripture or her own experience eluded her. She kept it in her heart, aware that God's creature could not keep equal measure with God Himself, could never sound the depths of his word and purpose. His mother's attitude brought joy to the public life of Jesus. To the consternation of his hearers, and to the surprise of modern readers, the blessings he bestowed on his mother were not so much for bearing and raising him as for hearing the word of God and keeping it (Lk 11:28). He had witnessed his mother, in the course of her daily life, abiding by his Father's will though this was clouded in mystery. His designs grew clear only with the advent of the Paraclete, with the fullness of his gifts, at Pentecost. Then, no doubt, she could reveal to John and Luke the events of Jesus' childhood in the fullness of their meaning.

In our own lives, too, God's purpose becomes manifest only in retrospect; the significance of the current event, whether in our private lives or the public life around us, seems shrouded in mystery. We learn the lesson that prayer, above all else, is quiet immersion in the Word of God for it is the Word who allows us to know him. We might know of him, as it were, exteriorly, from the evidence of his works, but we could never catch one glimpse of his sublime life in the Trinity.

This prayer needs no lengthy formulas. The Gospels, indeed, retain precious little of what Jesus spoke to his mother, yet that little was enough to feed her meditation till the moment of death.

The first recorded word of Jesus to Mary is his reply to her question in the Temple. He had been missing for three days during the deliberation of Pentecost, and to answer the concern of his parents he said, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know

that I must be busy with my Father's affairs?" (Lk 2:49). Such are the only words we have of his hidden life and, like the first words of any child, they struck deep into his mother's heart. They hearkened back to Simeon's prophecy and, long before the revelations of his public life, they proclaimed the divine affiliation of her son, his identity as Son of God. Jesus would so often speak to his disciples about his Father, but first of all, he speaks to his mother. The mouth speaks out of the heart's abundance, and who could be closer to Jesus' heart than the Father from whom he came and to whom he would return?

It is hardly surprising that Mary and Joseph "did not understand what he meant," for his meaning embraced the mystery of the Blessed Trinity and the concomitant mystery of our redemption by "the Word made flesh." For twelve years, Mary had reflected on the truth of the angel's message, and now the words of her Son struck like a lightning flash to make her darkness seem darker still. She would keep his word in her heart, reflect on it and pray over it till the Holy Spirit enlightened and led her "to the complete truth." (Jn 16:13) The Word of God surpasses all human understanding, conveying its riches only with the slow passage of time ... At Nazareth, then, Mary would live in "the dark light of faith," leavening her prayer with the first recorded utterance of her son.

His second and equally mysterious utterance was at Cana, pointing to all that separated Mary from Jesus by the mystery of God's transcendence. Without the conviction of such transcendence, no deeply religious spirit is possible, for we either reduce God's scale to ours or elevate our own to his. "Woman, why turn to me? My hour has not yet come" (Jn 2:4). "My ways are not your ways ... your hour is not my hour." For the first time, and again to his mother, Jesus reveals part of God's plan for himself: his mission as Redeemer, his need to suffer and die for man's salvation at the chosen hour, the hour of his passion, death and resurrection.

Jesus spoke this word "on the third day" (Jn 2:1), symbolic of a day yet to come, "at a marriage feast,"-the symbol of another marriage-where he changed water into wine symbolizing the wine of the New Covenant which flows from the wine press of the cross.

His word prepares his mother for the events of Calvary. After revealing something of the Trinity, he now admits her to the mystery of our redemption. This word is her passkey to the public life of Jesus. It would take her three long years to understand it fully, but when the Hour came, there she was, standing at the foot of the cross.

The third word was the last will and testament of Jesus: "Woman, this is your son;" in becoming the spiritual mother of John, she became the spiritual mother of all mankind. The mysteries of the incarnation, death and resurrection, which made us all the brothers and sisters of Christ, made us simultaneously the sons and daughters of his blessed mother; and to the end of her days, Mary lived in the truth of her spiritual motherhood.

It was from her lips that Luke and John learned of the three words which, above all others, "she stored in her heart". Each of them gives an insight into the three central mysteries: the identity of her son and the mystery of the Trinity; her son's mission as redeemer of the world; and her own identity and mission as mother and protectress of all mankind. And just as the words of Gabriel nourished her reflection and prayer in the earlier years of Jesus, so these became the substance of her later contemplation. It was only by degrees that she could penetrate their meaning and exploit their significance until she received the full enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, whose descent had been prepared by the long prayer of faith. At different stages in life, we too can experience the ineffable riches of a single word from God. Prayer needs no lengthy formulas, no hurried fluttering from phrase to phrase for, like the bee, it often prefers time to gather nectar.

How well do we heed the word of God? Do we, like Mary, seek to understand it in a spirit of faith? Or play with doubt like Zachary? or, like the unbeliever, do we sometimes throw it aside?

Her absorption in God's word.

Mary's initial reaction was wrapt attention and dedication to the Word, and her second was prolonged and

ever-deepening contemplation of that Word made man. The spoken word gave way to the silent eloquence of his appearance, movements and attitudes; and, after Cana, she too wrapped herself in the silence of contemplative prayer.

This prayer attained its peak on Calvary where she stood silently at the foot of the cross with the holy women and the crowds who "stayed there watching him" (Lk 23:35). Never were the bonds between the Son and his mother closer and more indissoluble than in the supreme sacrifice which they offered for our redemption. Mary's assent is that of the handmaiden "with her eyes set on the hand of her master" (Ps 123:2). The annunciation finds her lost in wonder at the message of the angel; Calvary finds her lost in contemplation.

Since the eye, no less than the ear, speaks to us of God, we need to spend time beholding Christ, perceiving how he regards persons and events, how he relates to them, what measures he takes in dealing with them, and then allowing his message to sink deep in our hearts. As religious, we shall find that our personal prayer tends more and more to such silent contemplation. It may often be a silence charged with sorrow or burdened with anxiety, but it will never be ineffective. Without realizing it, we shall be like negatives exposed to the light, developing a fresh and sharper image.

We shall discover that prayer is often no more than looking at Christ with a look that bespeaks our love and confirms our communion with him. And we shall find that God sometimes intrudes into this silent communion, with his word taking the weight and intensity of the word that Jesus spoke to his mother from the cross.

Her magnificat; her plea at Cana

The Gospel cites two examples of Mary's personal prayer in her Magnificat and her intercessory prayer at Cana of Galilee. Though some claim that the former belongs not to Mary but rather to an early christian community who composed it after the resurrection, neither the content nor the vocabulary supports their claim. The text is a web of reminiscences

from the Old Testament taken mainly from the canticle of Anne and from the psalms. The Ecumenical Translation of the Bible makes, in fact, seventeen different references to the psalms. This is hardly surprising. As a daughter of Israel, Mary would often pray the psalms and would naturally use them to inspire her own personal prayer. The canticle is proof that she so kept them in her heart as to make their language her own. They had been assimilated, made part of her, and hence they pour out of her soul in her song of praise and thanksgiving for all that God has achieved in her and in his people Israel. Her prayer breathes the wonder of a humble handmaid lost in joy at the marvels her Lord has wrought for her and through her.

Her Magnificat throbs with joy and hope without the faintest shadow of doubt or uncertainty. It sings of the messianic revolution, the arrival of God to rescue the poor from the rich man's oppression. It speaks for all the oppressed who witness God casting the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly. "Mary," writes Claudel, "becomes the voice of the world, speaking for all mankind in their immense need to thank their creator for the wonders he has achieved on their behalf."

She "proclaimed the greatness of the Lord" for past, present and future generations:

- for the present, she is personally grateful to God "for looking with favour on his lowly servant" and "for doing so many great things" on her behalf.
- for the past, she extols God's fidelity to the promises made to Abraham.
- for the future, she is aware of her own glory and of God's inexhaustible goodness to his people: "All generations will call me blessed" and "his mercy will be from age to age on all who fear him".

In singing Mary's Magnificat at vespers, we may easily vary our approach:

- we can sing it with Mary, joining our voice with hers and reliving her sentiments;
- we can apply it to our own life, as Mary did with the canticle of Anne, reflecting on our own experience and proclaiming the

marvels God has wrought in us and for us;

- we can sing it on behalf of the Church, offering thanks for all that God accomplishes in her and by her.

Moreover, the spirit of thanksgiving should animate not only Vespers but every moment of our day. Our whole life, in fact, should be a prolonged Magnificat since young and old can attest to the marvelous gift of a religious vocation.

The second example occurred at Cana when Mary expressed her concern for others.

Her request seemed, at first, to be refused since Jesus found the time inopportune. But Mary remained confident. "Do whatever he tells you," she assured the servants, thereby gaining far more than she expected. Materially, she obtained gallons of the choicest wine, and spiritually, she reinforced the faith of the apostles in Jesus.

God never fails to hear our prayer and to grant more than we ask though he may rectify or modify our petitions, especially those of the temporal order.

Today, Mary is not indifferent to our needs or to those of our students, our Congregation or the whole world. Let us commend them and hear her telling her son, "They have no bread; they have no faith; they have so few vocations." There are some things, Claudel humorously observes, that Jesus does not understand unless he learns them from his mother. If we sometimes feel that we are not heard, we must not lose hope but keep filling the urns to the brim! Let us do so under the eye of Mary . . . Jesus will turn our water into wine, and our wine into his precious blood.

C. Mary and her mission

Hastening to Hebron

Every vocation is a missionary vocation for there is no call without

a mission, no annunciation without the visitation. The two mysteries of Mary's life are complementary, the one better understood in relationship to the other. To begin with, they are parallel in structure. The first, which had no witnesses and could therefore be ascribed to illusion, is confirmed by the second in a frankly supernatural manner, especially in the words of Elizabeth so strikingly similar to those of Gabriel.

Though the mission unrolls in the meeting of the two women, they are instruments rather than principal authors. The Word enclosed in Mary's womb, though silent, is alive and active, "cutting like any double-edged sword but more finely" (Heb 4:12). At his approach, John stirred with joy in his mother's womb, foreshadowing the exaltation he knew when Jesus drew near to the Jordan: "The bridegroom's friend who stands there and listens, is glad when he hears the bridegroom's voice" (Jn 3:29). Already he was acting as precursor: "there stands among you—unknown to you—the one who is coming after me" (Jn 1:26). Recognizing his redeemer, he gave a sign to his mother who, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, "gave a loud cry and said, 'Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord?' (Lk 1:42).

God's saving grace began to radiate outwards through Mary. Her son was already offering baptism in the Spirit, and John and Elizabeth were the first beneficiaries of this effusion of light and joy. After the annunciation, Mary did not turn inwards on herself though, after such a profound spiritual experience, she would naturally be taken up, during her pregnancy in the solitude of Nazareth, with the grace and happiness God had given. Did she not have every reason to exclude all that was not directly related to the mystery that had befallen her, and to the child who was growing in her womb? All her time could so easily have been filled with pondering on God's goodness to her and in contemplation of the Blessed Trinity who had selected her as the instrument of our salvation.

But that was not her choice. Rather, "she went as quickly as she could to a town in the hill country" (Lk 1:39). Grace impelled her

to leave her daily routines and surroundings, and to head for the mountain road, becoming in the name of her Lord "the woman for others." Her generous self-forgetfulness and her eagerness to carry joy were inevitable features of a journey inspired from heaven by love. Those inspired by God's love feel the urgent need to enliven it in the here and now.

Whenever the Holy Spirit takes possession of anyone, he converts that person into a missionary, "somebody sent." That explains why the apostles quickly left the cenacle and went among the people, preaching the Good News, why Paul journeyed throughout Asia and Europe, defying danger and proclaiming, "I should be punished if I did not preach" the Christian revelation; why Mary, "overshadowed by the Spirit," and driven by his love, "went as quickly as she could to the hill country." Her word, there and then, wrought wonders just as it does here and now for those who listen and take it to heart.

"Zeal for my Father's house," Jesus was later to say, "consumes me." It was no different for his mother. The same love which drove her to the hill country in joy was later to fill her with the deepest anguish. As the exemplar of all apostles, she clung to nothing but gave herself totally and unconditionally to her God.

For us Brothers as for all catechists, Mary reveals how the message of her son grows fruitful only through union with her son. That is why our Directory states that "The Brothers, called to foster the growth of divine life in souls, seek Mary's help in their ministry of evangelization" (D:118). For Mary knew the secret. No sooner had she received God's favour than she hastened to share it, conscious that the joy of salvation insistently prompts us to pass it on to others ... Major Superiors of a religious Congregation relive the mystery of the visitation almost on a daily basis, for they too must be driven by the Spirit to bring to their Brothers the Word which they have stored up and pondered in their heart. May the fruit of that Word always reassure and confirm them in their mission.

Her sensitivity at Cana

Cana was one of the two places where John points to

the presence of Mary; the other was Calvary. She was present when Jesus first manifested his glory, and she was there again at the cross. The two descriptions, evidently of set purpose, share several details in common.

At Cana, Mary attended a wedding feast where, like a good and caring guest, she was fully aware of what the occasion meant and kept a helpful eye on detail. She saw things which others missed, heard things which escaped the ears of others, perceived needs undetected by the bride and groom. And knowing her own incapacity, she relied on her son. The outcome was twofold: water turning into wine, and the hesitancy of the disciples giving way to firm belief.

Mary's intervention made her liable for the thirst of all mankind and she submitted her liability to Jesus: "They have no wine." She seemed to take Jesus by the hand and to show him the way to death, his death on the cross from which would flow the wine of the everlasting marriage feast. But that mystery belonged to the future. Hence, Jesus said, "Woman, why turn to me? My hour has not yet come."

His reply was a veiled invitation to Mary to rise above her role as earthly mother, sublime though that privilege was, and to brace herself for service to his mission as Redeemer of our fallen race. Mary complied on the instant.

In addressing the servants, she echoed the phrasing of the people of Israel when they ratified the covenant of Sinai (cf. Ex 19:8; 24:3,7), or renewed an earlier promise (cf. Jos 24:34; Esq 10:12), and she anticipated the Father's words at the Transfiguration: "Listen to him" (Mt 17:5). Mary, "the woman," thus represents the whole messianic race now standing on the doorstep of a new covenant; furthermore, she gives us a vision of the mystical marriage of the Spouse and his Church which will be ratified on Calvary. Here, at Cana, her motherly intervention paves the way to a worthy response to the first of the signs Jesus was to offer.

Like the miracle at this wedding feast, the whole life and mission

of Jesus needed "the woman" to prepare the people for entry into the new dispensation. From that feast onwards, her role was to direct others to her son and to dispose them to receive his word. Her importance in our life as Brothers could hardly be clearer. The true apostle/missionary, like Mary, is sensitive to the distress of others whether it be physical or moral, spiritual, intellectual or social. In their own day, what splendid testimony was given by our Founders, John de la Mennais and Gabriel Deshayes. Are we faithful to their example in meeting the needs of our own students today? If we keep our eyes open and take time to listen, we shall soon perceive their deepest needs: to be loved, to find meaning in their lives, to be in touch with God. If, on the other hand, we grow self-centered, their needs will pass unnoticed and untended.

Beneath all kinds of urgent needs, the apostle recognizes needs more pressing still. He sees beneath the surface into the reality and knows the type of wine he is dealing with. It is either the fruit of the vine which satisfies for a while or the fruit of the cross which leads to life eternal. What actions do we take once we have seen and heard a person's story? And to whom do we direct that person? To him who quenches all thirst or "to leaky cisterns that hold no water" (Jer 2.13)? And if, like Mary, we find ourselves powerless, do we invoke the help of those capable of relieving the needs we noticed? May Mary open not only our eyes and ears but also, and above all, our hearts. Whatever our age, let us make her our intermediary for she knows how to win the heart of her Son. No creature is better qualified to address our creator, reflect our thoughts, voice our deepest feelings, pray our prayer, join in our supplication and share our trials.

What lessons we religious can learn from Cana! There we see how sensitive love understands and serves the needs of others, especially the poor; how joy uplifts a heart open to God's designs; how faith informs the awareness of Christ's saving nature and mission.

There, too, we see how Mary, "the woman" of the New Covenant, nurtures the belief of the apostolic community in her divine son.

Mary, the faithful witness at the foot of the Cross

Three words deserve our attention: "witness," that is to say martyr; "faithful," that is steadfast in belief; 'at the foot of the cross,' that is in the hour of utter dereliction.

Though Mary, throughout her life, remained in the shadows, it was she who moved quietly to the forefront at the hour of humiliation. While the others had all fled and the high priests gloated over their victory, while the Roman soldiers joined in scorn and God himself seemed to abandon the son he had given her, Mary offered the supreme proof of her love and unwavering faith. She is "the strong woman" in whom the faith, hope and charity of the Church were bonded and intertwined on the Friday Christ won for himself his mystical spouse.

From the side of the suffering Servant, Mary beckons us closer to the mystical body of her Son and especially to its most neglected members. She asks us to be witnesses of God's especial love for the poor and abandoned so as to inspire them with new hope and allow them to experience that love is stronger than hate, happiness more durable than tears.

By sharing the rejection, mockery and torture of her Son, she illustrates the apostle's responsibility to heed the cry of the oppressed and persecuted. When he makes their affliction his own, both in his body and his heart, the apostle quickly comes to know the meaning of compassion and will spontaneously recognize the features of Christ in the friendless and abandoned.

Like Mary, the Brother shows spontaneous preference for those whom the world ignores and most of all for younger people whose lives have been blighted physically or emotionally by lack of understanding and affection.

Like Mary, we may have no more than love to give; and love, perhaps, is all they need. They are no longer able to trust those whose actions betray their words while sad experience denies them much faith in themselves. Hence, their disgust with what poses as

the world of reality ... A simple kindness goes farther with them than reprimand or gratuitous advice.

* * *

The crucifixion scene, one of the peaks of John's Gospel, not only adopts the vocabulary of the Cana episode ("Woman," "hour") but also evokes the wedding atmosphere since Christ is celebrating his mystical marriage with mankind. He offers the wine of his blood to purify, and the water of his Spirit to vivify his people.

The gift of mother to son and son to mother is enframed in the Gospel text by two scenes. The first brings attention to the seamless garment (Jn 19:23-24) which symbolizes the messianic people rediscovering their unity in the union between the mother of Jesus and the disciple he loved. The second records the death of Jesus (Jn 19:28-30) when "everything had now been completed" and love had attained its zenith. The commitment of John to his mother and of Mary "to the disciple whom he loved" completes the work of redemption and manifests the boundless love of the saviour for his own.

Firm foundation to all Marian devotion depends on our understanding of all the Gospel details. The "woman," for example, is Zion ('Woman Zion,' "Mother Zion," "Daughter Zion," "Mount Zion" are synonymous), which often appears in the old Testament as a mother summoning her children home. It is in this home that the new people of God are born. Prophetic tradition with its messianic perspective had predicted that all members of this people were to find birth in Zion: "All call Zion, 'Mother' since all were born in her." The role of the "Woman Zion" is essentially maternal.

In our own context, Mary is the flesh and blood reality of "Zion, the mother" as she gives birth to the eschatological people of God who are represented by "the disciple whom Jesus loved" with the new dignity of "Your Son." Jesus reveals to "the woman" her status as "Mother" of the beloved disciple, who becomes "the son" of "the Woman."

St. John represents all those who believe in Christ by listening to his voice and uniting as a single flock under one shepherd. He typifies all the disciples beloved of Jesus by reason of their faith. Thus, "the mother of Jesus," addressed by him as "Woman," takes the beloved disciple as son: "Woman, here is your son," "Son, here is your mother." The new relationship is clear: maternal, on the one side, filial on the other.

From the cross, Jesus enlightened Mary as to her new maternity: she was the mother not only of John, who stood by her side, but of every other disciple. At the same time, he assured "the disciple whom he loved"—that is to say all disciples—of a new affiliation. Every follower of Jesus has Mary, as he himself had Mary, for mother. By her own son's evidence, it was she who bore the new Israel, the new Jerusalem, the eschatological people, the Church of Christ. She became the mother of all whom Jesus won for himself by his Passion.

The nature of this new motherhood and sonship must be seen in the light of two other elements in the synthesis of the fourth Gospel. First, it is clear that the prime agent of this new birth is the Holy Spirit (3:5) ; secondly, it is equally clear that the unity of the Church depends on obedience to the word of Christ in the strength of the same spirit (10:16; 12:22; 14:26).

What we encounter, then, is a spiritual relationship deriving its existence from the sacrifice of the cross. In making us sons of God by his death, Jesus made us simultaneously his brothers and sisters, who could claim his Father as Our Father, and his mother as our own.

This motherhood becomes clear and efficacious, however, only by Mary's direct participation in the oblation of her Son. It is when he sees her faithful at the foot of the cross that he reveals her new vocation and mission as mother of every disciple: "Woman, this is your son." At that moment of compassion, her spiritual motherhood is actualized.

Her compassion was contemplative in the original sense of the

word implying 'voluntary participation in the suffering of another'. Her son's dereliction meant her dereliction; his rejection, her rejection; his heart pierced by love meant her heart pierced by love. After giving his mother to all mankind, Jesus bowed his head and said, "It is accomplished."

Though mother of all, Mary is named particularly as mother of John, and with good reason. By specifying the individual, Jesus emphasizes his desire to see Mary not only as mother of his followers in general, but also of each in particular as if he or she were the only child to take the place of the only Son of God.

For the disciple, this spiritual motherhood has consequences which are implicit in the closing words, "The disciple took her to his home." The English, according to several exegetes, forgoes the nuances of the original text which point to a spiritual rather than a physical reality. Mary was at home with John, as John felt at home with Mary. They shared that loving care and attentiveness, the utter confidence in each other, the freedom to say whatever weighs on the heart, which pre-eminently distinguish the relationships between a mother and her child.

John quickly caught the sense of this final messianic gesture. He graciously accepted the gift which Jesus offered and, from that moment, he took as his own mother the woman who was mother of his Saviour.

For him, discipleship now meant kinship; the recognition that, spiritually, he too was the blessed fruit of her womb. It is no different for us religious. True devotion to our Blessed Lady is the seal of our status as disciples whom Jesus loves, while indifference to Mary betokens our tepidity in following Christ. Whoever refuses to be her son refuses to be a disciple. Every true disciple is born of Mary ... such is the basis of the devotion we are privileged to pay her.

The first impulse of this devotion is childlike love. It needs no justification; it is spontaneous, springing from the simplicity of heart which is unaware of embarrassment, shyness or reserve. We

find it in the prayer of our Founder: "Mary, mother of God, how glad I am that you are my mother too! I am free to tell you all I like: that I am weak and often fail and, therefore, need your love and help. I am your son; please keep me in your heart..." This simple love sheds light on the mystery of Jesus and Mary, and it sends shafts of clearer insights for us as it did for St. John. In a trice, grace gave him a deeper understanding of Mary than two millenia of study have given his successors. It is undoubtedly through his communion with Mary that he came to know Jesus with the profundity suggested by his Gospel. As he contemplates the compassion of Mary at the foot of the cross, a religious perceives more clearly the relevance of his vow of chastity. It is not a sterile burden but a spiritually fertile gift to God. In the sense that he puts himself unconditionally at their service, giving his life to them, he becomes like Mary, poor with the poor, weak with the weak, illiterate with the illiterate. In so doing, he participates in the passion of Christ, producing new life in the awareness that his own death is the price to pay: "Unless a wheat grain falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain..."

His ardent love for Mary reassures him, moreover, that by voluntary renunciation of fleshly parenthood, he can more easily join with her in the spiritual parenthood instituted by the passion and death of Christ.

Calvary, no less than the annunciation, reveals the potency of virgin love since it portrays the Blessed Virgin as mother of our whole human race. The virgin love is the love she extends to all others.

For us, too, the vow of celibacy which binds us to Christ is a means by which he opens our hearts to everyone. In allowing us to take up his cross and die with him, he gives entry to the nuptial mystery by which we father souls we shall recognize only in heaven.

In short, the mother of Christ as she stands at the foot of the cross is made the mother of all who by their faith are one with her son. She is the mother of the Church.

Mary's role in the Cenacle

"In the Upper Room, Mary exercises the new motherhood bequeathed by Christ." (John-Paul II, 22 May, 1988). She is the hub of the little circle joined in prayer as the people of God. She who gave birth to God's son is now filled with hope, by the advent of the Holy Spirit, for the birth of the Church. The mother of the Head is to be likewise mother of the whole mystical body . . .

The centrality she enjoys in the Upper Room is the centrality she will know throughout history in the life of the Church: that of prayerful presence interceding with the Spirit to scatter the Good News abroad. Hers is the unobtrusive role of mother, guarding the family unity, the unity of the Church, around the appointed Twelve. And her prayer is to the Spirit sent by her Son, just as the Son was sent by the Father.

It was the Spirit who emboldened the apostles to leave the Cenacle and fearlessly proclaim the Good News, first in Jerusalem and then throughout the world, with each of them acknowledging the primacy of Peter, the leader commissioned by Christ.

Two inferences clearly emerge: all evangelization is rooted in assiduous prayer with Mary, and apostolic mission needs the breath of the Holy Spirit who is universal Love. No difficulty, no problem is impervious to the penetrating power of Love. And here, the lay religious holds a privileged position. Like the priest, he is consecrated wholly to God's service; like the lay christian, he gives his energies to a secular function. He thus assumes the role of mediator between the Church's hierarchy and the Church's faithful becoming an agent of unity, a peace-maker, and as the need arises, a restorer of due order.

The Annunciation and Pentecost are closely linked. As the former celebrates Jesus' conception by the Holy Spirit, the latter celebrates the birth of God's people by the same divine Agent. As Jesus came to earth to prepare us for his Spirit, so the Spirit came down to recreate us in the image of the Son. Mary's call to us is to grow, in the Holy Spirit, ever more like her divine Son who is our model.

Close reflection on the meaning of mission reveals that Mary, the virgin mother, remains close at hand for all fresh starts and new beginnings whether at the Annunciation, or the Visitation, or Cana, Calvary and the Cenacle. What a cogent inducement we have to commend to her protection all our apostolic efforts. She will cause them to be blessed by the Spirit who fructifies and increases all that is good.

D. Mary, model of educators

Raising her son.

Like any responsible mother, Mary both bore and raised her child. From the Gospel, we learn nothing directly about the way she taught Our Lord to pray and read the scriptures, to celebrate the great feasts of the Jewish calendar and follow the rubrics of the synagogue and temple. We do not know how she gave him that sharp eye for all that lay about him, that love for the simple things of nature, and the warm respect he had for daily toil — features which emerge so clearly from the parables. Nor do we know how she taught the dignity and poise, the considerateness and kindness which mark all Our Lord's dealings with others.

We sense, nonetheless, that Jesus owed a great deal to his mother. His concern for the suffering and needy is in perfect tune with his mother's concerns at Cana; his advice: "You must not allow yourselves to be called Rabbi — the greatest among you must be your servant" (Mt 23:8), is the perfect reflection of his mother's behavior at the Visitation; the content and astringency of his beatitudes ring true to the style of his Mother's Magnificat.

We must not see Our Lord, of course, as Mary's disciple since the inverse is indisputable. But every mother has an indelible influence on her child... As a king who rules by humility and thoughtfulness, a prophet who casts the mighty from their thrones and fills the hungry with good things, and a priest who washes the

feet of his followers, does not the son, in his radical departure from tradition, owe something to his mother's example and teaching? It was she who taught that power was meant primarily for service, and the scriptures for the poor and lowly; she who illustrated that "burnt offering and sacrifice" was more an affair of self-oblation than the oblation of other creatures.

For thirty years Jesus and Mary lived in the closest interdependence of heart and soul. As teachers, we can all attest to the reciprocal influences between master and students, to what each party learns from the other, the older from the younger, and the inexperienced from the more mature. It is easy for us to see that it was no different in the Holy Family.

Since the Gospel says little about the specifics of Jesus' upbringing in Nazareth, we can draw no practical lessons or pedagogical principles from its scrutiny. But if we judge a method by its excellent results, we quite easily discover attitudes of a spiritual order to inspire us. There is no question of copying external details of Mary's procedures but rather of allowing ourselves to imbibe her spirit and to perceive our own vocation as an extension of hers.

Her attitude to Jesus is revealed in one instance by the Finding in the Temple, and in another by the whole public life.

In the first, Jesus was twelve years old, the age of initiation when a Jewish boy began his path of independence. At that age, he would go to prayer in the local synagogue and to Temple ceremonies in Jerusalem. It was on the occasion of the paschal journey to the Temple that Jesus slipped the notice of his parents whose alarm pointed to an unusual and unexpected departure. Upon finding him, they could not disguise their feelings and were puzzled by his words of explanation. Without more ado, they returned to Nazareth where "Mary stored up all these things in her heart" (Lk 2:5).

Hers is the attitude of every true educator who contends with a puzzling situation. In our work with adolescents, for example, as

we prepare them for freedom and self-dependence, and as their inclinations and reactions clash with our efforts, we have the example of Mary to guide us.

Mary was not one of the timid possessive mothers who forever lament the growing independence of their children. The Gospel portrays her as a woman serenely attentive to a destiny which grew ever more baffling, but to which she proved totally amenable, mindful as she was of a vocation where God already appeared to have full sway. All education, indeed, is a labour of patience.

In her reverence of the mystery unfolding before her, Mary gives us a sound, pedagogical principle: we can never expect to penetrate a rare and puzzling attitude by method alone.

At the outset and throughout the course of her son's public life, Mary's disposition is no different: she modestly fades into the background, giving Jesus full liberty of action. When he leaves for his public mission, she gives herself up to silence and prayer. And even in the darker moments, when a mother springs naturally to her son's defence, Mary does not intervene. All teachers know, hardships and contradictions are the school of maturity for those they help.

Guiding the Church At the foot of the cross, Mary assumed a new teaching mission with John and the apostles, the early Church and the Church universal as beneficiaries. That mission was evident in the Cenacle where, as at Cana and Calvary, "the mother of Jesus was present" (Ac 1:14), and it lasted until her assumption into heaven. She neither preached nor prophesied, but she prayed and reflected over the mysteries she had known. None beside her knew the mysteries of Jesus' birth and childhood, or those of his public life which she was called to share. In the light of the Paraclete at Pentecost, when all became clearer, she could unveil those mysteries to Luke and John, revealing their significance to them and to the Church at large. In this way, she precedes and informs all apostolic witness.

Above all, she nurtures the faith of the Church. She reveals the living source, which is the Word of God, and the way this source

can slake all longings. John Henry Newman points to her as the first theologian and the model of all genuine theological activity: "She does not find it sufficient to receive divine revelation: she meditates on it; nor merely to understand it: she is possessed by it; nor simply to assent: she develops it; nor to submit her reason to it: she reasons over it; nor by starting with reason, but by believing first in love and reverence without reasoning, and then by reasoning after believing." In this way, he concludes, "Mary is the symbol not only of the faith of simple souls but also of the Doctors of the Church whose duty is to scrutinize and weigh, to define and profess the Gospel, distinguishing between truth and error, foreseeing or correcting the aberrations of false reason, fighting error and temerity with their own weapons, and thus triumphing over sophistry and innovation." (cf. Nouvelle Revue Théologique, July 1985, p. 502).

The Church learns a great deal from Mary. From the Annunciation she learns how to cling tenaciously to the will of God and to consecrate herself wholeheartedly to the service of the Word. Bethlehem teaches her poverty, the ready acceptance of the small and mighty, rich and poor, learned and ignorant – in short, of all the redeemed. The flight into Egypt, the presentation, the finding in the Temple, all impel her to dispossession, and fidelity under trial, while the hidden life at Nazareth incites her to service and love in the humdrum affairs of daily life.

By contemplating Mary in these and other scenes, the Church discovers a spring of inexhaustible lessons. In Mary she sees herself. Mary's attitudes and acts feed her own faith. "By storing them up" in her own heart, the Church becomes "like a householder who brings out from his storeroom things both new and old" (Mt 13:52).

No matter the fury of Evil, Mary remained faithful to her Lord. Like the Church silenced by persecution, her loyalty in action spoke louder than any proclamation of faith. Her steadfastness and perseverance teach the Church hope and love: hope which grows stronger as a situation appears more hopeless, and love which draws closer to the Redeemer when others abandon him.

The Church also learns from Mary her virgin motherhood. As virgin, she gives herself exclusively to her Lord, shunning false idols and ideologies, "keeping whole and pure the fidelity pledged to her divine Spouse" and thus "by the power of the Holy Spirit, preserving with virginal purity an integral faith, a firm hope and a sincere charity" (LG 64). As mother, "by her preaching and baptism, she brings forth to a new and immortal life children who are conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of God" (LG 64).

Meanwhile, the Church understands that she cannot remain virgin and mother without staying at the foot of the cross, that is without sharing the stripping and agonies of Christ, without imitating his poverty and his obedience to the Father's will. In losing sight of this, history shows how she betrays her Lord. Hence, the humble recognition of Vatican II: "The Church is at the same time holy and always in need of being purified" (LG 8).

For the Church and for every Christian, Mary still remains "Mother and Mistress". All who wish can profit from her tutelage; they have simply to go, like John and the apostles, to her school. She will speak heart to heart as only a mother knows how, and will bring to light much that lies hidden in the mystery of her son. "Every Christian," says Philippe Ferlay, "enjoys the motherly protection of Mary even when he is unaware of it. Yet her protection derogates no particle of the Father's initiative or the Spirit's power. Indeed, the more he gladly recognizes Mary's role, the more sure the believer can be that he is walking the path God designs for him."

We cannot forget that, in guiding the Church toward faith, hope and charity, Mary also guides the individual towards a greater love of the Church, exactly as she guided the beloved disciple who took her — the icon of the Church — to his own home.

III

MARY, MOTHER OF RELIGIOUS

"Essential Elements" concludes by offering another perspective. It states that Mary is the mother as well as the model of all religious. The truth may seem implicit in her title as mother of all the faithful, as mother of all the Church. Here her claim is threefold:

- first, as mother of the Word incarnate, our brother Christ;
- secondly, by her role in our redemption and the words addressed to her from the cross;
- thirdly, by her permanent assistance to the mystical body, the Church.

To see her distinctly as "mother of religious" we need the more specific sense suggested by the same text: "Mary is the mother of religious because she is the mother of Him who was consecrated and sent into the world." His consecration and mission makes Jesus 'the religious' par excellence: he whom the Father consecrated and sent in a supreme way (cf. Jn 10:36). Jesus lived his own consecration precisely as Son of God: dependent on the Father, loving him above all and completely given to his will. These aspects of his life as Son are shared by all Christians. To some, however, for the sake of all, God gives the gift of a closer following of Christ in his poverty, chastity and obedience through a public profession of these counsels mediated by the Church. This profession in imitation of Christ manifests a particular consecration which is "rooted in that of baptism and is a fuller expression of it" (PC:5). The fuller expression recalls the hold of the divine Person of the Word over the human nature which he assumed, and it invites a response like that of Jesus: a dedication of oneself to God in a way which He alone makes possible and which witnesses to his holiness and absoluteness. Such a consecration is a gift of God: a grace freely given. (Essential Elements: 6-7).

Jesus confirmed his consecration at the start of his public life in the synagogue of Nazareth; "The spirit of the Lord has been given

to me for he has anointed me" ... He then rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the assistant and sat down... Then he began to speak to them: "This text is being fulfilled even as you listen" (Lk 4:16-21).

He fulfilled this consecration in his Passion for the apostles and "for those also who through their words will believe in me" (Jn 17:20).

"For their sake I consecrate myself so that they too may be consecrated in truth" (Jn 17:19).

Such is the child Mary gave to mankind: The Anointed, the Holy One, the Messiah, the Consecrated, the son she accompanied from the crib to Calvary, similarly consecrated, transpierced by the same sword, sharing the same sacrifice, and by the same token, giving birth to our spiritual life.

It is the radical nature of her consecration to Christ which constitutes the specific character of her motherly relationship to religious. Reciprocally, the radical nature of our own vowed consecration is the specific trait which distinguishes us as children of Mary and brothers of Jesus Christ. She is the mother of the supremely Consecrated and of those who consecrate themselves to him.

Though she is mother of all who are consecrated to God by baptism, her special title as mother of religious stems from "their act of special consecration which is deeply rooted in baptism and is a fuller expression of it" (PC:5).

Her "fiat" summarizes her whole attitude. That word proclaims her total submission and joyful surrender to God's will. She gave her word at the Annunciation and never went back on it. Unlike our own, her gift of self was immediate and unwavering. With her as with her son, "it was always Yes" (2 Co 1:19).

By her total cooperation with God's will, she opened herself to his love for her and for all mankind and was enabled "to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth" of the mystery

mystery of the Spirit, which surpasses all other joy. Magnificat!

Like the obverse and reverse of a coin, the "fiat" and "magnificat" go together. The former must be lived if the latter is to be sung. Our own experience attests to it. Our joy is greatest when our gift to God is whole and entire; regret, remorse and agitation invariably accompany our backsliding. The gateway to joy will always be our submission to the will of God. A life truly given to God is a happy life. How could misery and sadness take deep root in a heart dedicated to Him who is Beatitude?

The joy of our brotherhood should flow within us like a river. "The only real sorrow," says Léon Bloy, "is not to be really holy." Does not the solution reside in the "fiat" and "magnificat", the two words in which "religious life finds the totality of its surrender to and the thrill of its joy in the consecratory action of God" (EE:53)?

To abide by those words, we have constantly to look to Mary. The first part of this circular has suggested the means; part two will develop them more systematically.

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PART II

HOW WE DWELL CLOSE TO MARY

Having established why we, as Christians and religious, owe devotion to Mary, we now examine the best means to express this devotion. "There are three stages," writes Martelet, "in true devotion to the Blessed Virgin; invocation, imitation and closeness of heart." We invoke Mary because we rely on her help. As our love increases, we yearn to resemble her and thus follow her example. We soon discover that she is the best of all models since her life comprised the simplest ingredients; it was God who wrought the marvels through them. To follow her example, we need to understand her more, to ponder the mystery of her life, and read all we can about her. The better we know her, the more we are drawn to love her, the closer we long to dwell with her.

As Brothers, we discover practical ways to journeying through these stages and of assisting others, especially those aspiring to religious life.

1. Praying to Mary

The first stage is prayer. Mary assumed into heaven tends to the needs of her children because she is closest to the heart of her son. None should be hesitant to invoke her. Except for adoration, which is the exclusive domain of God, our prayer to Mary follows the traditional patterns:

- It is a prayer of praise honouring all that she means for God and God's creatures; honouring her motherhood, her immaculate conception and her openness to grace; extolling her beauty, humility, simplicity, purity and self-denial, those virtues proclaimed in the Litany of Loretto and other litanies.
- It is prayer of filial gratitude for her willing participation in the redemptive plan of God, and for all the favours both personal and collective which her intercession has won for us.

- It is prayer of supplication for all our needs in the spirit of the "Sub Tuum", the earliest public prayer of this kind dating back to the 3rd century and still preserved on a papyrus leaf in the British Museum. Its call for deliverance from all dangers stems from the underlying conviction that the Mother of God hearkens to every human appeal and that none go unheeded. To judge by the frequent references in his sermons, the "Sub Tuum" with the "Memorare" was the favourite prayer of our Venerable Founder.

As popular devotion makes evident, we can address Mary under numberless titles and as patroness of sanctuaries throughout the world. But the title most cherished by the universal Church remains that established by the Council of Ephesus: "Theotokos", "mother of God", because it specifies her essential role in the mystery of the incarnation.

It is our privilege to pray to God's mother not only each day but several times each day, offering our praise and thanksgiving, and commending all human needs to her protection. It is our joy to celebrate her feasts and, more importantly, to relive "with her in the liturgy the mysteries of her divine son's life" (D: 93).

To stimulate the devotion of the faithful, the Church intersperses Mary's feast days throughout the liturgical year. No month passes by without honouring an event in her life or celebrating a title bestowed by her clients while two entire months, May and October, are dedicated to her glory.

Several of these feast days enjoy the special esteem of the Congregation:

- August 15th is the patronal feast of the Congregation;
- September 8th commemorates the birthday of Mary and of John de la Mennais;
- December 8th remains the traditional date for renewing our personal consecration to Mary;
- February 2nd invites us to renew our vows in union with Mary as she presents the child Jesus in the Temple;
- March 25th recalls Mary's "fiat" as the harbinger of all assents to God's call for personal dedication to his cause.

Neither these nor any other celebration of Mary should find us apathetic since every son, worthy of the name, delights on all occasions to honour his mother.

Though devotional practices may vary, all must be wisely based on the directives of Lumen Gentium (8) and their ample commentaries in the Marian encyclicals. These emphasize that true devotion to Mary is:

- christological, wholly dependent on the mystery of Christ to which all devotion is relative. Mary could not accept any form of worship which by-passes her son.
- ecumenical, respectful of other people's sensibilities and heedful of other points of view.
- biblical, founded on the Word of God which explicitly or implicitly reveals the divine dispensation for the Virgin Mother.

Since "no new public revelation can be expected before the glorious manifestation of the Lord" (Dei Verbum: 4), the Church weighs and judges private revelations in the light of their conformity with the unique revelation of the Bible (John Paul II at Fatima, 1982). Indeed, we are under no obligation to accept either private revelations or even those apparitions officially recognized by the Church; still less, of course, the others.

Our devotion must be founded on the firm bases of Scripture and Tradition, not on other appeals which, despite their initial attractiveness, have neither the strength nor endurance of the inexhaustible Word of God. When in doubt, the Church is our guide, and once the Church has spoken, there is no further room for debate. Thus, the Canadian Bishops' Theological Commission reminds us that "All hankering after the sensational in religious doctrine and devotion, like eager pre-occupation with visions and private messages, tends to dim the truth that Christian life takes its primary nourishment from the Gospel and its direction from the shepherds Christ gave his Church. Apparitions and revelations approved by the Church simply reinforce the Gospel message of conversion, penance and prayer."

Praying the Rosary The meditated recitation of the Rosary, which is expressly recommended in our Constitutions (44), is the habitual prayer of many Brothers who are never without their beads. Since every human needs a mother and every man a spouse, the rosary has grown widely popular with the learned as well as the simple, the rich as well as the poor, the sorrowing as well as those in joy.

There are different ways of praying the rosary. Some interlace the Aves with the litanies dedicated to Mary, others focus on her shrines in various lands. André Frossard found a simple, personal way of combating routine and the danger of mechanical repetition. He offered his first Ave for one person, the second for another, and soon found the decades too short for his generous designs ... One of our own Brothers informs me of a useful means he employs quite often. In the first part of the Hail Mary, he replaces "blessed is the fruit of thy womb" by a short formula consonant with the particular mystery celebrated. Thus, "blessed is thy son who rose from the dead", "blessed is thy son who ascended into heaven", "blessed is thy son who sent us his spirit", "blessed is thy son who received thee into heaven", "blessed is thy son who crowned thee in heaven", are variations which can be legitimately substituted for private or public devotion. Whatever the method, the goal is to pray with interior calm. Initially, we may find ourselves concentrating on a word or phrase, but God leads us little by little to contemplative prayer and the peace of his presence.

While devotion to Our Blessed Lady inspires variations, two methods of saying the rosary are well-established:

- The first proceeds by reflection on the words of the Ave, taking them one by one and allowing them to feed our mind and heart in such a way as to become part of us. One word or phrase may inform our prayer for a whole decade or rosary over the space of days and weeks at a time. Our lips keep pronouncing the traditional formula and our hearts feed peacefully on the bread of the word. For example, we may stop at "Hail, Mary", reflecting that the two words are no mere apostrophe but the rendering of Zephaniah's prophecy (Zep 3:14-17) which unveils God's plan of salvation. The greeting

indicates that in Mary, daughter of Sion, the long expectation of Israel had ended. The Old Testament furls its scrolls for the promised Messiah is at hand and salvation is imminent; earth can tremble with joy as the final days yield to the age of deliverance.

By reliving in spirit the long expectation of Israel, we too can share hope and joy at the prospect of the New Dispensation. With Gabriel we marvel at the wonders of God's kindness; with him to greet Mary, who represents Israel at the decisive moment for the world's salvation and, especially during Advent, we are privy to a host of benefits and insights.

"Mary" or "Miriam"

This is the name so often repeated by Jesus and Joseph with love that never wearied, the name proclaimed throughout the centuries by generations of Christians, and the name adopted by millions in honour of our Lady. It is a name which is still musical to the ears of Christ and dear to his Sacred Heart; a name which we strive to repeat with his love, confidence and joyous exaltation.

"Full of grace"

This is the title reserved by God for his well-beloved and it illustrates the absolute originality of the mystery of Mary, the startling nature of her vocation. It contains numerous implications as the translated variants "Most highly favoured," "Most gracious lady," "God's chosen beloved" partially indicate, for no single word can express the Father's tender love for the woman destined to bear the Son in whom he took his full delight, the Son he will offer for the redemption and adoption of mankind.

We too can greet Our Lady with the title which is, so to speak, the divine name, "full of grace," "full of the life of God," given to the daughter of man. It emphasizes the gratuitous favour of God, and in it the Church finds an allusion to the Immaculate Conception, with Mary enjoying the closest relationship with the Beloved Son, the source of all grace.

"The Lord is with thee. . ."

Such is the formula of the angel to Abraham (Gn 26:24), to Jacob (Gn 28:15), and now to Mary in whom the promise is fulfilled. The same formula was customary at the dawn of a new vocation and was addressed, for example, to Moses (Ex 3:12), Gideon (Jg 6:12), and Jeremiah (Jr 1:8). Hence, Mary stands pre-eminent amid biblical figures in the spacious fresco of God's patience.

"Fear not, Mary . . ."

It is he who provides courage, strength and light. He is with thee today and every day in all the circumstances and situations of your life. Like a seed beginning to sprout, then blossom and carry fruit, he is protected by the warmth of your body and heart, fed with your own pure blood, and comforted with the ardor of your faith, hope and charity . . .

In harmony with the liturgical sessions and in rhythm with personal or communal experience, we can dwell in this fashion on each of the phrases of the Ave, pondering over them in the breath of the Holy Spirit. As the beads slip through our fingers and our lips re-echo the mysteries, our hearts rest in contemplation, absorbed by a word or phrase providing an aperture to the infinite glories of God's designs.

- The second method is to contemplate the key events in the life of Jesus and Mary. Though all are well acquainted with this method, two practical observations may prove helpful:

1. During a specific decade, we best contemplate the mystery from Mary's perspective, attempting to see things with her eyes and conforming our reflections and sentiments with hers. In this way, our prayer is not so much focused on Mary as moulded by Mary so that we read Christ's Gospel with his mother's vision.

There are obviously different ways of reading the mystery of Jesus' life, of knowing it more profoundly, assimilating it and making it our own. Each evangelist, for example, has his own

vantage point as does St. Paul; and the rosary proposes another way, that of close communion with Mary to share all she knows about Christ, to relive her thoughts and to listen as she listened so we may be led to imitate her faith, humility and docility to the Holy Spirit, those virtues reflected in her unfailing kindness, her gratitude in joy, patience in trial, and modesty in triumph.

We shall learn from Mary to open our being to the breath of the Spirit who deepens our understanding of Jesus and gradually transforms us into his likeness.

2. The basic event of Mary's life is the annunciation for it shapes the pattern of all the others; it is the mystery of God's call and of her compliance and dedication. It is an event she returns to frequently for it enlightens her mind and heart and guides her in sorrow as in joy. The Father's unspeakable love is now engraved in her heart forever, the substance of all her reflection and the impulse to all her deeds. The same was true, in a lesser way, of Jacob at the ford, Moses before the burning bush, Nathaniel under the fig tree, Zachary up in the branches, and Peter at the lakeside. It is similarly true of our own lives.

It seems evident, then, why the rosary begins with the annunciation. The subsequent mysteries gain deeper meaning and provoke a humbler response in the light of the first. Indeed, the whole human life of Jesus is rooted in the great messianic prophecy and Mary's joyful compliance with it. "In praying the rosary," writes John Paul II, "we strive in faith to sharpen our vision of all the mysteries embraced by the annunciation as by a common source: the joyful mysteries of the incarnation, the sorrowful mysteries of Calvary, and the glorious mysteries of the Resurrection." These fifteen mysteries, meanwhile, are neither exclusive nor exhaustive; other Gospel passages like the flight into Egypt may serve equally well, while a single mystery may profitably engage a whole rosary on certain liturgical occasions.

The Annunciation and the Joyful Mysteries

At the Visitation, Jesus bestows on Elizabeth and John the grace his mother has just received from the Holy Spirit. The Nativity,

Presentation and the Finding in the Temple lead Mary ever further in recognizing her son as the suffering servant in Isaiah and in seeing her vocation as participation in his mission. Furthermore, they help raise the veil on his mysterious life in the Trinity, a mystery implied at the Annunciation but needing much illumination.

The Annunciation and the Sorrowful Mysteries

The Annunciation sheds special light on the Crucifixion and the scenes preceding it. At the foot of the cross, Mary is the maid servant at the side of the Suffering Servant, sharing his affliction and his destiny. She is the mother of sorrows at one with her son in total surrender to the Father's will, and in perfecting her earlier gift of self: "I am the handmaid of the Lord; let what you have said be done to me."

By union with the sacrifice of Christ, the divine motherhood of Mary extends into the spiritual motherhood of all mankind. In the blood, agony and tears of her son, she accepts all humans as children born of the sacrifice of the Only Son: "Mother, here is your son."

Like dawn emblazoned by the noonday sun, the earlier mysteries are fully illumined by the Crucifixion. At the foot of the cross, Mary reveals how she has lived the Agony in the Garden, the Scourging, the Crowning with Thorns, and the Carrying of the Cross: her whole demeanour bespeaks her sentiments during the Via Dolorosa, and these become our own sentiments as we contemplate all that she endured. The events all lead to the peak of Calvary where mother and Son are bonded in the deepest unity. The interdependence established at the Annunciation now reaches consummation with an ardor of love defying all equal.

The Annunciation and the Glorious Mysteries

In the third segment of the rosary, the cardinal mystery is Pentecost. Luke presents it intentionally on the model of the Annunciation: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you." In the Upper Room, the Spirit effects another conception, that of the Church which is the mystical body of Christ. For the

Church, Pentecost means what the Annunciation meant for Mary. It is the source mystery re-enacted at every baptism where the Church produces new offspring in the blood and water from the wounded heart of Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Mother Church gives birth to the sons of God precisely as Mary, by the same power, gave fleshly birth to the only Son of the Father.

The public Pentecost, expressed in parallel with the Annunciation, sheds light on the earlier reception of the Spirit by the apostles. On the evening of the Resurrection, the glorified Christ breathed on his apostles saying: "Receive the Holy Spirit" (Jn 20:22). It also sheds light on the Ascension which can only be understood in the context of the Spirit's descent, as Jesus makes clear: "You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Ac 1:5) and "will receive power, and then you will be my witnesses" (Ac:8).

Finally, the grace of Pentecost blossoms in its magnificence at the Assumption and Coronation, the triumphal expressions of Mary's "fiat" at the Annunciation. The mysterious union between her and the Father, her and the Son, is now the perfect ripening of the first fruits of the Annunciation. Mary becomes, par excellence, the icon of the Church.

* * *

For Pius XII, the rosary was "the synopsis of the Gospel" and for Paul VI "an abridged life of Christ". As we pray the Aves in their spirit, let us follow Mary who "stored up in her heart" the mysteries of Jesus' birth, death and resurrection. In times of sickness, fatigue or discouragement, we have no better form of prayer. The rosary is the prayer of the poor and powerless; it is the prayer of the publican: "Have mercy on me, a sinner." It is the prayer of children in need of their mother, and of the elderly who rediscover in it the joyful spirit of childhood. Of the many quarters of an hour wasted each day, how easy it is to save one for the praise and supplication of Mary so that we may be formed by her and the Holy Spirit into an ever more perfect image of Christ.

The Congregation has always honoured the rosary. May it continue to do so. Our Founder would never retire, no matter how

late or how heavy his work, without paying this tribute to his Protectress and Queen. And he recommended the daily rosary to his Brothers, making it a point of their Rule in 1823.

The new Rule of Life states that "The Brothers love to give daily expression to their veneration of the Virgin Mary, especially through the meditated recitation of the Rosary" (C:44). Although communal recitation is no longer mandatory, groups of retired Brothers maintain the custom either at noon or in the evening when they recommend the needs of the Congregation, especially the need for new vocations, to Our Blessed Lady. Their example is inspiring and should prompt us all to follow their lead, especially on days consecrated to her.

"The recitation of the rosary naturally demands a calm and leisurely rhythm" (Marialis Cultus, p. 47), so that when time is at a premium, it is better to curtail rather than race through the five decades. With Laurentin, "let us ask the Christ child to see his mother as He saw her, and let us ask the handmaid of the Lord to see her son as she saw him in Nazareth, on Calvary, and at the glorious resurrection."

"When people grow lax over prayer to Our Lady," writes the novelist Didier Decoin, "I like to refer to the rosary which she insistently recommended in several apparitions. Many no longer say it because of 'the parrot-like repetition' and their independence of 'all crutches' . . . It seems they have never known how to use it and I may not be able to correct them; but in my own experience, the rosary is no childish exercise but a refined and mature form of devotion though its efficacy, like that of a computer, depends on what we bring to it. If our only contribution is pious murmur, and our sole pre-occupation the counting of beads, distaste and discomfort are inevitable. It is quite otherwise, however, when we pray with the secrets of Mary's life unfolding in our mind and heart. Prayer is no longer something chimed by rote but a heart to heart exchange, rising exceptionally to pure contemplation. And once we have had the faintest experience of such contemplative prayer, we know the rosary as a priceless treasure. Even when we feel less fervent, what better gift can we offer than the gift she asks of us?"

II. Following her example

With Mary as model, we try to harmonize our sentiments and our conduct with hers, as Part I of the circular indicates. It is not a question of external behaviour since the context of our life is so different from hers, but rather of imitating her relationship with Jesus in the light of the Beatitudes, the evangelical counsels and the theological virtues. Thus, in *Redemptoris Mater*, John Paul II urges us to imitate Mary "in that pilgrimage of faith in which she advanced steadfastly preserving her union with Christ... Nor is it just a question of the Virgin Mother's life story, of her personal journey of faith and "the better part" which is hers in the mystery of salvation; it is also a question of the history or the whole people of God, of all those who take part in the same pilgrimage of faith," and therefore of my own.

Vatican II is even more explicit, declaring that "the Mother of God is a model of the Church in the matter of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ" (LG: 63). She is the archetype, the perfect Christian whom we are called to follow in attaining the holiness God intended for man at his creation. She is the morning star attracting our eyes, showing us the path to follow,, and giving us the strength to persevere.

It is not only her virtue but also her mission that calls for imitation. Since she gave the Word of God to the world, nobody has ever spoken and nobody could ever speak as Mary did; she is "Queen of the Apostles" because no apostle knew Jesus better, because every apostle knew Jesus through her. As their successors, each of us is called to be not only another Christ but also another Mary as we open our arms and hearts to all in need.

As Mary, effacing herself, quietly withdrew when the Light of the World shone before men, so the Brother learns to withdraw, as necessary, from the lives of those he has led to Jesus. "Your heart must beat with the rhythm of Mary's heart," writes the Founder, "inflamed with her charity, humility, zeal, gentleness, purity and detachment so that her perfection may be reflected in the words and deeds of her children" (Anthologie: p. 164).

III. Abiding in her Presence

By striving to follow her example, we eventually come to live in Mary's abiding presence; like St. Joseph and St. John, we are at home with her, giving frequent tokens of our love and growing closer in mind and heart. That is how we respond to the dying request of Jesus to receive her as mother and thus be true to the example of his beloved disciple.

- Personal Consecration to Mary

Progress in our confiding love of Mary almost invariably leads to the desire to give ourselves wholly, to consecrate ourselves to her. In many countries, the christening of children is followed by a visit to her altar where they are dedicated to her; a dedication which these children will later ratify in their own name. They will feel the need of giving themselves body and soul to the Blessed Virgin, making her as their parents intended, their guardian and Queen.

That is the pattern followed by John de la Mennais on June 19th, 1809, when he and Feli offered themselves to the Heart of Mary as "slaves of love." The formula, written by Feli and signed by both, was inspired by Boudon who had such influence on Grignon de Montfort.

From the days of Brother Constantin, our whole Congregation has followed this example. On December 8th, the novices habitually consecrate themselves to the Blessed Virgin in the words provided by St. Louis de Montfort; in preparation, they study his Treatise and practice his spiritual counsels.

The consecration made to Our Lady as mediatrix of the Wisdom of God expresses the novice's total commitment to that Wisdom, who is Christ, through the hands of his mother. Reserving nothing for himself, he willingly surrenders his whole past, present and future, all that he is and has to his sovereign, much as a slave surrenders all to his master.

With the memories it evokes of cruelty, shame and bloodshed, the image of enslavement is hardly a popular one. Yet it is the image employed by Mary at the Annunciation to voice her response to Gabriel's message. It is the image used by the Founder as he knelt before her statue "making this declaration of love and binding myself to the humble and voluntary status of slave" (Anthologie, p. 157), the terms he repeated later in a sermon to his colleagues in the priesthood. We have mollified his terminology by substituting "servant" for "slave" forgetting that enslavement to Mary differs radically from that associated with human abuse and degradation.

Whatever the case, personal consecration involves total commitment. By it, we undertake to do nothing of ourselves or by ourselves but to submit all things to her wiser judgment, and in glorifying her, to glorify still more her creator. "By giving our word, we become her servants and sons, her unconditional subordinates, wholly dedicated to her so that we become her living extension in service to the world" (St. Maximilian Kolbe).

From his personal experience, John Paul II asserts that "Perfect devotion to Mary, our understanding of her and our confident abandon to her love, keeps pace with growing knowledge of Christ and greater trust in his person. What is more, perfect devotion to Mary is indispensable for whoever desires to give himself wholly to Christ and the work of redemption. Grignion de Montfort helps us understand the pattern of those mysteries on which we base our faith, and by which it grows and blossoms. The more my faith centres on the reality of the redemption, the more my commitment to Mary, in the spirit of the Montfort, appears the best way of sharing in this reality and of sharing with others its inexpressible richness" (Dialogue with André Frossard).

It is undoubtedly this kind of spirit which led Maximilian Kolbe to heroic holiness and which can endow lesser men, who live out their consecration in their daily lives, with very special graces. Little by little, Mary conforms their hearts with the heart of Christ, and will accompany them into his mystery.

To keep alive the spirit of our consecration, which harmonizes perfectly with our baptismal promises, a salutary practice is to renew it briefly each morning and evening, and to prepare the solemn renewal of December 8th by the novena to the Immaculate Conception. In the days of the Founder, the newly professed put themselves under the special protection of Our Lady during a ceremony all the Brothers attended (cf. Anthologie: p.164).

It is common knowledge that the Superior General, Brother Barbier, consecrated the entire Congregation to the Immaculate Heart of Mary on March 25th, 1943, during the dark days of World War II. His initiative followed that of Pius XII who responded to Our Lady of Fatima by consecrating the whole world to her protection on December 8th, 1942. Forty-five years later, the General Chapter renewed our consecration in the basilica of St. Mary Major to underscore Mary's patronage of the whole Congregation which commits itself and its students to her veneration and entrusts its well-being into her hands. It is a precedent which, at an appropriate time, could be duplicated in every community.

Living Out Our Consecration

Consecration assumes real meaning only when we attempt to live it out continually, enshrining Mary in our mind and heart and living in her spirit. The ordinary mother and child are aptest models for whom does the child think of when his mother leaves him alone for even a minute? His whole demeanour soon reminds her that she is missed. She fills her child's world even when he makes no show of it.

Closeness to Mary, like a mother's closeness, exerts a calming influence and banishes anxiety. "Unload your worries on to him," writes Peter, "since he is looking after you" (1P 5:7). Let us behave similarly with Mary; she influences our thoughts and feelings without a hint of that busy possessiveness which sometimes mars human relationships. Mary leaves us free; her memory does not obsess and her love is never a burden because her aim is to form, not destroy her devotees. "We shall discover this only by constantly dwelling on her immaculate purity since the truth of our dedication

lies not in thought, memory or sentiment, but in the will" (St. Maximilian Kolbe).

In short, it is simply a question of responding to the last words of Christ: of dwelling close to his mother, and of becoming so fervent a disciple as to be made his brother, the son of his own mother. There is no possibility of putting our Redeemer in the background so that the love we owe him is transferred to his mother... She soon reminds us of her relative place in the scheme of redemption: she is the lowly handmaid in whom grace flourishes more than in any other out of the mercy accorded by her son. She focuses our attention on him; it is his name she puts on our lips while he does the same for his mother. Her greatest joy is to form us in the image of her son. When we approach her in childlike simplicity, we perceive her eagerness that we grow daily more like Jesus.

As the Father sees us in his Son: "This is my well beloved Son in whom I take my delight," so Mary sees and loves each of us as another Christ. She cannot behold him without beholding us who are members of his mystical body, the Church.

Dwelling close to Mary means dwelling close to those she loves, preeminently the Holy Spirit. Wherever Mary is, there is the Spirit. Where the Spirit is, there is Christ, and there is his body and mystical spouse, the Church. This conviction intensifies our spiritual life and makes us readily available to the lowly and suffering people we encounter. "The more we love her, the better we understand the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the fatherhood of God, and the mystery of the Holy Trinity" (St. Maximilian Kolbe).

IV. Spreading Devotion to Mary

"Promoting her devotion among their students" (D: 118) is another way of venerating Mary. It is not hard to arouse the devotion of the young. Every child loves his mother and Mary is a heavenly mother. A keen awareness of this truth appeals to every

heart and may leave an impression for life. Some children will have learned it on their mother's knee, and our privilege is to sustain it. Others, however, will lack that advantage and need our extra help and care.

For all of them, our personal example will prove contagious for students quickly assess our attitude to Mary and are apt to follow it. Our language, our conviction at prayer, the way we speak about Mary inevitably stimulates their devotion or induces their indifference. For those engaged in Formation Programmes, inspiring example is especially important since it promotes peace and harmony, the physical and spiritual well-being of aspirants to the special service of God. Mary was at hand at the birth and development of their religious vocation, and she follows every step of its progress in the Holy Spirit. The mission she fulfilled for Christ she now fulfills for his mystical body and for each of its members, especially those who aspire to live by the evangelical counsels. That explains how Marian devotion, based on sound theology, gives religious life its authenticity and joy, and why, without it, religious cannot fully comply with their mission to the world.

How should we initiate our students? We may first of all encourage them to consider the three stages mentioned earlier.

We can lead them to make frequent recourse to Mary, to expose their personal needs, honour her for the outstanding privileges she receives from God, and thank her for all the graces she has bestowed. The simplest prayer is the "Hail, Mary" which we can examine imaginatively to shirk the dangers of routine, then the rosary, the angelus and the widespread practice of the three Aves at bed time.

Special occasions, such as Our Lady's feast days and the two months dedicated to her, incite more fervent devotion and provide opportunities for a historical survey of shrines, such as Lourdes and Fatima, which have been built in her honour throughout the world. Better still if teacher and students organize a pilgrimage to one or other of these places of public worship.

The second step is the invitation to follow Mary's example which presupposes sensitive interpretation of Gospel references to her. An admirable resource is *Marialis Cultus* of Paul VI which explains the trinitarian, christological and ecclesial aspects of Marian devotion, while detailing its biblical and liturgical roots (*Marialis Cultus*: 29-39). The proposed means help us evade excessive sentimentality and a balanced and vigorous devotion to her who will lead all to her son, the Saviour and the sole Mediator with the Father.

To reach the third step — dwelling close to Mary — there are no better agencies than the sodalities and confraternities founded in her honour. The Venerable Founder used them to change the whole spirit of an establishment and to promote individual spiritual growth. "As administrator of my diocese," he wrote, "I founded seven of them, one having more than eighty members who wielded a powerful and unobtrusive influence over all their colleagues" (*Anthologie*, pp. 161-162). In fact, sixty-eight of his sermons to young men and women are still extant, giving valuable insights into his methods and perspectives, and providing inspiration for the movements we promote throughout the world.

These movements are a powerful means of serious spiritual formation and often pave the way to real holiness. How could it be otherwise since they respond to Our Lord's appeal to dwell close to Mary as to a mother? No wonder the young feel at home in gathering to celebrate her. "The figure of the Blessed Virgin does not disappoint modern man and woman; rather she offers them the perfect model of the Lord's disciple; the disciple who builds up the earthly, temporal city while being a diligent pilgrim toward the heavenly, eternal city; who works for that justice which frees the oppressed and that charity which assists the needy; but above all, the disciple who is an active witness of the love which builds up Christ in people's hearts" (*Marialis Cultus*: 37).

Community Devotion to Mary

The central emphasis of this Circular is the cherished place which Mary holds in the personal life of the Brother. It is natural

that this be reflected in the life they lead in common. We must ensure, therefore, that our domestic circles give Mary the honour she receives in local parishes and in the Church at large; her statues and shrines should be tastefully adorned, her name arise often in public as in private prayer. We should voice our community intentions to her, begging for good vocations, requesting her help for the sick and the poor, and beseeching her to touch the hearts of the proud and rebellious.

Mary's feasts must be the joy of every religious community who will give the strongest endorsement to parochial and diocesan initiatives in her honour. It is a praiseworthy objective for each community to renew their joint consecration on a specific annual date and thus find new zeal in their apostolic efforts.

Sustained devotion to Mary never fails to strengthen the bonds of fraternal unity and to promote the spirit of mutual trust and joy. It is a mother's aim to bring her family together; it is a child's delight to follow her guidance and express his gratitude.

Vibrant community devotion is necessarily reflected in the desire to promote Mary's veneration by the wider public and to mingle with the faithful in praise of the Mother of God. Even if one feature or another of public enthusiasm disturbs us, our role must remain positive rather than condemnatory. Far better to enlighten others or modify their practices than to squelch their generous instincts. Who can say, moreover, who will be the real benefactors and the real beneficiaries? Missionary Brothers could easily inform us of what they have received as well as given.

CONCLUSION

Though Joseph had "decided to divorce her informally," he was persuaded by the angel "to take Mary home as his wife" (Mt 1:19-20). This God-given privilege included an even greater gift since "She will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus" (Mt 1:21). So Joseph lived in immediate communion with God's surpassing mystery; for years, he enjoyed the daily company of God's "most highly favoured" and of her son as he "increased in wisdom, in stature and in favour with God and men."

Later, St. John "made a place for her in his home" (Jn 19:27) so that together they could explore the significance of Calvary and the Cenacle in terms of the loving heart of Christ. From the lips of her who "treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Lk 2:19), John came to understand "the gift of God". There was nothing to predict that the young "son of thunder", who pleaded for "fire from heaven to burn them up", would one day become the eagle mystic revealed by his Gospel. The explanation resides in the lessons which Mary gave him on the meaning of her son's life and the life of the Church.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Part II of this Circular lends itself more easily to exchange of viewpoint. Apt topics could include:

1. What does our community do to venerate Mary on a daily basis and on her feast days?
2. What means have we adopted to stimulate Marian devotion among our students and others?
3. How did I personally develop my own devotion to Mary? What difficulties did I encounter, and how did I surmount them? How do I stand with regard to the three stages indicated: Intercession, Imitation, Dwelling close to Mary?
4. What importance do I attach to:
 - The rosary? What place does it enjoy in my life? Which method of praying is most profitable for me?
 - My Consecration to Mary?
 - The daily angelus? The practice of the three 'Hail Mary's'? Pilgrimages to Mary's shrines?
5. What measures could we take to intensify our community devotion to Mary? To spread that devotion to others?

Part I will demand more reflection and time:

1. After reflecting on Mary's sublime vocation, am I able to divulge the story of my own call and response so as to enrich fraternal community life?
2. In discussing the values of religious life, we may compare our own reactions with those of Mary:

The vows

- Does our poverty truly express utter detachment and absolute resignation to God's will?

- Do we give sufficient thought to the goals of religious chastity?
- Does my obedience lead me to fuller union with the suffering Christ?

Prayer

- Is there a special prayer which "I store up and ponder in my heart"?
- Can I point to occasions when I discerned God's will in the events of my life and the people I have known over the years?
- What place does the Magnificat hold in my life?
- When have I experienced the deep silence of contemplative prayer?

Mission

With reference to the four major events discussed in the circular, we may discuss:

- The Visitation; how zealous am I in spreading the Word of God? Have I perceived the apostolic values of my visits home and elsewhere?
- Cana: am I alert to the pressing needs of our schools and students?
- Calvary: what benefits arise from suffering and compassion?
- The Cenacle: do I cooperate with the Holy Spirit and with Mary in my daily life?

Mary's role in Nazareth

- What can we learn from Mary's example in bringing up the child Jesus?
 - How can we apply her example to our own educational mission?
3. "This is your mother"
- Community discussion could suitably conclude with shared prayer based on the words of Jesus: "This is your son... This is your mother."
 - Those interested in biblical sources may explore the prefigurings of Mary in the Old Testament.
 - Does the Circular suggest other aspects worthy of fuller development and discussion?

