

ASIA-OCEANIA MARIOLOGICAL CONFERENCE

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MARIOLOGICAL
CONFERENCE**

Submitted by:

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MARY as a Model of Dialogue and Hospitality

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This paper will present Mary of Nazareth as our model of dialogue and hospitality. Preserved from all stain, Mary always retained original righteousness both in body and soul, and so she was able to declare her *fiat* in complete liberty. All of Mary's being became hospitable to the Word without ever losing anything of her own humanity¹. Eve disobeyed and wanted to be like God; Mary, on the other hand, represents the new humanity as she let the Holy Spirit transform her into a welcoming space for a free and affectionate encounter with God. In this way, the new Eve gives birth to the new Adam, becoming the symbol of all those who become an open place for the Word to camp². Believers of all times, races and cultures have felt the affectionate presence of our heavenly mother and, grasping her hand, have celebrated to be one in Christ³. Yes, all human beings are the only Son of the Father, the only son of Mary⁴.

1. Created for dialogue

God is not a distant and inaccessible "immobile motor", but rather a friendly and warm-hearted being, who has created everything because he loves. God is an absolutely free person, "a lover with all the passion of a true love" .

1.1. Everything was created to enable man's dialogue with God

God's universal and salvific will precedes creation, because everything has been called into existence to allow the encounter between the Word and our freedom⁶. The whole of creation is good because it is loved⁷, and it has been loved as the space where God and man can meet.

God creates separating, differentiating, and in this way he transforms the chaos into cosmos, the confusion into a welcoming space, suitable for a free and affectionate encounter. He has created us each different from himself and so we can communicate with him and among ourselves. Being different we can become mutually enriched, instead of getting lost in a sterile monologue. Created in the image of the free and loving God, we grow in freedom as we educate our will to love.

¹"In giving her assent to Gabriel's word, Mary lost nothing of her true humanity and freedom". JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio*, [=FR], 14-IX-1998, n. 108, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, [=AAS], 91 (1999) 5-88.

²"The Word became flesh, he lived among us". Jn 1:14.

³Cf. Gal 3:28.

⁴"In the same holy bosom of his most chaste Mother Christ took to Himself flesh, and united to Himself the spiritual body formed by those who were to believe in Him. [...] We have issued from the womb of Mary like a body united to its head". PIUS X, Encyclical Letter *Ad Diem Ilium Laetissimum*, 2-11-1904, n. 10, in AAS 36 (1904) 530-542. Cf. S.M. ALONSO, *Maternidad espiritual de María. Hijos de Dios, hijos de María: filiación divina y mariana*, in *Ephemerides mariologicae* 1 (2008) 41-42.

⁵BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est*, [=DC], 25-XII-2005, n. 10, in AAS 98 (2006) 217-252. In Duns Scot "the primacy of the will sheds light on the fact that God is charity before all else". ID, Apostolic Letter *On the occasion of the VII centenary of the death of the blessed John Duns Scotus*, [=Scot], in *L'Osservatore Romano*, [=OR], (24-XII-2008), 9.

⁶"Everything is created so that this story can exist, the encounter between God and his creature. In this sense, salvation history, the Covenant, precedes creation". BENEDICT XVI, *Meditation during the first General Congregation of the 12th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, 6-VIII-2008, in *Ecclesia* 3436 (2008) 26. We have developed much more extensively the aspects related to freedom in the paper we presented at the Mariological Congress that took place at Vailankanni (India), 1-3 May 2008.

⁷"God saw all he had made, and indeed it was very good". Gen 1:31.

We are relational and dialogical beings, born to gather in freedom and mutual consideration. We develop ourselves through the free and friendly encounter with the Other and with others, while sin is synonymous with isolation, slavery and self-destruction.

Man exists because God calls him, summons him, and makes of him the addressee of the Trinitarian auto-communication. Out of nothingness, we were called to a loving dialogue with God, and this was the first step of Salvation History. In the fullness of time, the Omnipotent becomes Immanuel - "God-is-with-us"⁸. He assumes our humble condition in a woman's womb, and thus he makes it possible for us to speak with him face to face

God called us into existence, walks by our side and speaks to us personally. "The invisible God out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends and lives among them, so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself"⁹. In the actual progress of history, every human being is personally invited to a loving dialogue with God. Indeed, the Word of God is a real Person, who has become flesh of our flesh and demands of us a free and loving answer, here and now. We cannot remain indifferent to this call, because our identity and the reason of our existence depend on it. When accepting it, we enter into the mystery of Trinitarian communion through Christ, the incarnate Word.

Divine revelation is dialogical: it addresses us, asks for an answer, requires an interlocutor who receives and listens to it. God doesn't speak to the void. Man is the addressee, the listener of the Word and, like Mary, he is called to let the Word become flesh of his own flesh by the Holy Spirit. This is the only way to become credible witnesses of God in our world¹⁰.

1.2. Mary as a forerunner of dialogue

At the very moment that God thinks of Jesus, he also thinks of Mary, whom he chooses and points to as his Son's mother. "From all eternity [Mary] joined in a hidden way with Jesus Christ in one and the same decree of predestination"¹¹. Since that very first moment, man and woman are in the mind of God,

Mt 1:23.

⁹ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, [=DV], 18-XI-1965, n. 2, in AAS 58 (1966) 817-835. Both Trent and the First Vatican councils had presented revelation as God's vertical action that is translated into a doctrine. Cf. H. DENZINGER, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, Bologna 1995, [=DZ], n. 1501 & 3015.

¹⁰ "People today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories". JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, 7-XII-1990, n. 42, in AAS 83 (1991) 289.

¹¹ PIUS XII, Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*, 1-XI-1950, n. 40, in AAS 42 (1950) 753-771. "From the very beginning, and before time began, the eternal Father chose and prepared for his only-begotten Son a Mother in whom the Son of God would become incarnate and from whom, in the blessed fullness of time, he would be born into this world". PIUS IX, Bulla *Ineffabilis Deus*, 8-XII-1854, n. 1, in *Pii IX P.M. Acta*, 1/1, 597-619. The Blessed Virgin was "predestined from eternity by that decree of divine providence which determined the incarnation of the Word to be the Mother of God". SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, [=LG], 21-XI-1964, n. 61, in AAS 57 (1965) 5-71. Cf. PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis cultus*, [=MarC], 2-11-1974, n. 25, in AAS 66 (1974) 113-168; JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Mater*, [=RM], 25-III-1987, n. 7-8, in AAS 79 (1987) 361-433.

because Jesus will eventually be born of a woman and in a human family¹². So it can rightly be said that God creates humanity having in mind Christ and Mary¹³. Therefore, all humans, men and women alike, find in Jesus and Mary their own anthropological identity¹⁴.

Mary is our model for a new way of being in Christ. "If we want to be Christians, we must be devoted to the Virgin Mary"¹⁵, because she is the key that opens to us the mystery of God and the mystery of the Church¹⁶.

When we were blocked by sin, incapable of altruism and unable of true dialogue, we were re-created in the image of Christ, with Mary's free collaboration¹⁷. The Word becomes flesh in our freedom, and keeps looking for a maternal lap. Mary is the model; she cannot, therefore, be reduced to an optional or a pious idea. The mystery of the Church that welcomes the Word finds its paradigm in Mary's freedom. She receives the Word and lets him become flesh of her flesh. Paradoxically, a young maiden's freedom becomes essential for the mystery of God's self-communication.

Mary of Nazareth shows us the way to real dialogue and hospitality, as she "lived and exercised her freedom precisely by giving herself to God and accepting God's gift within herself"¹⁸. Like Mary, we are called to welcome the Word within ourselves and in our community, so that he can enliven our times.

1.3. Asia, a privileged soil for dialogue

Asia has been a privileged soil where "God revealed and fulfilled his saving purpose from the beginning", "through men and women of that continent". Even Jesus, the son of Mary, "took flesh as an Asian [...]" and made his own the history, the sufferings and the hopes of its people"¹⁹. The loving God has

S.M. CECCHIN, *L'Immacolata Concezione. Breve storia del dogma*, Città del Vaticano 2003, 64 y 72; V. BATTAGLIA, *La Concezione Immacolata alla luce della mediazione di Cristo*, in F. LEPORE, ed., "Signum magnum apparuit in caelo". *L'Immacolata, segno della Bellezza e dell'Amore di Dio*, Città del Vaticano 2005, 260-263.

"In the Virgin Mary everything is relative to Christ and dependent upon Him". MarC 25.

Mary is not only a woman, but "the woman", "the representative and the archetype of the whole human race". JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem*, [=MD], 15-VII-1988, n. 4, in AAS 80 (1988) 1653-1729. Cf. S. DE FIORES, *Maria, sintesi di valori, Storia culturale della mariologia*, Cinisello Balsamo 2005, 327.

PAUL VI, *Omelia nel Pellegrinaggio al Santuario Mariano di N. S. di Bonaria in Cagliari*, 24-IV-1970, n. 3, in *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, VIII (1971) 361. This document underscores "the importance of Virgin Mary in the Salvation History and in the ordinary life of God's people". CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *The Virgin Mary in the intellectual and spiritual formation*, [=ISF], 25-III-1988, n. 27, in OR (2-VI-1988). Instead of multiplying Marian devotions, we should let the Holy Spirit guide us to follow Christ in the way Mary did and together with her. Cf. U. von BALTHASAR, *Puntos centrales de la fe*, Madrid 1985, 246-247.

¹⁶ Cf. PAUL VI, *Speech at the Conclusion of the Third Session of the Second Vatican Council*, 21-XI-1964, n. 28, in AAS 56 (1964) 1007-1018.

What happens in Mary is a new creation. J. RATZINGER, *Introducción al cristianismo. Lecciones sobre el credo apostólico*, Salamanca 2005, 228.

¹⁸ JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis splendor*, [=VS], 6-VIII-1993, n. 120, in AAS 85 (1993) 1133-1228.

¹⁹ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, [=EA], 6-XI-1999, n. 1, in AAS 92 (2000) 449-528.

communicated generously in Asia for the good of all. How can Asia today share with the rest of the world the many gifts God keeps giving to its welcoming people?

Christian faith has to become part of Asia's peoples, engaging with their cultures and overcoming the mistaken though extended perception that sees it as foreign to Asia. Certainly we have to proclaim clearly that Christ is our only saviour, but this fundamental truth is not at odds with making Christian faith a part of Asian cultures. In fact, any culture can become true expression of the one Christian faith²⁰.

The vast diversity of ancient cultures, beliefs and traditions in Asia make dialogue a necessity and offer a great opportunity for mutual enrichment. In fact, dialogue is already "a characteristic mode of the Church's life in Asia"²¹.

The Blessed Mary, so present in Asian Christians devotion, is our model for dialogue, hospitality and evangelization.

"Throughout Asia there are hundreds of Marian sanctuaries and shrines where not only the Catholic faithful gather, but also believers of other religions too. [...] Hers is an ear that always listens, hers a heart that always welcomes, and hers a prayer that never fails"²²

Evangelization as dialogue makes every effort to overcome any self-centred attitude of resignation and complacency, which only looks for the satisfaction of immediate personal needs and lacks a social dimension. In this egotistical religiosity, even the devotion to Mary becomes pious individualism. As Philippine bishops said in 1975:

Our devotion to Mary should never lose sight of the present plight of the vast majority of our Filipino brethren who live lives unworthy of human beings [...]. Mary is the model of the perfect disciple of the Lord: the disciple who builds up the earthly and temporal city while being a diligent pilgrim towards the heavenly and eternal city, the disciple who works for that charity which assists the needy"

In front of a mystery that transcends her, Mary is not blocked or passive, but rather she responds actively, letting herself be transformed into a welcoming space. In a similar way, we too are invited to open our hearts to God and our neighbour.

2. Created for hospitality

God called man to participate in the Trinitarian dialogue, making of him a listener of the Word, someone who welcomes the Word as Mary did. That means to accept the other human beings with an affectionate, gratuitous and unconditional hospitality, because "by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man"²⁴

JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, [=EA], 6-XI-1999, n. 1, in AAS 92 (2000) 449-528.

²⁰.EA 21.

²¹.EA 3.

²².EA 51.

²³ Reported in S.T. MARTINEZ, *Jesus Christ in popular piety in the Philippines*, in R.S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Asian faces of Jesus*, Maryknoll NY 1993, 252.

2.1. God's hospitality towards Mary

The Trinitarian God (tri-unit) is unity in diversity, source of all communion and of all difference²⁵. He respects our freedom. Instead of showing his power, he becomes a gentle and friendly presence in our journey through life, quietly attending our free response.

In Mary, God shows his consideration and respect for every human being; his plan of salvation is carried out in the humbleness of the delicate personal relationships. Therefore, the capacity of donating oneself to others is not a sign of alienation for the Christian, but a fundamental aspect of having been created in the image and likeness of the Trinitarian God²⁶.

God respects Mary's freedom. From all eternity, he had thought of her as the mother of his Son, and so he had preserved her from original sin and made of her the "full of grace", his "beloved daughter"²⁷. Mary's affinity with God was essential, because Christ, as a man, would be educated by her. When the fullness of time had come, God neither forces Mary into accepting his plan, nor does he present it to her as something necessary and unavoidable. Through the angel Gabriel, God does not impose, but instead proposes his plan to her. When Mary feels confused, the angel calmly listens to her, responds to her doubts and gently waits for her answer, without any hint of pressure, in the quietness of the most reverent intimacy. Without her free and gracious consent, the incarnation of the Word would not have been possible²⁸. The infinite freedom of God and the freedom of a humble creature make possible the coming of the one who makes us free.

Mary is pure hospitality towards God, and her hospitality is both active and responsible. Her decision was to be so essential to humankind that she had to make it in full lucidity. There is no hint of her being passive or intimidated at any moment. Having been preserved from all stain of original sin, she can pronounce her *fiat* while enjoying fully of her creatural freedom. Poor in front of the Father, redeemed by Christ and docile to the Holy Spirit, Mary accepts joyfully the divine will and totally consecrates herself to her mission. Long before the angel's announcement, Mary has already welcomed the plan of God the Father ("the lover")²⁹ and has assumed the unconditional receptivity that characterizes God the Word ("the loved"), he who is begotten by the Father in the eternal "today"³⁰.

God is, in himself, agape, self-donation, community of three persons (Un 4:8). The Father donates himself totally to the Son; the Son donates himself totally to the Father; the Spirit who comes from both is the bond of love. God is the lover, the loved and the love. AUGUSTINUS, *De Trinitate*, XV, c. 16, in J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latino*, 226 vol., Paris 1841-1864, [=PL], 42.

²⁶. Cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Letter on the collaboration of men and women in the Church and in the world*, 31-V-2004, n. 6, in *Ecclesia* 3219-20 (2004) 30-31.

²⁷. LG 53.

. " The Father of mercies willed that the incarnation should be preceded by the acceptance of her who was predestined to be the mother of His Son". LG 56.

²⁹ Mary has been presented as an icon of the Father, because by faith she gives birth to the Word, the eternally engendered by the Father. Cf. AUGUSTIN, *De Sancta Virginitate*, II, 3, in PL 40, 398; R. LOMBARDI, *Maria icona della Trinità. Primizia di una umanità nuova*, Roma 2003.

³⁰ Cf. RM 17.

Under the action of the Holy Spirit, "the love among Father and Son", Mary becomes Ark of the Covenant, a welcoming space for the encounter between God and humanity. Such an infinite mystery is out of reach for any human observer. Even Joseph, her husband, has to be graciously introduced by God into the depths of that outstanding mystery³¹. He receives that revelation while sleeping, that is to say in absolute gratuitousness. Mary is "a garden enclosed, a sealed fountain"³² where the Holy Spirit can act freely, making of her the fullness of grace. In this way God prepares Jesus' incarnation, because it is not the flesh that counts, but being born through the Spirit³³. Mary is so blessed that those who meet her are filled with joy, receive the Holy Spirit and proclaim that Jesus Christ is the Lord³⁴. That is exactly what happens to Simeon³⁵, to Elizabeth³⁶ and to the disciples gathered in the cenacle³⁷.

"Since Mary is completely imbued with the Word of God, she is able to become the Mother of the Word Incarnate."³⁸ With her silence, she makes space to the Word and becomes its bearer. "Rightly therefore the holy Fathers see her as used by God not merely in a passive way, but as freely cooperating in the work of human salvation through faith and obedience"³⁹.

2.2. Hospitality in the family of Nazareth

Joseph and Mary, in full freedom, bring to realization the "spousal gift of self, which leads to the "indivisible union of souls," and the "union of hearts". "By virtue of the marriage bond the Son of Mary is also Joseph's Son."⁴⁰ Nothing happens here by chance or constriction. God has chosen Joseph, and Joseph declares his own *fiat* in full freedom. And so Joseph was "as close as possible to Christ, to whom every election and predestination is ordered."⁴¹.

A human being like us, in all things except sin, Jesus passed most of his years completely immersed in family life⁴². For his neighbours, Jesus was the son of Joseph and Mary, a normal person, perfectly integrated in the community and with a normal circle of family bonds⁴³.

³¹ Mt 1:20.

Song 4:12. Some Fathers "called her the 'Temple of the Holy Spirit', an expression that emphasizes the sacred character of the Virgin". MarC 26; Cf. RM 26.

³³ "What is born of human nature is human; what is born of the Spirit is spirit. [...] You must be born from above". Jn 3:6-7.

³⁴ Anna "began to praise God; and she spoke of the child to all who looked forward to the deliverance of Jerusalem". Lk 2:38; Cf. 1Cor 12:3.

³⁵ Lk 2:25-35.

³⁶ Lk 1:41.

³⁷ Acts 1:8-14; 2:1-4.

³⁸ DC 41.

. LG 56. The Blessed Mary cooperated in a singular way. LG 61.

"Together with human nature, all that is human, and especially the family — as the first dimension of man's existence in the world — is also taken up in Christ". JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptoris custos*, [=RC], 15-VIII-1989, n. 21, in AAS 82 (1990) 5-34.

⁴¹ RC 7.

⁴² RC 21.

⁴³ "This is the carpenter's son, surely? Is not his mother the woman called Mary, and his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Jude? His sisters, too, are they not all here with us?" Mt 13:55-56.

He was "born of a woman, born a subject of the Law" . In this phrase, the word "woman" is used to underline that Jesus assumes fully his condition of being a Jewish man in an actual family⁴⁵.

During all those long years of ordinary life, Joseph and Mary feel fully at ease in their role of parents. They gladly respect and accompany their son. Jesus, for his part, lives under their authority, joyfully welcomes their input and, with their help, he increases "in wisdom, in stature, and in favour with God and with people"⁴⁶. The relationship between Mary and Jesus is specially tight and significant:

As He sat on her lap and later as He listened to her throughout the hidden life at Nazareth, this Son, who was "the only Son from the Father", "full of grace and truth," was formed by her in human knowledge of the Scriptures and of the history of God's plan for His people, and in adoration of the Father⁴⁷.

Every member in the family of Nazareth relates to the others in full respect and reciprocal donation. Mary and Joseph let their son grow in freedom and trust him; they are aware that Jesus' personal mystery goes far beyond their capacity of understanding⁴⁸. And so, when their son answers them back: "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Mary and Joseph do not understand, but they trust him, listen to him and meditate on his words. They don't see in that answer an act of rebellion, an adolescent son asserting his independence, but rather encounter a question of faith. In fact, Jesus will continue living "under their authority", although he had already reached adulthood⁴⁹. The Immanuel, who had made himself a silent presence in Mary's womb, continues now his hidden life in a humble family of an unknown town.

Mary is never intimidated by her son; she speaks to him in a very natural and straightforward way: "My child, why have you done this to us? See how worried your father and I have been, looking for you."⁵⁰. Joseph likewise feels at ease in his fatherhood:

Gal 4:4. Cf. Mt 11:11; Lk 7:28.

⁴⁵. "In Jesus of Nazareth, God has assumed the features typical of human nature, including a person's belonging to a particular people and a particular land". JOHN PAUL II, *Letter Concerning Pilgrimage to the Places Linked to the History of Salvation*, 29-VI-1999), n. 3, in OR (30-VI - 1-VII-1999), 8.

⁴⁶ Lk 2:52. "He worked with human hands, He thought with a human mind, acted by human choice and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin". GS 22.

⁴⁷ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*, [=CT], 16-X-1979, n. 73, in AAS 71 (1979) 1277-1340.

⁴⁸ "My thoughts are not your thoughts and your ways are not my ways". Is 55,8.

⁴⁹ Lk 2:51. Being twelve years old, Jesus had already reached maturity. In that celebration Joseph would have had to recite the blessing: "Blessed are you my God because you have taken my parental responsibility away from this boy". F. MANNS, *Maria, mujer hebrea*, in *Espiritu y Vida* 14 (2005) 30. From that moment on, Joseph is not mentioned again in the gospels.

In this family, Joseph is the father: his fatherhood is not one that derives from begetting offspring; but neither is it an "apparent" or merely "substitute" fatherhood. Rather, it is one that fully shares in authentic human fatherhood and the mission of a father in the family⁵¹.

Joseph willingly and faithfully assumes his role as a father and a husband. When God unveils to Joseph his eternal design, Joseph is so astounded in front of so big a mystery that he can hardly understand what he can possibly do in it. But once he has enough clarity, he promptly and gladly accepts his own mission, with no need to take extra time to make his decision or to ask for advice. His purity and humility help him to recognize the mystery; his strength allows him to assume willingly and promptly his duty. Acting in this way he demonstrates he is a free and mature person who is not driven by jealousy. He does not intend to dominate Mary as if she were his property. Joseph's love is pure and authentic, and so he lets Mary be herself and follow freely the mission that God has assigned to her. Joseph is a mature person and so he is not afraid of facing gossip about Mary's surprising pregnancy.

Joseph, then, is "an upright man"⁵², not because he follows rigidly the letter of the law, but because he listens carefully and willingly to the voice of God. In this way, he is "also brought into the 'beginning' of the New and Eternal Covenant"⁵³.

2.3. Mary's hospitality

"Motherhood always establishes a unique and unrepeatable relationship between two people: between mother and child and between child and mother"⁵⁴. In fact, Mary welcomes her son and is welcomed by him, she educates him and, at the same time, she learns from him how to be a mother.

"Mary learned from Jesus! From her very first "*fiat*", through the long, ordinary years of the hidden life, as she brought up Jesus, or when at Cana in Galilee she asked for the first sign, or when finally on Calvary, by the Cross, she looked on Jesus, she "learned" him moment by moment"⁵⁵.

She is the most significant human person for Jesus and, at the same time, the first of his disciples:

She was the first [disciple] in time, because even when she found her adolescent Son in the temple she received from Him lessons that she kept in her heart. She was the first disciple above all else because no one has been "taught by God" to such depth⁵⁶.

Jesus' hospitality toward his mother is always respectful and truthful. When it is necessary to emphasize any basic dimension of faith or the need to conversion, Jesus is very straightforward⁵⁷. This is true even towards his own parents: "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in

Mt 1:19.

53. RC32.

⁵⁴ RM 45.

BENEDICT XVI, *Meeting with the men and women religious, seminarians, representatives of movements and consecrated life at the Shrine of Jasna Gora*, [=Cze], Czestochowa, 26-V-2006, in *Ecclesia* 3313 (2006) 27.

⁵⁶ CT 73; Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, [=VC], 25-III-1996, n. 18; RM 20.

For the current sensibility it can be somehow shocking the straightforward way Jesus uses to address the Siro-Phoenician woman: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to little dogs" (Mk 7:27), but it is so that he provokes her opening to faith.

my Father's house?"⁵⁸; "Who are my mother and my brothers?"⁵⁹. God's ways are always disconcerting and demand us to overcome, painfully, our natural tendency to accommodation. Mary is aware of this, and for that reason she carefully meditates on her son's words and becomes his first disciple. Jesus, in turn, instructs his mother lovingly. When he is twelve years old, he tells her that he is the son of God. In Cana he reminds her that his "hour" will truly arrive when he is elevated on the cross; it will be then when he will attend fully her intercessions. In his preaching he emphasizes that above all Mary is the one who hears the Word and keeps it⁶⁰. And on the cross he grants her spiritual maternity over the whole of humanity.

In the supreme moment of the sacrifice, Jesus entrusts his mother to the disciple whom he loved most: "Woman, this is your son". Then to the disciple he said, "This is your mother"⁶¹. Jesus chose his dearest disciple, so indicating that only those who love Christ and listen to him are able to welcome Mary. Indeed, real hospitality is an expression of unconditional love and reciprocal donation: "And from that hour the disciple took her into his home"⁶². Jesus continues: "It is fulfilled", indicating that Mary's spiritual maternity is an essential part of her son's salvific mission.

Mary is our model for hospitality. "Among creatures no one knows Christ better than Mary; no one can introduce us to a profound knowledge of his mystery better than his Mother"⁶³. In any moment of history, Mary welcomes the Word and donates it, so creating family relationships among us. Nobody should feel excluded. Like her, we are called to welcome the Word and let him transform us. "Let Mary guide you as you 'learn' Jesus. Keep your eyes fixed on him. Let him form you."⁶⁴

2.4. Hospitality lived in faith

Mary's obedience is an expression of her faith. The evangelist Luke highlights this fact very clearly: "Blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled."⁶⁵. The gift of faith, freely accepted, is the deep reason of her maternity. In the very difficult moments, when she is not able to understand God's plan, Mary meditates, trusts, loves, and waits. Mary "is in contact with the truth about her Son only in faith and through faith!"⁶⁶ She has no suspicions about him, she lets him grow up in freedom and, when the time comes, he can freely found a new family, the Church.

⁵⁸ Lk 2:49.

⁵⁹ Mk 3:33. In this episode, Jesus' relatives thought that he was "out of his mind" (Mk 3:21). With his straightforward words, Jesus is inviting them to join his new family, the Church, formed by those who sincerely listen to him. Blood bonds should not be an obstacle. Cf. Mt 10:37-38; Lk 14:26-27.

⁶⁰ Lk 11:28; Mk 3:35.

⁶¹ Jn 19:27.

⁶² Jn 19:27.

⁶³ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Rosarium virginis Mariae*, [=RVM], 16-X-2002, 14, in AAS 95 (2003) 5-36.

⁶⁴ Cze 27.

⁶⁵ Lk 1:45.

⁶⁶ RM 17.

We see it in the humility with which she recedes into the background during Jesus' public life, knowing that the Son must establish a new family and that the Mother's hour will come only with the Cross, which will be Jesus' true hour⁶⁷.

We have more difficulties. God's mystery goes so far beyond our capacity of understanding that we may often feel confused. We are so self-centred that we find it difficult to host diversity. Instead of making space inside us in order to welcome the Other and others, we prefer to run for our lives, trying to be like gods. "Save yourself; come down from the cross!" we seem to hear all around.

Our human reason tends to reduce everything to an object, tries to know the causes and the effects of everything so that nothing can possibly escape to its control. This kind of organized, well-known and domesticated world provides an apparent security. Eric Fromm observes that the individual looks for this serenity at all costs, even to the point of escaping from the uneasiness of freedom. That tendency may pave the way to authoritarianism, evasion or automatic conformity⁶⁸. It is difficult to "leave our country", in order to follow God's call. The Bible recognizes this difficulty: "No human being can see me and survive"⁶⁹.

The bewilderment in front of the divinity becomes fascination and joy when man accepts the gift of faith. It is then that he discovers that God is not a competitor who steals his false tranquillity. Zechariah, for example, was deeply upset when seeing the angel⁷⁰, Joseph needs to be reassured⁷¹ and even Mary was "deeply disturbed", because knowing herself to be a humble creature, she could not understand what the angel Gabriel was announcing to her. However, her instinctive reaction in front of the divine greatness is instantly transformed into gratuitous and unconditional hospitality: "You see before you the Lord's servant, let it happen to me as you have said"⁷².

Mary doesn't need to calculate meticulously the consequences of her decision. She follows God because she trusts and loves him. Her obedience is not blind, but an expression of freedom. Here is present the etymological sense of obeying (*ob-audire, oboedire*) as "to hear, to listen". Any answer of faith starts with listening (*fides ex auditu*)⁷³. It is not a question of blindly following orders, but of welcoming the other, making space for him, respecting his personal mystery, being questioned by him. Freedom and obedience always go together and both should be an expression of faith. "Listen, Israel", Yahweh repeats to his people, while he patiently waits for their loving answer⁷⁴.

. Cf. E. FROMM, *Escape from Freedom*, New York 1994.

⁶⁹ Ex 33:20. Both our sense of sight and images can help us to perceive the transcendence (icons), but they can also "domesticate it" for our own benefit (idols), and so block the encounter with the transcendent God. This ambiguity has caused the rejection of any image of the divinity in the Old Testament. Yahweh does not let people see his face. Cf. J. ELLUL, *La parole humiliée*, Paris 1981, 77-78.

⁷⁰ Lk 1:12.

⁷¹ Mt 1:20.

⁷² Lk 1:38.

⁷³ "The obedience of faith is to be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which man commits his whole self freely to God, offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals". DV 5.

⁷⁴ "Listen, Israel: Yahweh our God is the one, the only Yahweh. You must love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength". Dt 6:4-5.

Mary wants to get deeper into the sense of the Word. She is not moved at all by a utilitarian intention, "listening in order to proclaim", but rather she allows the Word to become flesh of her flesh while she meditates with "profound wisdom"⁷⁵. She listens to God and responds freely and lovingly. Her hospitality and donation make her a symbol of the Church⁷⁶ and a model of the new man in Christ, the one who assumes and develops his radical identity as "listener of the Word". In fact, "more blessed still are those who hear the word of God and keep it."⁷⁷ Together with Mary, we are invited to welcome within us the Word that called us into existence and who re-established our dialogue with God when we had let sin isolate us.

2.5. The joy of unconditional hospitality

Having assumed the logic of gratuitousness, Mary exults: "My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour; because he has looked upon the humiliation of his servant"⁷⁸. She recognizes that all her being is a gift from God, who graciously has given her such a dignity that all generations will call her blessed. By virtue of Christ's redemption, she has been preserved from all stain and had been made able to say "yes" to God. Having received everything as a gift, she also donates herself with generosity and so she "runs" to help her cousin. Elizabeth welcomes her with enormous joy, while she feels her son leaping for joy in her womb. Elizabeth recognizes that Mary's faith is the reason of so great a happiness. Mary has hosted the Omnipotent, has believed in his promises. Mary has not been moved by utilitarian reasons, thinking about the benefits that she could possibly obtain; instead, she has simply, and unconditionally, loved and trusted God.

Mary is "an image of God's tenderness", always "attentive to the needs of others, loving in her response to them and rich in compassion"⁷⁹. Following her example, our relationships should likewise be based on mutual trust and gratuitousness. Others are worthy not because they are useful, but because God has loved them. Our prayer should also become a gratuitous way of being with God, instead of reflecting on the benefits we can possibly get through prayer. To pray with Mary means above all hospitality, adoration, listening, dialogue, praise. The help we can get doesn't depend on mechanisms we can control,

. MarC 57. "Mary is the attentive Virgin, **who** receives the **word of God** with faith". MarC 17; Cf. RM 20. "By accepting and pondering in her heart events which she did not always understand, she became the model of all those who hear the word of God and keep it, and merited the title of «Seat of Wisdom»". VS 120. Mary is "a sure haven for all who devote their lives to the search for wisdom". FR 108.

⁷⁶ Like Mary, **the Church** "with faith listens, accepts, proclaims and venerates the word of God, distributes it to the faithful as the bread of life and in the light of that word examines the signs of the times and interprets and lives the events of history". MarC 17; Cf. DV 23. "Maria realizza come donna [...] i tratti della *reciprocità e dell'anticipazione* [...]. Solo una donna è capace di essere insieme così profondamente recettiva dell'altro e così profondamente oblativa di se, accoglienza e dono al tempo stesso [...] perciò solo la donna può dare un volto veramente mariano alla Chiesa e simboleggiare la Chiesa sposa". B. FORTE, *Maria, la donna icona del mistero. Saggio di mariologia simbolico-narrativa*, Cinisello Balsamo 1989, 255.

⁷⁷ Lk 11:28.

⁷⁸ Lk 1:46-47.

⁷⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Addres to nursing sisters*, 1-X-1998, n. 6, in *Ecclesia* 2915 (1998) 23.

but will always be a free gift from God . Those who live, pray and act in the interest of their own needs will never be able to calm their thirst; conversely, those who donate themselves gratuitously will find the joy and peace that only God can offer.

The intimate and unique relationship that Mary had with her son is also manifested in the spiritual maternity that she establishes with every one of us beside the cross. In the person of the beloved disciple, Jesus gives to us the supreme gift of his mother: "This is your mother"⁸¹. Those words are addressed personally to each human being at any moment of history.

With Mary, each single human being, together with all of humanity, feels again at home with the Father. The Blessed Virgin is "a mirror of the expectations of the men and women of our time"⁸². Her *fiat* is the answer that God always expects. Today Mary keeps encouraging us to respond positively to the Father through Christ: "Do whatever he tells you". In this way Mary continues taking us to Jesus and creating family relationships among us. In this family of God's children, everyone is invited to unconditional hospitality and absolute gratuitousness. Pardon takes the place of revenge; donation replaces self-interest and selfish calculation; justice becomes fidelity to love.

Mary's hospitality is extended today in the gratuitous and disinterested hospitality that the Church offers to all people. "In the most holy Virgin the Church has already reached that perfection"⁸³. Mary is the face of the Church, which today announces and offers God's hospitality to all humanity.

Everything about Mary — privileges, mission, destiny — is also intrinsically referable to the mystery of the Church. In the measure in which the mystery of the Church is understood the more distinctly does the mystery of Mary become apparent. Contemplating Mary, the Church recognizes its origins, its intimate nature, its mission of grace, its destiny to glory, and the pilgrimage of faith which it must follow⁸⁴.

Conclusion

Our capitalist society tries to transform religion into another commercial product, fully ready for mass consumption. Numerous "sacred" goods are merchandised to easily meet everybody's needs. The real scope is a self-centred well-being, completely untied to any social commitment and with no link to a personal and demanding god. The subject is invited egoistically to pursue his own spiritual comfort, trying to obtain everything, immediately and effortlessly. This type of false religiosity is a narcotizing product that foments selfishness and narcissism instead of promoting liberty, hospitality and communion.

. "All the salvific influence of the Blessed Virgin on men originates, not from some inner necessity, but from the divine pleasure. It flows forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rests on His mediation, depends entirely on it and draws all its power from it". LG 60.

⁸¹ Jn 19:27.

⁸² MarC 37.

⁸³ LG 65; Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Constitution *Sacrosanctum concilium*, 4-XII-1964, n. 103, in AAS 56 (1964) 97-138.

⁸⁴ IFS 27, in OR (2-VI-1988) 20; Cf. RM 2.

Marian devotion has to avoid that self-centred privatization. Mary's historical figure, inserted in the mystery of Christ and in the mystery of the Church, is the paradigm of a free and liberating humanity that welcomes diversity. Together with Mary we can meet the Word that becomes flesh in every human being, and in so doing, we can joyfully discover that diversity makes real communion possible. Mary holds us as her children in Christ, he who is her Son and our Brother. With Mary, we experience God's maternal love, who wants the whole of humanity to become one in his Son, with no discrimination.

Mary freely and joyfully welcomes a life that transcends her, lets him become flesh of her flesh, allows him to grow freely, and finally donates him to the world. She does not try to overprotect him or to have him only for herself. With an absolute and unconditional hospitality, Mary welcomes and respects her Son, meditates on his words and lets him be himself, in total freedom. Under her intercession, we are also called to become listeners of the Word, to make him flesh of our flesh and to let him transform us in his likeness.

God "chose us in Christ before the world was made to be holy and faultless before him in love." (Eph 1: 4-5) We have been made free to be able to offer unconditional hospitality to Christ and to all people. Welcoming diversity, we are called to build together Christ's mystical body until he takes us back to our Father's house, where we will live forever under the loving care of our heavenly mother.