

(English translation)

16 February 1987

## Mary in the Experience of the Focolare Movement

... Mary was a gate that leads to God. A gate is not a gate unless it opens and allows free passage. A door that is always closed is really a wall. Those who stop at the gate do not reach God. The gate is for Jesus.

“Hail, O Gate of the Sublime Mystery,” sounds the Akathistos hymn.<sup>1</sup>

The Virgin is the one who is empty of self, utterly self-forgetful. She is the created being who knows that she is created, even when filled with God.

She was using the same method for our Movement that she had used for the Church: keeping herself in the shadows in order to highlight her Son, who is God.

### Magnificent Light

Precisely because Jesus was in our midst, we began to understand something about Mary that we previously had not been aware of. He began to show her to us from his point of view. As a result, in a manner of speaking, Mary had her “official” debut in our Movement. Jesus unveiled her as great, with greatness in proportion to how much she had managed to disappear.

When this happened in 1949, the year was filled with special graces. It was an enlightened period in our history.

### Word of God

We then understood that, like a precious stone, Mary is a rare and unique person set within the Holy Trinity. She is totally made up of the Word of God; it enfolds her entirely (see Lk 2:19, 51). And if the Word is the splendour of the Father, then Mary, completely shaped by the Word, is incomparably beautiful.

We were so deeply moved by these realizations that even now we cannot forget them. It still seems to us, as it did at the time, that only angels could stammer something about her.

The Magnificat (Lk 1:46–55) also displays how Mary is completely the Word of God. The originality of this prayer lies in the fact that it is a collection of sentences quoted from the scriptures. This makes us understand that the scriptures had nourished Mary so much that she was in the habit of quoting them to express herself.

R. Laurentin writes: “In the Magnificat, each part of every sentence echoes a passage from the Bible. . . . Mary is so permeated with the Word of God that she is its echo. We should not, therefore, be surprised when God answers her in the same way. At the Annunciation, the divine messenger speaks in the language of the scriptures to the Virgin, who had been continually nourished by them.”<sup>2</sup>

“The ark held the Law,” writes Saint Maximus of Turin, “and Mary carried the gospel. . . . While the ark emitted the voice of God, Mary carried the Word inside, the Word made flesh.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Inno Acatisto,” in *Lodi alla Madonna* (Rome, 1980), p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> R. Laurentin, *La Vergine Maria* (Rome, 1984), p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> Maximus of Turin, “Sermo XLII” in *Patrologia Latina* 57, pp. 738–40.

Although she was uniquely perfect, Mary's particular characteristic was the vocation of every Christian: to repeat Christ, the truth, the Word, each according to the personality given by God.

We Christians, as indeed all the rest of humanity, are all as equal as the leaves of a tree, yet each of us is completely different. Each one, in fact, sums up in himself or herself the whole of creation. Therefore since each one of us is "a creation" in ourselves, we are equal to others and, at the same time, different from them.

Seeing Mary as essentially God's word seems to us to be charged with meaning, especially for dialogue. If Mary may be a stumbling block to full unity with our sisters and brothers of evangelical churches, what

will happen when they, who underline the value of scripture so powerfully, discover she is the personification of those very scriptures?

### **Mother of God**

The figure of Mary has attracted us ever since our souls began to contemplate her. A new love for her began. She responded to this love evangelically by revealing herself more clearly to our souls in her most exalted form: Mother of God, Theotokos. Just the tiniest intuition of this mystery was enough to render us speechless in adoration and in thanksgiving toward God for having accomplished so much in one of his creations.

Mary was not just that young girl from Nazareth, as we had previously thought, or the most beautiful of God's creations, or even the heart that contains and surpasses the love of all the world's mothers. She was the Mother of God.

She loomed larger in our eyes than ever. We had been totally unaware, and it was as if we were getting to know her for the first time.

In the past, we had seen Mary in relationship to Christ and the saints—to make a comparison—as in the heavens where there is the moon (Mary) in relationship to the sun (Christ) and the stars (the saints). Now, it was no longer so. The Mother of God embraced, like a vast, blue sky, the sun itself, God himself.

Mary, in fact, is the Mother of God because she is the mother of the humanity of the one person of the Word, who is God and who wished to become man. The Word, however, can never be thought separate from the Father or the Holy Spirit. Jesus himself, the son of Mary, tells Philip when the apostle asks him to show them the Father: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. . . . I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (Jn 14:9–11).

We had contemplated Mary as being set within the Trinity, but now, because of her Son, in her own particular way, we saw her as containing the Trinity.

Maximus the Confessor, a Father of the Church, writes: "Indeed, through his incarnation, the Word of God demonstrates theology by the very fact that he displays in himself the Father and the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> The Father in his entirety and the Holy Spirit in his entirety were essentially and perfectly within the Son in his entirety, even when he became incarnate, and even though they did not themselves become incarnate."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> In this instance, "theology" refers to the intimate life of the Trinity as it is manifested in the economy of salvation, that is, in how the divine Persons relate to human beings.

<sup>5</sup> Maximus the Confessor, "Oratio dominica," in *Patrologia Graeca* 90, p. 876.

Full of adoration, we admired God who, in limitless love for this privileged created being, in a sense made himself “little” before her.<sup>6</sup> According to Paul, Jesus, who is God, “emptied himself” (Phil 2:7). And all this began in Mary’s womb.

When we began to comprehend Mary’s greatness, our souls wanted to shout out, “Only now do we know Mary!”

Contemplating Mary as the Mother of God and the fact that God gave her the ability, in a way, to contain the Trinity, Louis de Montfort wrote: “In that same paradise, Mary is the paradise of God, and into her ineffable world the Son of God came to work miracles, to guard it and find there his own delight.

God made our world for ‘man the traveller’; he made another, paradise, for ‘man the blessed’; but he made another for himself and gave it the name Mary.”<sup>7</sup>

Peter Chrysologus adds: “Only Mary contains him whom the world can never contain. Only Mary carries in her arms the One who carries the world. And only Mary generated her creator and nourished the One who nourishes the living.”<sup>8</sup>

If Mary is the Word of God lived out, she heads the entire array of Christ’s disciples and is the first disciple. And she is in no way an “obstacle” to our relationship with Christ.

If Mary personifies the Word of God, the Christian is right in venerating her and following her as a leader after Christ. For this reason she is the subject of song and of painting, poetry pays her homage, monuments are erected to her, and processions honour her on feast days dedicated to her.

Moreover, if Mary is the Mother of God, she is very different from any other Christian. So much so that God adorned her with such beauty that he delighted in her and exalted her, as the angel’s words proclaim: “Hail, favoured one! The Lord is with you” (Lk 1:28). A special place at God’s side awaits her.

It is easy to understand, therefore, why images of Mary appear in Catholic and Orthodox churches. Every expression of honour and affection toward her becomes meaningful.

## Our Model

A further understanding we had of Mary during the period of light which took place in the summer of 1949 was of Mary’s “exemplary” nature, of how she is our “prototype,” as Pope Paul VI later defined her.<sup>9</sup> Mary is our model. She is that which we “should be”; while we saw that each one of us was that which “could be” Mary.

That summer, the Lord had chosen a number of women Focolarine, two or three men Focolarini, and a married Focolarino to receive special gifts of light. One day, when we were already fused into a single soul by the love of God, which enfolded us in a special way, we felt a powerful impulse to consecrate ourselves to Mary. We asked Jesus in the Eucharist, to give us to his mother as only he knew how.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> In his *Hymn to the Nativity*, Saint Ephraem the Syrian writes, “He who was equal to his Father from all eternity became a child in Mary’s womb; he gave us his greatness and took on our smallness” (*Corpus Scriptorum Cristianorum Orientalium* 187, p. 180).

<sup>7</sup> Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort, *Il segreto di Maria* (Rome: Centro Mariano Monfortano, 1972), p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Chrysologus, “Sermo 143,” in *Patrologia Latina* 52, p. 583.

<sup>9</sup> See also Paul VI, “Omelia nella festività dell’Assunta,” 15 August 1966, in *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI* 4 (1966) (Vatican City: Poliglotta Vaticana, 1967), p. 1065; *Lumen Gentium* 63–65 (in *Enchiridion Vaticanum* 1:439–41).

<sup>10</sup> “The consecration described here,” explains the theologian Marisa Cerini, “reflects the original consecrations to God that can be found in the Bible, whether they were collective (such as that of the chosen people) or personal. God always initiated them: it was God who called people to dedicate themselves to him and who ‘consecrated’ those who responded to his invitation; it was he who made them sacred or holy as he is holy, giving his own sanctity. In a similar fashion, the group’s consecration to Mary, entrusted to Jesus in the Eucharist so he might bring it about, is God’s work. The result is that they are clothed in Mary’s purity.” *Ed.*

What happened was something extraordinary. This was more than merely an act of devotion, without any real content. Something truly took place. In that consecration, it seemed to us that Mary clothed us in her “immaculateness.”

And we realized that the prayer to Mary composed later by Paul VI, “teach us . . . to be as immaculate as you are”<sup>11</sup> — could come true for us.

We dared to hope that what Louis de Montfort had written about certain people who dedicate themselves to Mary could happen to us as a group. “The main result is that Mary comes to live in the soul, to the point that it is no longer just the soul that lives but Mary who lives in it. She becomes, in a manner of speaking, the very soul of that soul.”<sup>12</sup>

God’s plan for our group, and consequently for the newborn community, was in a sense, we realized, to relive Mary.

We also saw each of us as a tiny Mary, similar to her, as a daughter who has *solely* the features of her mother. I remember it was then that I looked upon our mother, Mary, for the first time with the gaze of a daughter. But now it was as a daughter who saw her real self in her mother. And intuitively I began to grasp what may have gone through Mary’s heart as she saw herself in us.

This thought moved me for quite a while.

We realized for the first time, in an unforgettable way, that Mary was our mother. The words of the young Thérèse of Lisieux came true for us. “I understood . . . that I was her daughter, and so I could only call her ‘mother.’”<sup>13</sup>

Indeed there and then the conviction was so strong that our natural mothers seemed distant, and they became almost like any other woman in the world. Mary had taken her rightful place. She was, as John the Geometer writes, “mother of each and every one of us and more mother than our own mothers.”<sup>14</sup>

Regarding Mary as our true mother, Louis de Montfort writes: “Just as in natural childbearing . . . there is a father and a mother, in the spiritual realm . . . there is a father who is God and a mother who is Mary. All true children of God . . . have God as father and Mary as mother and those who do not have Mary as mother do not have God as father.”<sup>15</sup>

The theologian J. H. Nicolas seems to have some affinity with our experience, since his writings contain similar elements: “What Mary’s action would bring is a kind of perfection to nature and creation, which is made capable of overcoming hesitation and of opening up to its Creator and Saviour, of returning to something of its *first innocence*, a tranquillity, and even heals the ‘reflexes’ of pride and rebellion. Everything that she received through pure grace, Mary obtains for us and bequeaths on us. Through her, we can be reborn. She is—actively and gently, humanly and divinely — our mother.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Paul VI, “Il patrocinio di Maria sulla Pentecoste perenne,” 25 October 1969, at the Basilica of Saint Mary Major, in *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI 7* (1969) (Vatican City: Poliglotta Vaticana, 1970), p. 687. With regard to sharing Mary’s purity, Maximilian Kolbe writes: “Let’s completely devote ourselves to her, with no limitations, in order to be her servants, her children, her things, and her property in such an unconditional way that we will be mystically transformed into her living, speaking, and working in this world. She is the Immaculate Conception, and she remains so in us and transforms us into herself by making us immaculate” (*Gli scritti di Massimiliano Kolbe: eroe di Oswiecim e beato della Chiesa 1* [Florence, 1975], p. 896).

<sup>12</sup> Louis Grignon de Montfort, “Il segreto di Maria,” no. 55, in *Trattato della vera devozione alla santa Vergine e il segreto di Maria* (Rome, 1985), p. 205.

<sup>13</sup> See also Thérèse of Lisieux, “Ms A, 56v-57r,” in *Opere complete* (Rome, 1997), p. 166.

<sup>14</sup> Giovanni il Geometra, “Discorso sull’Assunzione,” no. 66, in A. Wenger, *L’Assomption de la T. S. Vierge dans la Tradition Byzantine du V° au X° siècle* (Paris, 1955), pp. 410–12.

<sup>15</sup> Louis Grignon de Montfort, *Trattato della vera devozione a Maria* (Rome, 2000), p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> J. H. Nicolas, *Theotókos: Le mystère de Marie* (Paris: Desclée, 1965), p. 183.

Since we understood that together we were truly called to be like Mary, we also gradually realized that we had to live God's Word. We had to be God's Word and nothing else. In particular we had to live Jesus forsaken, who is the Word fully revealed.<sup>17</sup>

We had to safeguard God's Word within. By becoming holy through the Word, each of us generated Jesus in ourselves for ourselves and for those around us. Like this it would have been possible to say that, in a way, the words "blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus" applied to us.

"If someone, through their word," writes Gregory the Great, "inspires love for the Lord to be born in the soul of a neighbour, they practically generate the Lord . . . and become the Lord's mother."<sup>18</sup>

In our consecration to Mary, it seemed to us that Jesus repeated what he had done with John the Apostle and Mary—he gave us to her to be her children. "Woman, behold, your son" (Jn 19:26). He also helped us do what every Christian should: imitate John at the foot of the cross when Jesus invited him to take Mary to be with him. "Behold, your mother" (Jn 19:27).

According to Vatican II, Christians should be forged by the Holy Spirit and Mary. "The text [*Lumen Gentium* 65] suggests that whenever Christ is born in the hearts of the faithful, he is still 'conceived by the Holy Spirit and born from the Virgin.'<sup>19</sup>

Christians are thus formed by the Holy Spirit and Mary. The goal, of course, is not to remain in Mary but to become another Jesus.

We understood this clearly in 1949. The day after our consecration to Mary, the Lord helped us realize during meditation that Christ was coming to dwell in us, fused into one, and in each of us individually. "In a way," Paul VI says of a Christian who lives God's Word, "the miracle of God's incarnation occurs inside us, just as it did for the Madonna."<sup>20</sup>

These were the first clarifications that the Holy Spirit made to us about Mary.

Now, many years later, we can see how these were forerunners of those graces and illuminations from

God that moulded and built our Movement, which spontaneously took Mary's name.

At the time, the young Work of Mary was present in those few who had been privileged to take part in

these spiritual intuitions. As it grew, in order to be united with others, those graces were shared as much

as possible.

### Further Illuminations

Then more light came.

Once, for example, we seemed to understand, by a special intuition, the meaning of Mary's title, Mother

of Beautiful Love. We spontaneously wanted to repeat, "Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved, ah, you are beautiful" (Song 1:15).

Mary is mother of a love that is beautiful.

<sup>17</sup> Jesus is the Word of the Father, the revelation that God is Love. In the abandonment that he experiences on the cross (see Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34), he reaches the depths of humanity's sin and distance from God. By doing this, he proves just how far God's love extends. *Ed.*

<sup>18</sup> Gregory the Great, quoted by Saint Bede the Venerable in *Commento al Vangelo di Marco*, vol. 1 (Rome, 1970), pp. 116–17; see also *Lumen Gentium* 65.

<sup>19</sup> J. Galot, "Maria, tipo e modello della Chiesa," in G. Barauna, ed., *La Chiesa del Vaticano II* (Florence, 1965), p. 1169.

<sup>20</sup> From a speech by Paul VI on August 15, 1970.

She taught us who were united with her to grasp the “beautiful love” of God that exists beneath all creation. Everything seemed linked by this love. For example, we saw, looking outside of ourselves, that nature was animated by a spiritual sun as well as a natural one. We saw everything living out of love: a river flows to the sea out of love, water evaporates out of love, and rain falls out of love.

We saw how everything on earth is in a relationship of love with everything else: each with every other thing. This was a golden thread that connected all that is.

I felt I had been created to be a gift for those around me, and that God had created those around me as gifts for me. As in the Trinity, where the Father is completely given to the Son, and the Son is completely given to the Father, each person is completely given to the others.

We saw in Mary the whole creation purified and redeemed, and we understood how all creation returns to God through Mary.

She is the Mother of Beautiful Love.

And it seemed to us that she shared some of her maternity of love with us.

Today the Work of Mary is very developed.<sup>21</sup> We know how enriching its spiritual maternity has been for many, so it is obvious why in those first years the Madonna introduced us to our specific kind of outreach: a spiritual maternity embracing the widest variety of people in the Church and humanity in general.

One day, I remember, as we looked to Mary, we seemed to recognize how much she loved the Father.

She had been taught by the Son to love the Father, and as a result the Father loved her even more. She seemed to be the fulfilment of Jesus’ words to the Father, “you loved them even as you loved me” (Jn 17:23). The Father loved her *just as* he loved his own son.

We saw her as the *daughter* par excellence, “the beloved daughter of the Father,”<sup>22</sup> as Vatican II referred to her.

She is God’s daughter as, though in an utterly different way, Jesus is God’s Son. For Jesus was the Son begotten through the Father’s love, his “beloved Son” (Col 1:13), as Paul calls him. In a similar way, we spontaneously began to call her, who was God’s daughter, the “woman of love.” Truly, she was extraordinarily beautiful!

We can still remember appreciating Mary’s beauty and, since we did not know anyone who equalled her,

we asked her to form a family here on earth, made up of children who would be *wholly her* and share her

same spiritual features.

Now we feel that Mary herself suggested that prayer to us. Although we are absolutely unworthy, she intended to take us and weave together what would eventually be the Work of Mary.

(published in *Mary Transparency of God*)

<sup>21</sup> On 10 July 1968, in a public audience at Saint Peter’s Basilica, Paul VI defined the Focolare Movement as “a tree that is already very fertile and very rich.” See Paul VI, *Al Movimento dei Focolari* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1979). *Ed.*

<sup>22</sup> Lumen Gentium 53.