

(English translation)

Basilica of Saint Mary Major
Rome, November 30, 1987

The Spiritual Influence of Mary on People Today

My task in this moment is to speak of the experience of the Focolare Movement, which I represent, with regard to Mary and her spiritual influence in today's society.

What is the Focolare Movement? It is a vast Movement of the Church which offers to today's person a modern spirituality, a way of living Christianity in this epoch by facing present-day problems and by being open to the new horizons of the Second Vatican Council.

The Focolare Movement has another name as well. It is called the Work of Mary because the members of this Movement are convinced that Mary is at work here, teaching many people how to be Christians today. Its Marian spirituality is clear and decisive. I will seek to illustrate some of its main points.

First of all, Mary, through the Focolare Movement, invites people of our times to make a great choice. She points out to them the goal they should live for, the ideal which should animate them, the One who should have the first place in their hearts.

Today, as always, people give a meaning to their lives; their actions are motivated by a goal to be reached. In the western world, for instance, the ideal which has taken hold of the crowds is the total independence of one's individual personality. We could say that there is an effort on the part of humanity toward autonomy and adulthood. There is a searching for being, but this search in practice is focused more on having than on being. Concretely speaking, this way of seeing things is translated by men and women today above all in terms of demanding well-being and freedom in all fields.

Although there are positive aspects to these tensions, like the defense of human rights, of freedom, of a minimum of well-being, of peace and security, we cannot deny that such a vision of things can be quite negative and dangerous.

As a matter of fact, in order to fulfill these dreams, people nowadays seek to overcome barriers and prejudices, but they also neglect values of the past which cannot be renounced. They put in second place and often neglect the transcendental dimension of life and traditional ethical rules. All of these tendencies which cannot be approved have an influence, in one way or another, also on people who believe, especially on young people.

Thus Mary who knows that that reality is not limited to this world, speaks to the heart of people today inviting them to not make of self-assertion, of autonomy and wellbeing (all ideals destined to pass away) the goal for which they live. She invites them to put God in the first place in their souls as she did.

Mary lived of God, of faith in God. God was everything for her. On the other hand, God alone gives full meaning to our life on earth. He alone gives meaning to the next life, which exists and which will never end, even though many people in the modern world do not take this into account. Yes, people today must make this great conversion of no longer putting themselves at the center of their interests, but God.

How does Mary present God to people today? She presents Him in His true reality. She presents Him as Love. The true God, the God of Christians is Love. Mary knows that by presenting God in His true essence, people will soon realize that they are not alone in managing their lives. There is Someone with them who loves them, who thinks about them, who is more a Father to them than their earthly fathers.

They will understand that if such a Father was capable one day of sending His Son on earth to die for them in order to save them from the snares of sin, they can be confident that He will intervene in all their other needs. Jesus affirmed this when He said, "Do not worry about these things, do not say, 'What

are we to eat? How are we to be clothed?' (...) Your heavenly Father knows you need them all" (Mt 6:31).

Thus to believe in God Love, to live our lives in this faith. We should be able to repeat what Saint John the Evangelist wrote, "And we have believed in love" (cf. 1 John 4:16).

But we must not limit ourselves to believing that God loves us. Mary teaches us that we must respond to this love with our love. We must love God in return.

There is a sentence in the Gospel which clearly tells us how to love God. It says, "It is not those who say to me, 'Lord, Lord,' who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Mt 7:21).

We might think at times that loving God is a question of words or sentiments. No. Loving God means doing His will. Thus we should not do our own will but God's will. This means that we should not plan out our lives which in any case would be something limited and unsatisfying because thought out solely with our limited minds. Rather, we should abandon ourselves to God and accomplish the plan that He in his Love has for each one of us.

The plan of many people today consists in being financially well-off and of having a good social position. Work is viewed as a means for acquiring more instruments of wellbeing. Free time is geared toward the searching of experiences, of acquaintances, of pleasures. Much time is given to traveling, tourism, amusements and shows. Moreover, this tendency toward wellbeing leads to having fewer children, to gradually having a second house, a second car, the most advanced telecommunication media and so on.

It is clearly a plan which is exclusively earthly, which totally lacks any Christian dimension, which gives little happiness here on earth and does not prepare us for eternal life.

Above all, it is a plan which does not know what human beings can experience even in this life if they live as sons and daughters of God.

To plan on accomplishing God's will in this life rather than our own, means to prepare ourselves for making life a wonderful, divine adventure. Those who have done this, as Mary and the saints, know what extraordinary surprises are in store.

In fact, by doing God's will, the Lord responds to our love with His love. If we generously give what we have to our brothers and sisters, He abundantly fills us with goods. If we seek His kingdom, He gives us more than what is necessary. If we put Him in the first place in our hearts, placing him before our relatives and every good, He fills us a hundred times over. And with the hundredfold, He also gives us eternal life.

Thus Mary teaches us to do God's will. This is expressed each and every time by different voices. Sometimes it is the voice of our conscience; other times, the duties of our state of life; still other times it is the voice of the commandments of God or of the precepts of the Church. God's will is also expressed by different events.

There is, however, one will of God which is expressed in a command of Jesus which Mary particularly emphasizes. It is the commandment concerning love of neighbor and it is very important because at the end of our lives we will be examined on this. Jesus will say to us, "I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me" (Mt 25:35-36).

We must live out this love of neighbor with all the people we are in contact with during the day knowing that Jesus considers done to Him what we do to them. These persons might be our relatives whom we clothe, feed, console and advise.... They might be the people we work with; it might be society which we must love by serving in offices, in schools, in Parliament

We must love everyone, excluding no one. In fact, we must love our enemies too. This is

Christianity.

But Christian love does not go in one direction alone. It is not directed only towards the others. This love should also return to us. The pearl of Jesus' Gospel is mutual love, reciprocal charity, especially among Christians.

"Love one another as I have loved you" (cf. John 15:12). Mary, all taken up as she was with her Jesus, reminds us that this commandment is particularly important to Him because He calls it His and says that it is new. It is the synthesis of the Gospel and the very heart of Jesus' teaching.

When Jesus came on earth, He did not come from nowhere as each one of us. No, Jesus came from Heaven. He was like an emigrant who came from a distant country. Undoubtedly, an emigrant adapts himself to his new environment, but he also brings his own ways and customs and often he continues to speak his own language. Likewise, Jesus undoubtedly adapted Himself here on earth to the life of all persons, but He brought with Him because He was God – the life style of the Trinity which is love, mutual love.

This is what He wants from us. This is what Mary wants too. Jesus made her our Mother when from the cross He entrusted her to John. This is explained very well in the recent encyclical dedicated to Mary. And like every good Mother, she wants to see us, her sons and daughters, loving one another, loving one another as Jesus loved us, who even died for us.

The early Christians had understood Jesus teaching on mutual love. They had centered it as the focal point of the good news and they put it into practice with much zeal. As a matter of fact, the pagans who observed them said, "Look ... look at how they love one another ... how they are ready to die for one another."¹

Let us try then to live this mutual love, especially among Christians. Let us make the effort to place this reciprocal charity at the basis of our entire lives, as Scripture wants. Does Jesus not admonish us that even if we are about to make our offering at the altar, if we know that our brother has something against us, we should not make our offering but go first to be reconciled with our brother? This is how important brotherly love is to Him. We could say that it is everything in Christianity.

If we love one another, all our actions will acquire value, however small or humble they might be. Mutual love will be the fount of ever new joy in our lives. It will be the source of light and peace because charity attracts the fruits of the Spirit.

Furthermore, by loving one another as Jesus has loved us, a supernatural phenomenon will take place in our lives. Jesus will be spiritually present among us because He said, "Where two or three are united in my name (as He wants and therefore in mutual love), I am in their midst" (Mt 18:20).

Mary loves this presence of Jesus among her children very much. She who gave Jesus physically to the world, wants nothing more than to see Him spiritually alive among Christians in today's world. Thus we must commit ourselves to living mutual charity with all our heart.

Moreover, if we love one another, we will be able to spread Christianity extensively and effectively in the midst of the secularized society around us. Seeing our mutual love, men and women also in the modern world, will believe because it is written, "May they be one (in love) so that the world may believe" (John 17:21). This is what the early Christians experienced.

And such was the divine force that emanated from this manner of living Christianity that before long they had spread to practically all parts of the world known at that time. As Tertullian affirmed, "We were born yesterday, and yet we have already invaded the entire world..."²

¹ Tertullian, *Apologetico*, Latin text. Translation and notes by Anna Resta Barrile, Zanichelli, Bologna, 1980, chapter 39,7, p. 145.

² Tertulliano, *op.cit.*, chapter 37,4, p. 139.

To choose God Love as the ideal of our life; to do His will in order to respond to His love with our love; above all, to love our neighbor and to love one another – these are the initial teachings that Mary gives through the Focolare Movement.

But this is not enough. Mary also gives the modern person a new explanation of suffering. She fully faces this problem which is present in every epoch, in every person. Suffering is a question which often goes unanswered. What significance does suffering have for Mary? What is the best way to face it?

In our contemporary society – with the exception of a minority of people who believe and practice their faith; in particular, of an élite group of people who seriously seek to live as Christians – suffering is viewed with fear. It is not understood and so people tend to not think about it. In addition, different forms of entertainment, television, and advertising tend to present images of wellbeing and security. Above all, people would like to exorcise death as if it did not exist, carefully turning their attention to all they can have in this life. All that makes people suffer is considered only as misfortune.

Contrarily, the mystery of suffering has another significance. The person who explained it to us with His words and with His own life was Jesus. He suffered and died. Certainly everything was caused by evil, by the men who condemned, scourged and crucified Him. But He always saw another, more profound meaning in His suffering and death. He suffered and died for the salvation of the human race. It was the price He paid in order to reunite human beings to God, since they had been separated from Him by sin, and to reunite them to one another.

From the moment that Jesus was on the cross, our suffering too, all suffering has acquired a meaning similar to His.

People suffer surely because of negative factors like accidents, illnesses and misfortunes.... But God who is Love for each person as He was for Jesus, gives another dimension to each person's suffering. Through suffering people give their contribution to their own salvation and sanctification and also toward the salvation and sanctification of their brothers and sisters.

The saints were familiar with this new way of understanding suffering. In fact, in every suffering that unexpectedly turned up, in every cross, they did not see only the external, material and earthly aspects. Rather, they discerned the hand of God which permitted everything so that with Christ they could work for their own spiritual good and that of others.

Looking at the Crucifix, they grasped the value of suffering. For this reason, they identified themselves with it and found union with God. After spending long periods of time before the crucifix in Saint Damien's Church, Saint Clare of Assisi would return to her companions with a light radiating from her face which revealed her increased unity with the Lord.

Saint Bonaventure passed spiritually through the wounds of Jesus and was inflamed in that furnace of God's love which is His Heart. Saint Catherine of Siena used the words "blood and fire" to teach the need for welcoming suffering in order to "burn" with love of God.

Today, through the Focolare Movement, Our Lady points out to us a particular suffering of Jesus, that supreme suffering at the apex of His passion when He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 15:34).

In that terrible moment, the Son of God had the impression that the Father, who was one with Him, had abandoned Him. And the anguish He experienced in His inmost being was of such depth that it cannot be explained. In His divine heart He experienced that separation from God which human beings had brought upon themselves through sin, with all the consequences.

His soul was immersed in the darkest night, in the most atrocious doubt, in the total absence of peace. He felt all the weight of our sins.... However, despite all this He abandoned Himself once again to the Father with total trust, "Father," He said, "into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

Mary, drawing our attention to Jesus crucified and abandoned, wants to help us to find the strength to overcome every difficulty. If our heart also suffers because of a lack of peace, of serenity, of security, we will remember this suffering of Jesus. If we are aware of spiritual aridity, of darkness, of

confusion within us or if we are gripped by doubt or by the burden of our sins, we will think of Him.

Going deep into our hearts, we will tell Him that we want to do as He did. We want to accept suffering. We will say "yes" to Him. If we do this and if we continue then to live our lives as Christians, we will experience, among other things, something like a miracle. When we embrace suffering, especially spiritual suffering, it is transformed as if by a divine alchemy, into love. If we suffer courageously, our union with God will grow and we will help others to find this union or to strengthen it.

Finally, Mary extends another invitation to people of our times through the Focolare Movement. She orients them toward universal brotherhood, toward the unity of the human family. Even though our planet is afflicted by multiple tensions, in various ways Our Lady presses people on toward unity and she wants this on all levels.

She wants families and the different generations to be united. She asks for unity among races, among nations, among Christians. As much as possible, she desires unity between Christians and the faithful of other religions and, at least on an operative level, with all people who seek the good of the human person. She loves all humanity and she wants universal brotherhood.

Ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters, these are a few of the requests Our Lady has expressed through a Movement of the Church. It would be good for us to strive to put into practice with total commitment at least one of these requests. This would be sufficient to make us aware of something truly new in our life as Christians.

Already millions of persons are following these points indicated by Mary. Besides all the rest, they are very universal. These people are following Our Lady's indications with great spiritual joy and they are experiencing the consequent solutions to many personal, family and social problems. They have been transformed into authentic apostles of a new civilization of love.

Mary made God the ideal of her life. May she find the way to make Him the ideal of our lives as well.

Mary made God's will her own in the incarnation and throughout her entire life. May she help us to fulfill God's will perfectly.

Mary loved her neighbor – as we can see in her visit to Saint Elizabeth and at the wedding feast of Cana. May she imbue our hearts with this charity.

Mary lived mutual love with fullness in the family of Nazareth. May she help us also to put this into practice.

Mary offered every suffering at the foot of the cross. May she fortify our hearts when we are overcome with suffering.

Mary is the mother of all. May she enlarge our hearts to embrace all humanity.

Mary is the leading lay person of the Church. With Mary and with her spirituality, we also, who for the most part are lay persons, will rise to the task the Church asks of us in our times: to work for our sanctification which is the universal vocation of all persons and to contribute toward the renewal and spreading of the Church; to animate with the Christian spirit the realities of the world we are involved in. We want to do all this for the glory of God and of His Mother.

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