

# MARY, CERTAINTY OF OUR HOPE

• Antonio López •

“Mary, God’s most beautiful child, helps man  
to become, as she is, a gratuitous longing for God.  
She intercedes so that man may, as she did,  
become prayer.”

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Forty years ago, in a meditation on Holy Saturday, Joseph Ratzinger wrote poignantly that “there is a fear—the actual fear dwelling in the depth of our solitude—that cannot be overcome by reason but only through the presence of a living person, because this fear does not concern something we can give a name to, but rather the eerie strangeness of our final solitude.”<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, every fear is the flourishing of a suspicion that loneliness may very well be the final word on human existence. But solitude is not merely the physical isolation that finds its ultimate expression in death. One can be alone in a ship packed with people. Final solitude, instead, has to do with a radical absence of relation with the love that is the *logos* of existence. The horror of complete isolation is then “the fear of not being loved,” the fear of “having forfeited all love forever.”<sup>2</sup> Scripture calls hell “loneliness, so deep that love no longer gains

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph Ratzinger and William Congdon, *The Sabbath of History*, trans. Susan S. Cesaritti and John Rock, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: The William G. Congdon Foundation, 2006), 44.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Ratzinger, *The Yes of Jesus Christ. Spiritual Exercises in Faith, Hope, and Love*, trans. Robert Nowell (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991), 69–70. Hereafter YJC.

access.”<sup>3</sup> All kinds of small hopes that in their own way affirm life’s positivity fade away unless there is a living person who can accompany us down and through that realm at whose entrance, as Dante put it, everyone is commanded to “abandon all hope.”<sup>4</sup> In a way that eludes our comprehension, the true shepherd, the icon of the Father’s love (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15), descended to hell that we might not remain ultimately orphans (Jn 14:18). “This is the new hope,” wrote Benedict XVI in his latest encyclical, “that arose over the life of the believers.”<sup>5</sup>

As the moon requires the sun’s light in the dark hours of the night, so man needs the company of people whose lives are transfigured by Christ’s presence if he is himself to receive Christ, and learn to take Christ’s hopeful light as his guide through the shadows of existence. This “need” for others, of course, does not stem from a deficiency in Christ’s salvific deed. Rather, in a mysterious way, Christ incorporates man as part of the consolation he brings in shining forth the Father’s mercy. “Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12:1), as Benedict XVI writes, “who more than Mary,” archetype of the Church, “could be the star of hope for us?” (SS, 49).<sup>6</sup> She, as this guide, brings certainty to man’s hope for life with the One who does not deceive. Following the work of Benedict XVI and other contemporary theologians, this essay offers an elucidation in six parts of Mary’s engagement in and confirmation of man’s hope. First, it shows that Mary, the mother of the Redeemer, helps us to recognize Christ’s presence in faith and to discover how his consoling accompaniment gives rise to hope. Sections two and three show how faith in Christ means following someone who continuously educates man to grow in hope. Sections four and five explain how, as we see in Mary, growth in the faith-filled hope brought by Christ’s Spirit means allowing oneself to be removed from the solitude brought by original sin and, at the same time, to be grafted on to love’s true form: virginity. The last section

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<sup>3</sup>Ratzinger, *Sabbath of History*, 45.

<sup>4</sup>Dante, *Inferno* III, 9.

<sup>5</sup>Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, 6. Hereafter SS.

<sup>6</sup>See also SS, 8: “For us who contemplate these figures [martyrs and those who have made the great act of renunciation that is embracing a life of virginity], their way of acting and living is *de facto* a ‘proof’ that the things to come, the promise of Christ, are not only a reality we await, but a real presence.”

indicates that Mary's virginal motherhood also teaches us that prayer is the language of both hope and love.

### 1. *Encounter with the living God*

In its simplicity, the account of the Annunciation, the tidings brought to Mary, discloses a truth about man that our contemporary ears tend to hear only with difficulty: man's existence *is* dialogue with God—a dialogue initiated and sought by God himself. As Dionysius eloquently put it, God “is, as it were, beguiled by goodness, by love, and by yearning and is enticed away from his transcendent dwelling place and comes to abide within all things, and he does so by virtue of his supernatural and ecstatic capacity to remain, nevertheless, within himself.”<sup>7</sup> Dionysius's description is true of every being, but it is particularly fitting for Mary. God, with a yearning beyond man's comprehension, calls man into being and teaches him through beauty to recognize his presence—to believe in him—and to make room within himself for him—to hope in him—so that man, by being with the triune love, can become like God (2 Pt 1:4). Man's dialogue with God is not a simple conversation, as we may tend to understand the word. It is a constitutive relation, that is, participation in a love that desires the other to be itself by abiding within this love. This dialogue, which can also be called prayer, “is an act of being.”<sup>8</sup>

Mary's recitation of the psalms taught her that the one true God is a person who has a name that can be called upon and is to be honored in and above everything (Dt 6:4–6). His face is to be sought in the midst of every circumstance, because every single event is a different moment of this ongoing dialogue between God and man.<sup>9</sup> No other creature perceived God's greatness and her own nothingness as she did. She knew as no one else did of being “dry, weary

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<sup>7</sup>Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, PG 3, 712B. English translation taken from Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Lubheid and Paul Rorem (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 82.

<sup>8</sup>Joseph Ratzinger, *The Feast of Faith. Approaches to a Theology of the Liturgy*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 27.

<sup>9</sup>Joseph Ratzinger, *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 13–31.

land without water” (Ps 62:1). Eastern iconography often depicts Mary clothed in a dark brown garment precisely to represent that she is the truth of earth: she is the *humus* that is perfectly aware of itself as arid land that burns in longing for the rain that will come one day to render her fruitful. She is indeed the “lowly servant” (Lk 1:48), the open vessel of longing, as the Fathers used to call her. Mary had not forgotten the promises that God repeatedly made to the people of Israel. She had faith in him, that is, she recognized his active and loving presence in the temple and history of her people. She, more radically than Abraham, waited and hoped for the fulfillment of God’s promises, without predetermining their final form.

The tidings that Mary received from the angel made her faith and her hope even more dramatic. The daughter of Zion, personifying all of Israel, hears the news that despite the rejection that God’s predilection encountered from the people of Israel, God wished to fulfill his promises of salvation by coming to dwell in her. To recognize the presence of the Mystery now means her sacrifice of permitting God to receive from her his own human physiognomy, in order that man might encounter the face of the Father and begin to taste his eternal life from within. God does not want to send another king or prophet; he himself wishes to accompany man.<sup>10</sup> Mary’s gratuitous and selfless *fiat* to this divine offer, which could seem like nothing from the outside, is the true “whisper of freedom.”<sup>11</sup> She adheres to the Mystery that wishes to invade man’s existence. Her faith, expressed in her *fiat*, captures man’s greatness: to be that holy soil in which the divine seed can grow when the soil

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<sup>10</sup>In this regard, the memory of the Annunciation sinks its roots through the prophets, kings, judges, and patriarchs to the dialogue that God had with man at the very beginning (Gn 1:26, 3:9), that God himself is. The ontological foundation of man’s dialogue with God is the eternal speech in God. At the same time, the memory of the Annunciation also anticipates in a certain sense that ultimate cry of dereliction with which, in the unifying spirit of love (Hb 9:14), Christ will surrender to the Father’s womb (Mt 26:39; Lk 23:46) while his mother remains standing still at the foot of the Cross. See Adrienne von Speyr, *The World of Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985); Ratzinger, *Feast of Faith*, 24.

<sup>11</sup>Luigi Giussani, *Perché la Chiesa* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2003), 308. The passage cited is not included in the English translation, *Why the Church?* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001).

permits itself to be absorbed by the seed.<sup>12</sup> Mary's faith is thus the apex of both reason and freedom: it is abandonment to the Mystery that is now recognized as present in history. Mary's *fiat* is not simply a "free choice," but rather the ardent and holy desire to affirm and adhere to this presence.<sup>13</sup> Contrary to what is sometimes suggested, her immaculate conception, while allowing her to offer an unconditional Yes to God's most unique gift, did not diminish her humanity, nor did it guarantee an automatic fulfillment of God's design. Rather, her conception without original sin signifies that she "reserves no area of being, life, and will for herself as a private possession." Historical circumstances were for her transparent to God's loving, all-demanding, and ever-greater design. She was thus prepared by God to receive his Logos and, "precisely in [that] total dispossession of self, in giving herself to God, she comes to the true possession of self."<sup>14</sup> Mary's faith then is perfect creaturely justice before the Creator; it is the recognition of a Presence greater than herself. Man's constitutive relation with God, which we have presented in terms of dialogue and prayer, takes on an unprecedented, unforeseeable depth in Mary. The human being, trapped in his own littleness and at a loss for the true words with which he may address God and pronounce his own self, is confronted here with an astounding miracle: the Speaking One wishes to silence himself in Mary's womb so that he can utter his own Logos with words learned from Mary. God's dwelling in the ark of the covenant, the "womb of Israel," becomes "literally real in the womb of the virgin of Nazareth."<sup>15</sup> Mary represents the rebirth of being, the constituting of Christian personality. Foreshadowing Christ's command from the Cross (Jn 19:27) and the Church's very identity, Mary's *fiat* reveals

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<sup>12</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 14–15. Hereafter *MCS*.

<sup>13</sup>Ignace de la Potterie, *Maria nel mistero dell'alleanza*, trans. Fabrizio Tosolini (Genova: Marietti, 1988), 63–64; Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 1.

<sup>14</sup>Joseph Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion. Meditations on the Church's Marian Belief*, trans. John M. McDermott (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 70. Hereafter *DZ*.

<sup>15</sup>Ratzinger, *MCS*, 65. The sadness that permeates the Greek tragedies (e.g., the *Iliad*) may be seen as a prophecy that gladness, much more than a fulfillment of expectations, is the daughter of the unforeseen presence of the beloved who comes offering unending life. It is also in light of the Paschal Mystery that one can adequately interpret Euripides's *Alceste*.

what is at stake in man's dialogue with God: what it is to be a person, that is, "to be a fit habitation for God."<sup>16</sup>

Mary's *fiat* teaches us that faith is the moved recognition of God's presence in history. With a faith that will grow along with her child, Mary knows that a person may entrust himself completely to God without fearing that God will desert him. Thus, we see the truth of man's constitutive relation with God in God's indwelling in Mary and, through her, in man. God's indwelling, however, is not a "spatial" or a "static" reality.<sup>17</sup> Indwelling is a dynamic and nuptial relation in which one seeks solely to rest and to be in and with the other. Furthermore, the Triune God and man are not the only protagonists in this reciprocal indwelling in which the essence of personhood is revealed; it is always-already open to the world. Just as "Christ had only one thought: to give himself away, to share his very substance, in an infinite manner," so his mother, the *theotokos*, "never bore anything in mind except giving the Son to the world."<sup>18</sup> Through her Yes, "the hope of the ages became reality, entering this world and its history" (SS, 50).

## 2. The fruit of faith

Faith, as the certainty of Christ's abiding presence in history, and hence of being's ultimate positivity, projects man into the future and makes him long for the definitive and ever-new dialogue of love with God. It is characteristic of faith that it roots man in the present. Precisely because Christ brings the Father's mercy into history, however, he also becomes the certainty for the future. Hope, in this

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<sup>16</sup>Ratzinger, *MCS*, 66. It is in this understanding of person that one can grasp the depth of the Marian ecclesiology of both Balthasar and Ratzinger, who cogently show in what sense Mary as archetype of the Church—and not merely one member among many—allows us to understand the Church's personal subjectivity. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Who Is the Church?," in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 2: *Spouse of the World*, trans. A. V. Littledale (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 143–94; and id., *Theo-Drama. Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 3: *The Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ* (=TD III), trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 283–360.

<sup>17</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 8.

<sup>18</sup>Adrienne von Speyr, *Handmaid of the Lord*, trans. E. A. Nelson (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 53.

sense, is the most beautiful fruit of faith because it is the certainty that love's ever-surprising presence will remain. "It is a looking-forward in Christ's presence, with Christ who is present, to the perfecting of his Body, to his definitive coming" (SS, 9). This certainty with regard to the future generates, on the one hand, the peace that comes from acknowledging that Christ is present and hence there is nothing to fear (Jn 6:20) and, on the other hand, the longing that, through the Holy Spirit, he might remain and draw everything to himself, that is, into his relation with the Father. Faith, then, begets hope, while making man enter ever more deeply into the heart of reality. That is, faith transforms time and historical existence into a path on which—thanks to the experience of the positivity of being, which is brought by the Spirit of the crucified and risen Lord—one learns to wait and to long for the one who has already come. History, with its difficulties, is a sure path on which the consoling presence of the beloved Son of the Father, through the Holy Spirit, transforms the certainty of a future "with him who is the source of life, who is Life and Love itself" (SS, 27) into the desire for his return, and this desire into a plea that everyone and everything be united with him.

Mary's faith-filled hope teaches us that to believe in Christ is to recognize him, and to entrust oneself to him completely. This entrusting, however, means following someone who never stops walking.<sup>19</sup> John Paul II's *Redemptoris Mater* illustrates with unprecedented clarity not only the centrality of faith for understanding the figure of Mary, but also how she learned to hope through her historical existence. Mary's pilgrimage of faith is not the path of an isolated individual. Her pilgrimage, and within hers that of the Church and of every man, takes place within Christ's movement of exit from and return to the Father, which is the historical expression of the movement of love that constitutes his own begetting (RM, 8.25). Mary, personifying the whole Church, reveals herself as a person who walks toward her destiny, both carrying hope within herself and allowing herself to be transfigured by the one she carries and follows for the sake of the world.<sup>20</sup> "When you hastened with

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<sup>19</sup>Marcello Bordoni, *Gesù di Nazaret. Signore e Cristo*, vol. 3: *Il Cristo annunciato dalla Chiesa* (Rome: Herder-PUL, 1986), 775–92.

<sup>20</sup>Ratzinger, *YJC*, 58; Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 70–99.

holy joy across the mountains of Judea to see your cousin Elizabeth,” says Benedict XVI, “you became the image of the Church to come, which carries the hope of the world in her womb across the mountains of history” (SS, 50). Hope, in this regard, is the movement proper of faith in which one follows the Son of God, that is, allows oneself to be gradually brought into the mind of Christ (Phil 2:5; 1 Cor 2:16) and into his own time, into his very self. In this way, one grows in the certainty “of the hope in the great and boundless love: [hope] in paradise, the kingdom of God, being with God and like God, sharing his nature.”<sup>21</sup>

What does it mean to follow someone who knows that “our journey has no other goal” than eternal happiness (SS, 11) and who gives all of himself so that we may share in God’s eternal blessedness (Jn 15:11)? In living out hope and the desires born from certainty of the future, definitive company of Christ, it is not uncommon to set up one’s own idea of what the fulfillment of those desires might look like, instead of keeping the space open for what Christ himself determines. Because one’s own desires carry so much weight, it is also common to cherish one’s own images of their fulfillment above Christ’s presence (Mk 8:33; Mt 26:14–16). In this way, God is removed from human existence, and without God, as Benedict XVI repeatedly says in his encyclical, quoting St. Paul (Eph 2:12), there is no hope. Real hope, instead, can only enter a life that does not shy away from the dramatic relation with God, i.e., with Mary’s Son, the Only-begotten of the Father. For this reason, to experience true hope one must be willing to relinquish those programs or tendencies that are the most common forms of a rejection of hope: the hedonist vision of existence that considers a life without suffering as the most humane ideal; the spiritualist attitude that opts, in the face of life’s contradictions, for a disincarnate liturgy and a prayer that runs parallel to or “above” the daily affairs of life and so cannot transfigure them; the integralist interpretation of Christianity that dreams of a fulfilled eschatology, that is, of a victory for Christ that rejects the drama of history;<sup>22</sup> the optimism that confuses hope with a progress whose development is entirely in man’s hands (SS, 17–18); and the sloth (*acedia*) that embraces idleness out of a denial that the consistency of life is, as Mary’s life witnesses, a relation with Someone who

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<sup>21</sup>Ratzinger, *YJC*, 68.

<sup>22</sup>Massimo Camisasca, *Riflessioni sulla speranza* (Genova: Marietti, 2006), 9–13.



is always greater than oneself, and who asks to be followed, without pause, to the utmost.<sup>23</sup> To enjoy the final relation with the Triune God is, as Aquinas said, an arduous good to obtain.<sup>24</sup> Hope is not a mechanical result of Christ's consoling presence. The Christian must learn to grow in hope so that he can cast off his fear of the loneliness man embraced when he rejected God's company, and thus be able to welcome God's loving presence freely.

### 3. *Growing in hope*

John Paul II's Mariology helps us to see in what sense Mary learned to hope through her pilgrimage of faith.<sup>25</sup> The late pope rightly indicates that, similarly to Abraham's pilgrimage of faith, Mary continually has to accept to go without hesitation or delay where God tells her (*RM*, 14). In doing what he says and accepting what he does, she learns to value everything in light of her Son's presence. Her pilgrimage of faith, through which she grows in hope, becomes a continuous expropriation of the way she imagined the promise of enduring, indwelling love is to grow (Lk 2:49; Jn 2:4). Furthermore, this availability to follow Christ's path in the midst of the crowds, even to the extent of not being noticed, and to encourage others to do so (Jn 2:5) meant that she herself becomes part of the inscrutability of God's design. Mary learns that to hope also means to be part of God, to allow herself to be brought into God's thoughts (Is 55:8–9). God's reasons are always greater and higher than what man suspects. Not because they are unreasonable, but because they are truer. They have to do with the incomprehensible movement of descent to man in order to change him from within so that he may be brought back into the dialogue of love which God himself is (Jn 1:14; Rom 5:5).<sup>26</sup> To look at Mary is to be helped in

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<sup>23</sup>Ratzinger, *YJC*, 75.

<sup>24</sup>*ST* II-II, q. 17, a. 1.

<sup>25</sup>See also Balthasar, *MCS*, 107–10.

<sup>26</sup>In this regard, it is important to see that Mary's perfect obedience did not exempt her from not-understanding. "And in this non-comprehension," says von Speyr, "she is taught that her Son is God. He is not only great but the Ever-Greater, whom one understands only through non-comprehension" (*Handmaid of the Lord*, 94).

allowing Christ to purify the images in which one tends to encapsulate the hopes that are born from faith in him. This purification of one's sight, more than learning a particular teaching, is coming to see oneself within him who sees us, and hence entering into his life so that one can live his own life in being with and for him.

Since man tends to dwell on what he needs to have in order to be, the purification that goes along with the pilgrimage of faith in which one is ever more certain of the hope of paradise, of life with God, requires permitting oneself to be divested of what God himself has given as a gift. Mary "has to learn to release the Son she has borne."<sup>27</sup> Mary has to repeat the total, simple Yes she gave to God at the Annunciation at every new circumstance during her pilgrimage of faith. She thus accepts that her Son is taken from her and put to death—unlike Abraham's son, whose life was spared on top of Mount Moriah. The Lamb wishes to have the bride's consent to his own hour (Mt 26:39) as part of his own sacrificial offering. Mary has to allow her beloved Son to drink the cup the Father has prepared for him.<sup>28</sup> Mary is called to make her own her Son's will to do the will of the Father (Jn 6:38) and hence not only to tolerate but to love his decision to accept dying on the Cross—no matter how much this love appears here in the form of sacrifice. Releasing her Son, loving her Son within the Father's merciful and mysterious will, Mary learns that the gift of her own motherhood can be hers only when it is given along with her very self to the Father and to the world. This giving back of the gift, of course, is not a function of divine jealousy. It does not undo the gift. It rather shows the true nature of the gift: a relation of love, a reciprocal indwelling in which the more one gives oneself, the more one receives oneself from and with the other and the more one gives again to the beloved. God, at the Incarnation, receives Mary so that he can give himself to the world with her, and Mary, educating and following her Son, is given in turn with the Son in his eucharistic offering of himself so that the Church can come into being. Mary thus teaches us that to give

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<sup>27</sup>Ratzinger, *MCS*, 76.

<sup>28</sup>As Balthasar says, without overturning God's absolute priority in man's salvation, Mary's participation in Christ's salvific deed is made possible and required by Christ's a priori self-emptying. See Balthasar, "The Mass, a Sacrifice of the Church?" in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 3: *Creator Spirit*, trans. Brian McNeil, C.R.V. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 185–243.

oneself is to accept being completely and gradually taken (*fiat*) and given further—according to the modality determined by God. If, rather than the acceptance of being taken (that is, having both oneself and what is most precious in life be taken), the gift of self were one’s own initiative, it would not be a true gift because it would be alien to the gratuitous obedience that is proper to the nature of love. The gift of self would be solitary pride under the guise of sanctity.<sup>29</sup> True hope does not determine how love is to accompany us, how the Father is to fulfill his promises. Even more than at the beginning, when Mary only wanted God to receive her unconditional *fiat* through the angel, now, at the foot of the Cross, “she wishes *to be surrender*.”<sup>30</sup>

Through these different expropriations, God takes everything away from Mary so that she may both “rest” in the infinite triune love alone—whose human form was taken from her, the lowly servant—and be offered to every man as the mother of hope. This is the fulfillment of the solitude she felt when the angel departed from her and, as the only one to know what had taken place, she relied completely on God.<sup>31</sup> Her solitude at the foot of the Cross in the apparent loss of the relation with her Son, himself abandoned by the Father, becomes the most intimate participation in her Son’s life. The death of her Son on the Cross, the rejection of mankind, and her new maternal relation to John the beloved disciple, are, inasmuch as they are a true incomprehension and rejection, the most intimate participation in Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross. Standing “at the foot of the Cross,” wrote John Paul II, “Mary shares through

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<sup>29</sup>Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 202–211.

<sup>30</sup>Von Speyr, *Handmaid of the Lord*, 121.

<sup>31</sup>Wishing to elucidate the novelty of the Christian event and its capacity to constitute man’s personhood, Giussani mentions that perhaps the most astonishing moment of the Annunciation is when the angel leaves Mary after having received her *fiat* (Lk 1:38). She was left alone. She thus found herself in the new situation in which God’s design had proposed and she had freely accepted. At that time she was the only one aware of what had happened and no one, herself included, could foresee how the angel’s prophecy was going to take form in the child growing in her womb (Lk 1:33). She had no empirical evidence she could rely on. Her only signs were the words and promise uttered by the angel. That first solitude, token of the greater solitude at Golgotha, shows that faith, expressed in her *fiat*, resides exactly in the loving recognition of and adhesion to the sign in which God makes himself present within a human reality (Giussani, *Perché la Chiesa*, 308–09).

faith in the shocking mystery of [Christ's] self-emptying. This is perhaps the deepest kenosis of faith in human history" (*RM*, 18). How would we know that the Father's giving away of his Son is the indispensable act of love through which he will make the fulfillment of man's hope possible if Mary—upon whom the Holy Spirit, that same Spirit whom Christ sent from the Cross, had already come—had not stood at the foot of the Cross? "The *Pietà*," says Ratzinger, "completes the picture of the Cross, because Mary is the accepted Cross, the Cross communicating itself in love, the Cross that now allows us to experience in her compassion the compassion of God."<sup>32</sup>

Learning to release her Son means accepting a new motherhood, "a new mission"—one that is different from the human motherhood she renounced when she was made the mother of God (*SS*, 50). Yet this new motherhood is nothing other than a participation in her Son's Eucharist. In giving his mother to the beloved disciple, Christ gives her, says von Speyr, "to those to whom he has given his own life. He takes her mission into his and distributes it together with her. Through this she becomes more than ever the Mother of the Son of God because he, through this, has become more than ever the Son of Man and brother to us all."<sup>33</sup> It is proper to this eucharistic mission to share in the joy of the Resurrection, a joy which is fully hers inasmuch as it is fully given to others. She remains "in the midst of the disciples, as their Mother, as the Mother of hope" (*SS*, 50). Thus the purification of the faith-filled hope transforms human existence into an ecclesial soul, an existence, which, like Christ's, is for-others, i.e., that allows others to dwell within oneself, to be part of the definition of oneself.

Mary's pilgrimage of faith, of her continuous self-entrustment to the one who is present, is a school of hope. With her we discover that learning to hope entails not only learning to recognize that the heart of reality is a merciful Father who, as it were, "turns against himself" in order for us to have everything with his Son (*Rom* 8:32).<sup>34</sup> Through his Spirit, the incarnate Son purifies man's desires, imagination, and instinctive way of possessing what is given.

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<sup>32</sup>Ratzinger, *MCS*, 78–79.

<sup>33</sup>Von Speyr, *Handmaid of the Lord*, 122.

<sup>34</sup>Benedict XVI, *DCE*, 10; Ratzinger, *DZ*, 21–24. The Paschal Mystery is God's marvelous way of bringing justice and mercy together. See also John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 4.

What a disobedient, loveless will only view as an uncalled-for dispossession, the freedom that is assisted by Mary and by the witnesses of many who have given their lives to Christ (SS, 39) knows that everything is received as a gift from the Father and is to be given back to him in the surrender of oneself. One thus gradually discovers the dialogue of love that constitutes the very divine nature. To hope then is to allow the incarnate love of the Father to take possession of oneself and one's own history through the Holy Spirit until the form of one's own existence becomes that of the Triune God. In a word, learning to hope means learning to become love.

#### 4. *A radical novelty*

“In hope,” says Ratzinger, “our life stretches itself out towards the totality of reality, towards a boundless future that becomes accessible to us in faith.” This totality is “a love that is an immense affirmation of my existence and that discloses before me the fullness of being.”<sup>35</sup> What the reciprocal “stretching out”—of Love toward man, and of man toward Love—at the center of man's hope and historical existence reveals, is that to grow ever more certain in hope for the definitive company of him who is life itself is to grow in the form of love. In Mary, perfect creaturely obedience, we begin to see something stunning: virginity is the form of love. To elucidate this understanding of love, proposed with great clarity by Luigi Giussani, we shall first examine the common understanding of this term. In the following section, we will examine a non-dialectical description of virginity.<sup>36</sup>

It is a common assumption to think that “virginity” means nothing more than giving up conjugal intimacy and surrendering to a dismal barrenness—something that seems incomprehensible for a being whose nuptial nature is made for union and conception. As is

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<sup>35</sup>Ratzinger, *YJC*, 69.

<sup>36</sup>I prefer to use the term “virginity” rather than “celibacy” because it seems that the former term permits the novelty of this form of love to emerge more adequately than does “celibacy”—normally understood dialectically and hence negatively, as the “state of being unmarried” (OED). The understanding of virginity as presented here follows the work of Luigi Giussani. See, for example, Luigi Giussani, *Si può vivere così?* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2006); *Il tempo e il tempio* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1995); *Si può veramente vivere così?* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1996).

well known, the Old Testament considers such a life displeasing to God. Man and woman are created by God in order to be married and to be fruitful. Barrenness—resulting from remaining single or from unfruitful marriages—seems to represent therefore an existential and a theological curse: the woman without children had no future—that is, no heir and no possibility of being looked after in widowhood or old age—and hence no present. More tragically, however, a woman who had not received the divine blessing of fertility was deprived of contributing toward the history of the conception of the Messiah, the one would fulfill God's promises. Women like Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah prayed to God to be freed from this curse, and they were heard.

Mary's miraculous motherhood recapitulates the dramatic stories of her predecessors, but it does so by opening up into history love's final depth: fruitful virginity. The unforeseeable fruitfulness of Mary's *fiat*—which allowed her to bear God's Son—also includes, however, “the surrender of oneself into barrenness.” When she said yes she also renounced “earthly fertility, self-disposal, an autonomous planning of one's own life.” Mary's fruitful virginity, which represents the beginning of Christian virginity, clarifies “why the barrenness [described in the Old Testament] is the condition of fruitfulness,” and not the other way around.<sup>37</sup> The Old Testament teaches that the barren marriages made fruitful by God's grace, and the nuptial relation of God with Israel, are the foreshadowing of a new fruitfulness, one which passes through Christ's Paschal Mystery and knows no end. The relation with him who is life itself cannot but generate a life that does not die. Hope for eternal life, in this sense, is also the possibility of experiencing eternal fruitfulness.

Mary's perpetual virginity, the reminder of the Son's divine Origin, introduces a new (divine) fruitfulness, which is the super-abundant fulfillment of human love.<sup>38</sup> This is also true of St. Joseph's

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<sup>37</sup>Ratzinger, *DZ*, 51–52.

<sup>38</sup>This, of course, does not mean that men will no longer have to go through the experience of death. This new begetting is a true beginning with Christ, the Crucified-Risen Lord. The “eternity” of the fruitfulness referred to here is not a quantitative measure, although it is indeed hard to count the numerous followers that, e.g., were given to Ignatius, Francis, or Dominic. Rather, the “eternity” has to do with the fact that the “fruit” of virginal love is begotten in the Lord and hence it is given to participate already in the form of love that will be given to everyone in heaven.

virginity. His free renunciation of his own natural paternity is also obedience to God's will, an obedience that, after his consent is given, "will be ordered to, and subordinated to Mary's obedience."<sup>39</sup> St. Joseph's sacrifice, his virginal love for Mary and her Son, is not only a means of ensuring that Jesus belongs to the house of David. It is also the memory of God's faithfulness to a people grown bitterly unfaithful as conveyed by the lives of, e.g., Jeremiah (Jer 16), Ezekiel (Ez 24), and above all Hosea (Hs 1–2).<sup>40</sup> Virginity, more than a sign of man's endurance, is a sign of God's fidelity to man. It is his faithfulness that makes man fruitful. In being asked to be the foster father of Mary's son, Joseph is also made the Patron of the universal Church. Mary's marriage with Joseph represents in this sense the completion of marriage as well as of prophetic obedience in Israel. Yet the fact that their conjugal love was always virginal indicates that the truth of their love is to be found in Christ's presence and in their obedience to him.

While never a denial of marriage, the fruitfulness of virginity is not to be understood so much within the Josephite marriage, but rather within the new community of mother and son that Christ institutes from the Cross when he gives Mary and John to each other. Virginal paternity and maternity is therefore the spiritual begetting whose grounds are located in the love of the crucified and risen Lord, which is experienced in the community formed by the Spirit of the beloved Son of the Father. Virginal fecundity is the superabundant flourishing of the love in which one is continually begotten. The form of virginal paternity and maternity given to man is thus primordially filial. In the community of Mary and John, "human fruitfulness," says Balthasar, "has finally raised itself above the sphere of sexuality, but not in the direction of hostility toward the body and 'spiritualization': instead it is in the direction of a Church whose core is formed by the eucharistic link between Christ and his 'bride' and 'wife' (Rev 21)."<sup>41</sup>

Even though according to the New Testament virginity is not seen in opposition to marriage, but rather has to do with its very truth, our cultural heritage still makes it difficult for us to perceive the radical newness brought by virginity. We have grown accustomed to think that the things of earth belong to us and things of

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<sup>39</sup>Von Speyr, *Handmaid of the Lord*, 60.

<sup>40</sup>Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, 49–53.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 53.

God belong to him. As history seems every so often to witness, the clearer the distinction between these two realms, the greater peace human societies will enjoy. In this way, distracted by the apparent success of the scientific and historical progress, those who do not welcome God's intervention into history can only look with disdain, if they do not ignore them altogether, at those who have embraced a life of consecration. Even those who embrace God's Incarnation tend to incline toward the view that the life of consecration, despite what the birth of secular institutes may indicate, belongs most properly outside the walls of the city—even if they still maintain a relatively high regard for virginity as an extraordinary experience. If the hope for heaven is also the expectation of the fulfillment of a relation with God that has already begun (SS, 27), what needs to be seen is that virginity, while asked only of a few people, is more than a significant experience reserved for these certain few, but rather itself reveals the inner truth of love.

#### 5. Noonday torch of charity

If, in order to understand the positive content of virginity, we once again ponder the event of the Annunciation, we see that the God of love wishes to give himself to Mary without imposing himself. That is, he seeks to be hers only if he is gratuitously received. Drawing on Benedict XVI's reflection on the nature of love, we can say that God's desire (*eros*) to be one with the creature he loves selflessly seeks a unity with her (*agape*) in which she is asked to reciprocate with the same free, other-seeking love she is offered.<sup>42</sup> At the Annunciation we also see that Mary's *fiat* ardently affirms (*eros*) God precisely because, in the Holy Spirit, she freely lets God be one with her (*agape*). God, moved by man's nothingness and constant betrayal, gives himself to the one he has created so that his creature might exist. God wants to become the son of the most beautiful of his creatures. Yet, in his eternal desire (*eros*) to become flesh, God respects his creature; he wants his creature to be herself in a free dialogue of love with him (*agape*).<sup>43</sup> If the unity

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<sup>42</sup>Benedict XVI, *DCE*, 3–11.

<sup>43</sup>“Man's union with God,” says Pope Benedict XVI, “is no mere fusion, a sinking in the nameless ocean of the Divine; it is a unity which creates love, a unity



between *eros* and *agape* proper to love is maintained, while at the same time the one is not confused with the other, we can see that God always loves and asks to be loved in a virginal way because he, the triune love, is *agapic* yearning and yearning *agape*. Virginité can thus be described as the unity itself of *eros* and *agape*, that is, of the desire (*eros*) to be one with the other and of the actual gratuitous union with the other that is a selfless affirmation of the other (*agape*). Following Giussani, we can say that virginité is a possession (love's being one with and for the other) which bears within itself a detachment (the moved and gratuitous affirmation of the other that lets the other be).

The exchange of the gift of persons as seen in the Annunciation is a real, virginal "possession." God in his Son, through the Spirit, will be forever linked to humanity through Mary's flesh, and Mary will become first *theotokos* and then bride of the Lamb.<sup>44</sup> This relation remains a "virginal" one because while God does become flesh in Mary, and the Immaculate Conception will be incorporated into Christ by being made his mother, neither of them cease being themselves and neither ever thinks of using the other as a mere instrument. It is within this virginal relation that one can understand Mary's perpetual physical virginité. The memory of the virginal conception invites Mary, "who kept everything in her heart" (Lk 2:19.51), to look at her child and to see the Father who begets him eternally. She knows and she is educated to acknowledge that her child's destiny is in his Father's hands and not in her own. Her love for her Son will always include her Son's Father and his mission to glorify the Father's name. At Cana, for example, asking the servants to do "whatever he tells you," they too, thanks to her—the

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in which both God and man remain themselves and yet become fully one. As St. Paul says: 'He who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him' (1 Cor 6:17)" (DCE, 10).

<sup>44</sup>Bearing in mind that the Church in her relation with Christ can be understood to mean "the creature's fusion with its Lord in spousal love, in which its hope for divinization is fulfilled by way of faith," and "Christ and *ecclesia* are the hermeneutical center of the scriptural narration of the history of God's saving dealings with man, then and only then is the place fixed where Mary's motherhood becomes theologically significant as the ultimate personal concretization of Church. At the moment when she pronounces her Yes, Mary is Israel in person; she is the Church in person and as person. She is the personal concretization of the Church because her *Fiat* makes her the bodily Mother of the Lord" (Ratzinger, MCS, 30).

“woman”—are helped to recognize Christ as the Son of the Father (Jn 2:5). She thus teaches them to let their hope rest in him.

Mary’s virginity can be fully understood only christologically. Her virginal motherhood is, in fact, a participation in Christ’s virginal love of the world for the Father. Christ, who took his flesh from Mary, sees when he looks at her not only the one who welcomed him in faith and thus who represents the new Eve; he knows that his Father gave her to him (Jn 17:11.24) and that, from now on, “she belongs to the name of God in such a special way that whoever would praise him cannot leave her out of account” if he wishes to praise God’s name rightly.<sup>45</sup> The seeming rejections of Mary (Lk 11:27–28; Jn 2:4; Jn 19:26) are not only a participation in Christ’s *kenosis*, as we saw, but they also seek to make room for the other to be, a space of love in which the world is called to be embraced with the Father’s Son of love.<sup>46</sup> Christ’s relation with Mary is never unconscious of her origin and mission. He knows, in a way that Mary herself cannot fathom, that his mother is called to be given along with him from the Cross to the world.

Following Jesus Christ through his historical existence as recounted in Scripture allows us to see that his virginal way of loving is what makes him attractive to those he encounters. The woman caught in adultery, for example, realized after Jesus forgave her that she belonged to him more deeply than to the one from whose arms she was taken. Jesus did not treat her according to common expectations, but rather according to the design of the Father. He had come to reveal the Father’s mercy, to save man. He thus knew her more deeply and purely than anyone else. He was aware that his judgment would be understood only after he had fulfilled his mission. Yet, for the woman caught in adultery, it was within that love that she felt free, totally herself in being totally his. The same was true for Matthew when he was taken from the place where he collected due and undue taxes. Peter, whose name was changed in view of his own mission (Jn 1:42), was taught that Christ’s decision to obey the Father’s will over Peter’s own little plans for the salvation of Israel had more weight than Peter’s betrayals (Jn 21:15–19). In this way Christ showed Peter that past sins cannot

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<sup>45</sup>Ratzinger, *MCS*, 63.

<sup>46</sup>For this reason von Speyr rightly indicates that Christ is thus introducing a new state of life (*Handmaid of the Lord*, 110–32).

determine the present more than Jesus' love does. Virginité, in fact, flourishes in history as mercy. Finding himself being dealt with in such a virginal love, Peter was not only freed to be himself in being completely with Christ, with no lies between them; he was also allowed to experience the knowledge that nothing could prevent the hope he had in Christ from being fulfilled. Virginal love, expressed in Christ's mercy, reveals that the last barrier to hope—the belief that past sins may undermine Christ's decision to be with man—is simply a mirage that reflects man's fear that he is ultimately not worth loving.<sup>47</sup> Christ's virginal love transforms that fear, which is a distorted plea for mercy, into a further *fiat* to be with him and to do his will (Jn 21:17).

Jesus Christ introduced virginité into history as the truth of love. It is his very way of loving the other (man and the cosmos) that generates the reciprocal belonging that man longs for in hope. Christ's gift of self, the icon of the Father's mercy, begets the communion within which one is allowed to be. In the Father's design, one is inserted by the Spirit of love within the relation between the Son of Mary and the Father. Through this virginal love the crucified and risen Lord is "all in all" (Col 3:11) and "everything to everyone" (1 Cor 15:28) in a way that includes and respects man, while also causing him to exist.<sup>48</sup> Virginité, then, is the true form of love because it affirms the other (God, man, and the world) without the impulse to reduce the other to oneself. Virginité is the reciprocal possession of the other as a gift given to him; a gift, which as we saw in Mary, is to be offered with oneself to the Father for the fulfillment of his Son's mission. Thus virginité is the nuptial form of love in that it affirms the other through the total gift of self, within the memory that the purpose of that union is the Father's glory, revealed in Christ and communicated in the Spirit.

The circularity among charity, faith, and hope that we examined here may now allow us to grasp more fully the meaning of virginité. True love for another, that is, according to what he is and not what one might obtain in that relation, reaches its apex when the lover looks at the other with the eyes of faith that discover in him the divine triune love from which he continuously gushes

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<sup>47</sup>This, of course, is not the sin against the Holy Spirit, although it could become it.

<sup>48</sup>Luigi Giussani, *L'uomo e il suo destino* (Genova: Marietti, 1999).

forth and for which he is made. At the same time, this gaze of faith has to acknowledge that hope for the loved one's eternal existence is dependent not upon one's own endeavors, but upon his remaining in the place that divine love itself has ascribed to him. Virginité, in this regard, is the affirmation of everyone and everything within a memory that allows triune love, the source and destiny of all, to give concrete form to everything and hence to reveal itself. This "informing," to which the virgin gives his grateful and complete assent, allows reality and human existence to remain and grow in the relation of love between the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. Virginité, then, is not simply the fruit of man's magnanimous effort to love truly. It is the eschatological anticipation of the living form of love that God is. As such, it is a grace given to a few, as it was freely given to Mary, so that everyone might discover love's true affirmation of being.

We mentioned that sacrifice, understood as surrender or detachment, is a fundamental dimension of this act of love, one that is necessary to preserve the adequate balance of *eros* and *agape*. The meaning of sacrifice can be approached by way of the relation between beauty and virginité. The unity of *eros* and *agape* in which virginal love consists shines forth in beings as a beauty that asks to be received in obedience to its very nature. That is, beauty invites man to love and educates him into this love at such a depth that the desired unity is not sought for the sake of appropriating the beautiful in its appearing (this would be a false understanding of possession) but simply to rejoice in its being (Gn 1:31; Lk 1:38). What we see lived experientially in Mary and Christ and in those called to live in this state of life, is also true of the very structure of being. In its gratuitous self-revelation, being gives itself to be known in beauty yet it resists being possessed in a way that loses sight of its own origin (Lk 21:34). "It is from Beauty," Dionysius the Areopagite contends, "that being comes to all existing things."<sup>49</sup> Attracted by this beauty that, without asking permission, holds him—through wonder or through suffering—in its hand, man recognizes that the triune mystery from which everything comes, while giving itself, remains beyond his grasp. The sacrifice proper to the historical expression of virginité is to affirm beauty: the beauty of God, of man, and that of the cosmos itself. In light of Mary's existence, we can see that the

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<sup>49</sup>Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, IV, 7 (PG 3, 701).

sacrifices man makes in order to avoid having his own preconceptions and instinctive reactions be what give form to his faith-filled hope, arise ultimately out of the desire to love according to the nature of love. This is what prevents one from bending the other's being to one's own will or plans, and thus what lets love be an affirmation of beauty, i.e., of God's ever-deeper mystery and of his relation to man.

The relation between beauty and virginity illustrates further that both the gift of self that seeks gratuitous union with the other, and the sacrifices proper to virginity (including refraining from conjugal intimacy) can only be accomplished in the wonder that is the echo of the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, the fruit of and witness to the love of the Father and the Son, is the one who unites while preserving the distance. He, the person-Joy who searches the depths of God (1 Cor 2:10), makes it possible to enjoy the other not because this other is owned, but because he both is and has a mission defined by God. The Spirit of Christ thus ensures that virginal love is what it is called to be: a witness to God's glory. Wonder, seeing the other in his call to participate in the Father's glory and to share in Christ's mission, is the source of the detachment within the unity proper to love. The coalescence of beauty and virginity foreshadows, then, the goal of virginal love: the revelation of the Father's glory in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

It is perhaps possible to see now that the unity proper to conjugal love has its truth and not its antithesis in virginity. Spousal love will become truer the more it lets itself be informed by the virginal way in which Christ loved reality. By this we do not mean that spouses have to set aside conjugal intimacy, but rather that, according to the measure that is given them, they accept to learn to love each other in and for Christ. The difference between the two states of life is thus the specific task according to which each is to participate in Christ's sacrifice of himself for the redemption of the world. To marriage is given the joy and sacrifice of begetting and educating children into their true childhood. Those called to virginity are asked to witness to Christ with the gift of self (SS, 8.39). Married love needs the eschatological memory of virginity in order to grow in the truth of its own unity—which is itself the fruit of the Spirit of Christ, the beloved Son of the Father. Virginal love, if it is to avoid the pitfalls of clericalism and gnosticism, requires the accompaniment of families to remember that, as it is given to man, virginal love is filial, and that the dedication to Christ is a bodily,

nuptial gift of self. In this virginal love one allows oneself to be placed, as Mary did, at the service of the joy of others, the revelation of God's glory. The opposite of virginity understood in this way is not marriage but solitude—the willingness to conceive oneself apart from the *logos* of *agape* that ardently gives himself for us. This is why Mary, virgin and mother, is the star of hope. She is the witness to the mysterious fact that nothing can separate us from a future in the company of “him who is the source of life”; she accompanies man so that he may dwell and grow in that dialogue of love with him “who is life and love itself” (SS, 27).

Before we indicate a sense in which this shining forth of virginal love gives form to Mary's mediation, we need to make explicit the presupposition of the contention that virginity is the form of love. It is only if, as Giussani indicates, “virginity coincides with the nature of real being in the formula of the totality of its revelation,” that one can claim that virginity is the form of love. It is because, analogically speaking, “virginity is real being,” i.e., it is the form of the love of the Triune God himself, that one can see in what sense virginity is the truth of love.<sup>50</sup> It is impossible to explore adequately here the profundity of this immensely rich perception of love. Assuming the coexistence of being and love as revealed in Scripture (Ex 3:14; Jn 8:24–28; 1 Jn 4:8), it suffices to note for now that, in addition to the circumincession of *eros* and *agape* indicated above, an entryway into this immensely rich insight can be found in the conception of the trinitarian relations in terms of gift. In fact, if it is true that both relation and essence in God can be seen in terms of love, then relation—as the complete and gratuitous gift of self—reveals the *perichoresis* of the divine persons in terms of an absolute love that gives itself without laying claim to any reciprocation. The expectation of a gratuitous return of the gift, as has been discussed elsewhere, is always already fulfilled superabundantly; otherwise, we would be dealing with creaturely love and not with divine being.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Luigi Giussani, “Moved by The Infinite,” *Traces* (July–August 2003), 2.

<sup>51</sup>See my “Eternal Happening: God as an Event of Love,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 32 (Summer 2005): 214–45. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama. Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 5: *The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 61–109; von Speyr, *The World of Prayer*, 28–74; Ferdinand Ulrich, *Leben in der Einheit von Leben und Tod* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 1999); and my *Spirit's Gift. The Metaphysical Insight of Claude Bruaire* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006).

The eternal conversation of expectation and fulfillment, unfathomable gratitude and surprise, reveals that the divine processions are, in a way that escapes our understanding, a relation of love that is archetypically virginal. Precisely because God does not have anything that he “is” not—God is *ipsum esse subsistens*—the gift of self that God is, is so complete that it is freely and gratuitously given and reciprocated. Inasmuch as the gift is absolutely given, the divine persons “possess” the divine essence (each of them is a unique way of being the one God). Inasmuch as the gift of self is gratuitous, the being-self of each of the hypostases is not “attached” to itself, but is always already given overabundantly and “waits” for a free reciprocation that is always already offered gratuitously. This divine exchange of the gift is the archetype for what we intend by (human) virginal possession (Eph 3:15). “It is from the eternal virginity,” writes Giussani, “that motherhood’s virginity is born.”<sup>52</sup> In God, the Father gives everything to the Son; and yet, although he shares all of himself, including his own giving, the Son is another. The Son *is* the Word that pronounces the Father in thankfulness and who does not claim to be the Origin from which he freely receives himself. The Holy Spirit, that unknown beyond the Word, is he who witnesses, as yet another, to the inexhaustible ever-joyful unity and difference of the Father and the Son. Of course, what man experiences as “sacrifice” (or detachment, as we saw before) in his historical, fallen existence because of the Christian eschatological law of “already but not yet,” in God is only joyful gift of self of such gladness that it can allow room for the Paschal Mystery.<sup>53</sup>

#### 6. ‘The Spirit and the Bride say: Come!’

We mentioned at the beginning that the *theotokos* helps us to see that God creates man because he wishes to dwell with him, to enable man to remain in that relation with the love that never fails. We also discovered that the hope of participating in this eternal life is a taking up of and entering into the virginal form of love itself in

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<sup>52</sup>Giussani, “Moved by the Infinite,” 2.

<sup>53</sup>Contrary to the present account, Sergius Bulgakov reads the existence of sacrifice into the nature of absolute love. See, for example, his *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 53–67, 359–94.

the way God determines (1 Cor 7:7) so that love's beauty might be enjoyed and further revealed. In this final section, we will see that, as the Annunciation shows, one of the most important revelations of the fruitfulness of Mary's virginal motherhood is the way she assists man to enter into the heart of triune love: prayer.

From the Cross, the Redeemer "entrusts Mary to John because he entrusts John to Mary" (*RM*, 45), and in being given as a gift, Mary is made co-mediatrix of man's salvation (*RM*, 20). Her mediation, understood in light of Christ's, is not extrinsic; it is the mediation of a mother (*RM*, 38). As such, Mary, archetype of the Church, participates in the sacramental begetting of the new man. She who, instructed by the Holy Spirit, had to teach her Son to be human while learning from him what it means to be a child of God, is now called to teach man "to become like a child" (Mt 18:3) in her Son.<sup>54</sup> Mary, the new Eve, "guarantees the ontological independence of creation," but she does so as woman (and mother).<sup>55</sup> The creature finds its truth in Mary: the creature is called into existence as one whose being is to welcome and to respond to that call. In that gratuitous response she becomes fruitful.<sup>56</sup> To negate this Marian dimension of creatureliness would entail "the negation of creation and the invalidation of grace"; it would reduce "the creature to a mere masquerade."<sup>57</sup> To understand this feminine receptivity (which, although differently, constitutes both male and female) in terms of a logic of power and submission is to fail to see that the creature's creative receptivity has its roots in a filial gratitude whose most genuine and mature expression is prayer. Mary, mother of hope, teaches man, created in and for the Logos who in her took flesh, that prayer is the language of gratitude and hope.<sup>58</sup> The certainty that God fulfills his promises by becoming flesh in her, as we saw above, transforms our hope in him into the desire for him.

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<sup>54</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 70.

<sup>55</sup>Ratzinger, *MCS*, 31.

<sup>56</sup>Balthasar, *TD III*, 283–292. To say that the creature can only be considered as secondary, responsive, "feminine," vis-à-vis God, does not equate God with Adam (God does not need creation to be himself) or mean that the Son's response is the fulfillment of a lack in the Father (this would be Arianism).

<sup>57</sup>Ratzinger, *DZ*, 28.

<sup>58</sup>*ST II-II*, q. 17, a. 4.



Yet the desire for him is only authentic when it becomes an affirmation of him, that is, praise that is full of wonder, and the confident, not anxious, request that he never cease holding us in existence. It is in Mary's *fiat*—the simple, absolute, and grateful self-entrustment to God—that we can participate in Christ's human and divine Yes to the Father (2 Cor 1:19). Mary, God's most beautiful child, helps man to become, as she is, a gratuitous longing for God. She intercedes so that man may, as she did, become prayer.<sup>59</sup>

Mary, in whom the whole Church is personified, teaches man that indispensable silence (Lk 2:19.51) in which to utter prayer's most fundamental word: "Come" (Rev 22:17). This word both expresses the essence of man's religiosity and sums up the inexhaustible richness of the "Our Father." As Scripture tells us, prayer is said only thanks to the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8:26; Eph 6:8) and its primary content is asking for the Spirit to come. One cannot but ask for everything, that is, for God himself—otherwise what externally might look like prayer would be in reality nothing but a soliloquy. True prayer is always asking for the undeserved miracle of God's company in the certainty that he hears man's entreaty. "If you, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Lk 11:23). In prayer, the man who is not afraid of being led in the pilgrimage of faith, asks the Spirit to come through Mary. He, the Holy Spirit, is the one thanks to whom we can participate in God's triune life of love. Yet, as he collaborated in the Incarnation of the Logos of life by overshadowing Mary, the Holy Spirit, Love of love, will introduce us into the fullness of truth revealed in Christ only through Mary.<sup>60</sup> The man who hopes prays with Mary that the Spirit of Love may come to transform all his fears of eternal solitude into the hope of everlasting enjoyment of the beloved Son of the Father, the one who is and who is to come. With Mary, certainty of our hope, one's faith-filled hope is able to hear that the Lord of the Spirit (2 Cor 3:17), with a yearning beyond man's comprehension, says to the Bride: "Come! And let him who desires take the water of life without price" (Rev 22:17). This yearning, echoed in Mary's

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<sup>59</sup>Ratzinger, *MCS*, 15.

<sup>60</sup>This is why, as Ratzinger wrote, "a christological form of prayer which excludes the Church also excludes the Spirit and the human being itself" (Ratzinger, *Feast of Faith*, 30).

existence and in the lives of those who are held in the hands of Christ, discreetly dissolves man's fear of being deserted by the love that gives meaning to existence. The Lamb's call invites him to grow ever more deeply into that grateful dialogue of prayer with the Triune God, for the sake of which, as confirmation, God did not shrink from being born of the virgin's womb to offer himself for us. □

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