

# Mary of Nazareth: biblical reflections for today's culture

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## 1. Introduction

The figure of Mary, mother of Jesus of Nazareth, has always been of great importance for Christian faith and culture. Marian devotion is a centuries-old religious phenomenon of enormous importance: it is enough to consider the millions of people who every year visit the hundreds of shrines dedicated to the young girl of Nazareth in Italy alone.

But what are the reasons for the extraordinary favour that Mary meets across the board in the Church and in society? Are all the manifestations of such appreciation actually signs of faith in her son, the crucified and risen Nazarene? Do not Christian faith and paganism “disguised” as Christianity often appear to be very much intertwined? To these and other questions the following pages will try to offer some answers. They will do so in the most radically Christian way possible, that is, by dealing with explicit and incontrovertible biblical recurrences of the figure of Mary.

In this paper, in fact, I will consider, albeit briefly, only those texts in the New Testament that deal explicitly with Mary of Nazareth. I will therefore focus in particular on specific passages from chapters 1-2 of the Gospel according to Luke and on Jn 2 and Jn 19.

Other New Testament passages on this subject will be mentioned here, and still others, which various exegetical and devotional traditions have traced back to the mother of Jesus (e.g. some First Testament passages), will not even be mentioned because they structurally go beyond an effectively direct biblical treatment of Mary and give room for hermeneutical excesses that have no relation to a soundly literal reading.

I have great respect for Marian devotion and I believe that Mary is a very important figure for the attempt at Christianity that I try to live and for many other women and men who wish to live in the image and likeness of the God of Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, there is an increasing urgency to help show how and why various forms of attention to Mary are neither Christian nor inwardly and socially a constructive use of the biblical sources. What is at stake is very important: an ever more Christian attention to Mary because it is ever more radically biblical and fosters a truly intelligent and passionate spiritual growth of present and future generations.

## 2. From the Gospel according to Luke

### 2.1. The broad contexts: Luke 1-2 and Matthew 1-2

Only Mt and Lk give us information about the infant phase of Jesus' life, and the Lucan version is more extensive in this respect (132 verses against 48).

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Those who are looking for a sort of minute-by-minute chronicle of Jesus' biography in these opening chapters of Luke and Matthew or other Gospel texts will be disappointed. Equally unfounded is an opposing view that is prepared to swear by the total historical inconsistency of the events narrated.

Lk 1-2 and Mt 1-2 as well as Jn 1:1-18 and Mk 1:1 are texts with a strong Christological concentration. They are masterly preludes that announce - anticipating to some extent and summarising - the complex symphony of the Gospel; they reveal its dominant motifs, they offer the key to its interpretation, but they can only be fully understood at the end of it.

In the Lucan version as a whole, the function of chapters 1-2 is clear. They aim to place John the Baptizer and Jesus in the history of salvation, to subordinate John to the Messiah, and to proclaim the mystery of Jesus from the very beginning of the narrative.

## 2.2. Luke 1,26-38

<sup>26</sup>*In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin betrothed to a man of the house of David named Joseph. The virgin's name was Mary.*

The birth of Jesus is announced in a small suburban town, with a bad reputation (cf. Jn 1:46) and a very mixed population, where ritual purity was very difficult to maintain.

The one who receives the announcement is an absolutely anonymous girl, who is certainly engaged to a member of the Davidic lineage, but who has no particular socio-cultural or physical distinction in herself. There is another important aspect: Mary is presented as a virgin. The Lucan usage in the passage in question does not give rise to any doubts whatsoever: a comparison with v. 34 is enough to understand that here we are indicating a girl who has not yet had sexual relations.

It is precisely in this atmosphere of quiet modesty that the girl named Mary becomes, from the end of verse 27 onwards, the focus of the divine call.

<sup>28</sup>*When he came to her, he said, "Be joyful, you who are truly filled with grace, the Lord is with you". <sup>29</sup>At these words she was greatly confused and wondered what the meaning of such a greeting was.*

The archangel wants to convey increasing serenity and contentment and the text presents this to us according to a "three-step scale".

- First of all, the initial expression, be joyful: the Greek imperative used is certainly a conventional greeting in secular Greek. On the other hand, both the first testamentary background of the angel's words (cf. Zech 9:9; Zeph 3:14-17; Joel 2:21-23) and other attestations of the verb used as a translation of the meaningful Hebrew term *shalôm* (= peace, in the sense of global well-being and serenity) suggest something more. The opening imperative is meant to insist on the angel's invitation to joy.

- Secondly, the expression truly filled with grace: this element increases the strength of happiness referred to. In fact, divine grace from the past to the present has enveloped Mary's existence and is destined to persist: Mary is, so to speak, called to realise this.

- Thirdly, the affirmation of the presence of the Lord God beside her. God's active presence is the essential guarantee offered to those who are the object of the divine call, a guarantee that evidently spreads its wings on the free and responsible faith of the recipients.

Mary's shock expressed here in the Lucan text is very strong. She does not, however, come to an immediate refusal or objection. She has a reaction of a meditative-interior order, which makes explicit the search for meaning that she considers necessary to understand the reasons for this exaltation that God, through the angel, intends to give her.

This inner response offers the right to the explanation that follows: <sup>30</sup>*The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. <sup>31</sup>Behold, you will conceive a son in your womb, give birth to him, and call his name Jesus. <sup>32</sup>He will be great and called the Son of the Most High; the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David <sup>33</sup>and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his sovereignty will have no end".*

It was quite unusual, then, for a woman to receive such a solemn greeting as she did: this alone causes further surprise and upset. Secondly, Mary, in her entire person, is called to be the one who will give birth to the one awaited for thousands of years, the Messiah, the Son of God. The greatness of the newborn child is absolute (vv. 32-33): he will not acquire it from the outside and it will not be valid only before the Lord. The divine nature of Jesus and the messianic proclamation are decisively reaffirmed in their Davidic and royal status, according to a perspective that starts from the dimension linked to Israel and expands towards eternity (cf. Dn 7:14).

<sup>34</sup>*Then Mary said to the angel: "How can this be? I have no sexual relations with any man!"*. <sup>35</sup>*The angel answered her: "The holy and sanctifying breath will descend upon you, the power of the Most High will bring down its shadow upon you. That is why the one to be born will be holy and called the Son of God.* <sup>36</sup>*See, your kinswoman Elizabeth also, in her old age, has conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her, whom everyone said was barren:* <sup>37</sup>*no word from God will be ineffective".*

Mary, having now entered into the divine picture that the Lord's messenger had presented to her, is concerned about the real feasibility of the foretold birth. Her question (v. 34) is the real narrative hinge of the pericope. The question posed by Mary, not about the "who" of the event, but about the "how", is entirely legitimate.

The archangel's answer dispels all uncertainty in this respect too. The consecration of the unborn child in the divine sanctifying breath is here placed in close relation to his powerful saving action. It can only be an essential dimension of the person who is to be born, who, although truly human, is completely Other than his fellow human beings.

In v. 36 the guarantee is given that this action is superior to the limits of human anatomy and physiology. In fact, this has already tangibly occurred with Elizabeth, the mother of John (cf. v. 13). On the other hand, v. 37 sees the divine superiority definitively reaffirmed. And all the words of the angel, from beginning to end, address the responsibility of a response that only Mary can give.

<sup>38</sup>*Then Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord!". May what you have said happen to me!"*.

The divine message makes the girl take a decision the consequences of which she cannot foresee for herself. Mary, defining herself as the servant of the Lord

- places herself in the depth of the pact with God proper to her ethnic-cultural tradition, reaching the most authentic roots of it;
- recognises that her destiny is closely linked to that of the Son to whom she will give birth;
- she points out, without any passivity or negative subjection, the features of her own vocation and the most human way of dealing with it in full relational freedom and seriousness.

Mary's entire response is a sort of explosion of enthusiasm for what has been presented to her, which she accepts, taking it on in the way of passionate service and faithful love that she has freely given herself.

The covenant between God and the human being finds here, at one and the same time, its most traditional and newest reaffirmation: the Lord offers a woman to become the intermediary of his word par excellence, which is his son, for the benefit of the ultimate and true good of all humanity.

Mary is not the example of an inhuman certainty. She experiences anxiety, perplexity, doubt, in short, an objective restlessness that is expressed through two specific facts: the inner questioning of what her new existential perspective was, and the response to her question about the working out of the vocation that God had planned for her. In all of this, as well as in her final positive response, Mary opens the way for a path of faith in the God of Judeo-Christian revelation, because she stands ready to welcome the event of the divine entrance into the specificity of every existence, according to a realistically human dimension.

Mary's strength stands out particularly from the exterior poverty of her resources and means: her inner energy is remarkable, her capacity to entrust herself is striking. Hers is not a blind

faith. She appears anything but unprepared and intimately withdrawn, as she has been portrayed over the centuries in so many images of popular traditions that have not done her justice.

Divine grace certainly supports her, but the choice she makes is the fruit of her freedom. This freedom is played out in fidelity to her being God's creature, daughter of the Lord, who tenaciously thought of the good of the human being from the beginning.

Mary does not content herself with saying something in verbal form, she responds with the subdued but tenacious proclamation of her life: she "is a mother in body and in faith, or - more precisely - she is a mother in body because she is a mother in faith. The child she carries in her womb is at the same time the physical expression of her faith: in Mary motherhood and faith are inseparable dimensions" (G. Gutierrez, p. 293). On this subject Origen says quite eloquently: "What is the use of my saying that Christ came only in the flesh which he received from Mary, if I do not make it clear that he came also in my flesh?" (In Genesim homilia III, § 7).

This passage does not focus on the vocation of this extraordinary woman, but on the earthly birth of the Son of God and his salvific role. It calls readers to a dynamic relationship with God, not one stiffened by fideism or trapped in devotionism. It is a question of allowing the grace and power of the Spirit to bring about this birth in every human being, so as to offer to Mary's son a humanity willing to grow in welcoming him, strong in the same power of love as this Palestinian girl.

### **2.3. The response of passionate faith: reading 1:39-56**

*"<sup>39</sup>In those days Mary went up the mountain and hurried to a town in Judah. <sup>40</sup>She entered the house of Zachariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup>As soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby jumped into her womb. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup>and she cried out with a loud voice, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! <sup>43</sup>To what do I owe that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup>When the voice of your greeting reached my ears, the child leaped for joy in my womb. <sup>45</sup>Blessed is she who believed that the words of the Lord would be fulfilled".*

The Lucan text shows the instantaneous speed of this determination and its fulfilment (v. 39), according to a logic of full solidarity that is also much more: faith is a gift from God, but it is also a human response and, like every human act, cannot do without sharing and support. Why does Mary go to Elizabeth? The text of vv. 39-40 in itself offers no explicit reason. Perhaps one can make some intra-biblical commentary by saying that the men and women of the Bible are on the move from the moment God's action makes itself felt. Luke hurries along as does Mary and wastes no time in describing this journey to us. Everything focuses on the arrival.

The entrance of the cousin arouses a profound reaction in her who is awaiting the birth of John. What springs up first of all is immediate joy, underlining, as in Lk 1:28, that when God encounters a human being, what follows is and must be above all this positive feeling and not the fear of the unknown or the terror of the miraculous.

The event is not only presented in the narrative (v.41a), but explicitly taken up by Elizabeth (v.44), who can effectively express her enthusiastic state of mind (cf. Gen 25:22; 2 Sam 6:13-22). The encounter with the one who knows that she is to become the mother of the Son of God has made her a participant in the most authentic divine dynamism: the divine Spirit (v. 41b). The essential motivation for all this extraordinary movement, from the geographical exterior of the journey to the interior of a mother's womb, is Mary's acceptance of the divine proposal, hence Mary's faith in the fulfilment of the divine promise (v. 45).

As regards the historicity of the entire episode of the visitation and the truthfulness of the relationship between Elizabeth and Mary, there is no evidence to support this. In this regard, the first unlikely fact seems to be that a young girl, moreover betrothed, makes a journey of several days on her own.

And no tradition, even New Testament tradition, apart from the Lucan one, supports the kinship between the Baptist and Jesus. In the Gospel versions, the presence of relations between the

followers of John and the disciples of the Nazarene is affirmed, in terms of “rivalry” (cf. Jn 3:22ff; 4:1-2; Mt 11:2).

Mary’s capacity and willingness to entrust herself is the culminating motif on which Luke focuses the attention of the reader, who can legitimately expect a Marian response. And, in fact, it arrives, through an extraordinary canticle of praise. Its probable original context is the liturgical life of a Judeo-Palestinian community of Christian origins, which projects the theological and anthropological discourse far beyond possible cultural ancestry. And the Lucan editor places on Mary’s lips these words that are a salvific bridge between past and future.

*<sup>46</sup>Proclaim loudly, my soul, the greatness of the Lord <sup>47</sup>and my spirit bursts with joy in the God who saves me, <sup>48</sup>because he has turned his gaze on the lowliness of his handmaid: behold, from now on, all generations will proclaim me happy, <sup>49</sup>because for me the Mighty One has done great things.*

Two verbs of shocking openness to praise and joy begin the canticle. This loud and choral glorification of the saviour is realised by the totality of the subject: on the one hand, the soul as the dynamic root of the living being; on the other, the spirit of the individual, that is, the person in his relational dynamism. The terminology in question is outside any Hellenising opposition between soul and body.

The objects of this joyful recognition are, respectively, the Lord, the living God of the Fathers who manifests his faithfulness and goodness to the present generation, and God the Saviour, i.e. the specification of the fundamental active title of the Divine in question. The whole composition evokes the acts of this saviour. Mary’s whole person (living being and spirit) rejoices in praise of the one who gives decisive meaning to her existence.

The fundamental reason for Mary’s jubilation is manifested by a clear explanation: God’s participating and beneficent gaze has turned on an ordinary person despite her human and personal limitations. Mary, who had previously declared herself to be the Lord’s servant (v. 38), sums up in herself the role of spokesperson for the less important individuals.

An expression of surprise and astonishment (v. 48b), signals the inauguration of a new age, associated with the subsequent formulation, in which the Lucan editor, a theologian of history and salvation, underlines the salvific qualitative leap underway.

Marian blessedness is rooted in what God has worked in her by her free and responsible acceptance (vv. 48a.49a). The subject of this “beatific” recognition - all generations - indicates a global involvement according to a general divine plan. In it, God’s expressive feature is the historically realised power. Its object - great things (cf. Deut 10:21; Ps 119:18) - is in clear semantic contrast to the smallness of the recipient of this action. It demands an equally general human response.

The whole of v. 49 is a formula full of respect and modesty: if one does not know the story in which the Magnificat is inserted, one cannot identify these great things. They are, therefore, audacious words: they are the inscription of what touches Mary in the long chain of God’s wonders, in the litany of his works of salvation, from the liberation from Egypt onwards.

*“and holy is His name”.*

The holiness of the name, that is, of the divine power, is of fundamental importance and, in this canticle, is perhaps the theological-anthropological centre of gravity of the discourse. In fact, the appellation holy was as normal for the gods as the term saint was applied to people and things before becoming the specific term of the transcendent world. Once this transposition has been made, however, holiness exists only in relation to the holiness of God. God is the Other who enters into a relationship with human beings and makes the recipient of that relationship share in his holiness.

*“<sup>50</sup>And his passionate benevolence for generations and generations goes out to those who bind themselves to him. <sup>51</sup>He has deployed power with (his) arm, he has ruinously scattered the arrogant in the designs of their hearts. <sup>52</sup>He has torn the mighty from their thrones, he has exalted those who live in meagreness, <sup>53</sup>He has filled the hungry with goods and sent the rich away empty.*

<sup>54</sup>*He has stood up for Israel, his servant, to make a memorial of his passionate kindness, <sup>55</sup>as he had spoken to our fathers, for the sake of Abraham and his descendants forever”.*

Verse 50 immediately indicates the motive and distinctive character of the divine action: his passionate kindness. This word, which also occurs in verse 54, gives the whole text a very precise atmosphere. It cannot be understood without having in mind its Hebrew origin and the context from which it comes and in which it is placed. It is the word *hèsed* (ed. = Greek *éleos*) which expresses the gratuitousness of friendship and is at the root of the preferential choice towards someone. It also expresses the desire for reciprocity, the behaviour that makes possible the exchange relationship between people united by a bond: loyalty, generosity, trust.

In the context of an intensely extended historical perspective that continues (cf. v. 49a), this beneficent attention of God is directed towards those who have a genuine existential respect for him. Literally one should translate *those who fear him*.

Nevertheless, the fear in question has no connection with a notion of fear of the Divine. The attitude evoked by Mary involves the humble recognition of God’s holiness, an attitude of loving adoration, of peaceful and happy obedience to the Word, of joyful humility in faith, humility present wherever God reveals, acts and saves.

From this basis, the canticle expresses a look at the past as an emblematic testimony of the Lord’s effective attention to the affirmation of these values in human history. In vv. 51-53 there are six verbs of action, which record a “shocking” salvific process, from the past of God’s action in favour of humanity and Israel to the development of Jesus’ action up to the post-Easter continuity. They embrace past, present and future in their resonance, on Mary’s lips, as a profession of faith and a cry of hope.

The heart of divine action is attention to those in difficulty. This intervention can also involve destabilising those in a position of selfish superiority in order to re-establish social justice. The human being is a creature with whom everything is a gift: recognising this fact means placing oneself in an attitude of obedience and demand, a condition that those who are powerful and/or rich for their own sake find hard to accept, insofar as they believe themselves to be happy (=saved) because of their own merit.

In a form of circular continuity with what is stated in v. 51, v. 54 expresses the synthesis of divine action in the history of salvation: God’s liberating behaviour towards the covenant partner according to a memory of love that is always active and constant. Indeed, his characteristic of eternal action is his passionate mercy towards human beings.

The final verse of the canticle roots the poetic reflection in God’s historical relationship with the first human generations. The memory of God still appears as the expression of an unflinching fidelity to human generations, a fidelity that commits and calls to action.

The God who works the reversals sung in Lk 1:46-55, the one who dispossesses and deprives usurpers of their false condition of superiority, who exalts the humble and exalts them with good things, surely manifests this passionate mercy that knows how to forgive and liberate. An overall look at this splendid composition shows that it is the explanatory interpretation of the faith with which Mary adhered to Gabriel’s announcement. And one cannot deny the social force of the words of the canticle precisely in its perspective of praise to God. The song is essentially equivalent to a real “fight”, because it is God who “fights” to free his people and increase the level of justice proper to their lives:

“The spiritual power of Mary’s words consists in making us see how the search for justice must be placed within the framework of the gratuitousness of God’s love, on pain of losing its profound meaning, and at the same time in helping us to understand that this free and gratuitous love - which gives reason for our prayer and thanksgiving - demands on our part solidarity with those who live in a situation contrary to the life plan of the God of Jesus Christ” (G. Gutierrez, p. 308).

## 2.4. Luke 2:16-19 and its context

<sup>8</sup>There were some shepherds in the same region who stayed out in the open at night and guarded their flocks. <sup>9</sup>An angel of the Lord appeared before them, and the glory of the Lord shone on them, and they were terrified with great fear. <sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for, behold, I bring you good news of great joy, which will be for all the people. <sup>11</sup>Today a Savior has been born to you, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David. <sup>12</sup>This is the sign for you, that you will find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger". <sup>13</sup>And immediately there appeared, together with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup>"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, to men of his bountiful kindness". <sup>15</sup>As soon as the angels had departed from them into heaven, the shepherds spoke among themselves, "We must go up to Bethlehem and see this event announced and fulfilled, which the Lord has made known to us. <sup>16</sup>So they hurried on, and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup>And when they had seen it, they made known to the people the fact of which they had been told concerning the child. <sup>18</sup>All who heard it were astonished at the things which the shepherds had told them. <sup>19</sup>Maria, for her part, kept all these words full of meaning, comparing them with one another in her heart. <sup>20</sup>The shepherds then went back, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

In vv. 18-19 the reaction of the bystanders - including Mary and Joseph, since the text does not express it otherwise - to the shepherds' account is unambiguous and common to many other similar circumstances in the Gospel versions (cf., for example, Mk 5:20; 12:17; Lk 1:21; 2:33; 9:43) all are filled with great wonder. This formulation is intended to underline the importance of what the shepherds have communicated (cf. 1:63.65). Mary emerges, however, from the group of those present.

She does not limit herself to the immediate sensation. She goes further, starting from a characteristic that has already emerged earlier: deep reasoning according to a vital memory, the attitude of constantly comparing within herself what is happening around her and in her life, without being satisfied with the first evaluation or impression and without engaging in rational introspection or intellectual analysis, in search of the authentic meaning of things.

All this, evidently, started from a listening to the words of the shepherds that was not a pure and simple hearing, but which implied an authentic involvement, which passed through the heart and may have brought about a consequent choice of existential obedience. However, it caused a joyful and grateful recognition of God's worth. Both the amazement of the shepherds and bystanders and this meditative restraint are like an open question: "What is to become of this child" (cf. 1:66)? The answer will be given later by the very advent and action of the child of this extraordinary believer.

## 2.5. And what does the rest of Lk 2 say?

In vv. 21-52 of the second Lucan chapter, Mary appears as the addressee of Simeon's words (vv. 34-35) and as the interlocutor of her son in the dialogue on the occasion of finding him in the temple of Jerusalem (cf. v. 48).

Undoubtedly, "Simeon announces to Mary that her whole life will be traversed by the word of her son, a word which, like a sword, will force her to make painful but inevitable choices. If the acceptance of the angel's announcement had led her to be the mother of Jesus, the acceptance of the son's message will lead her to be his disciple" (A. Maggi, p. 78).

## 3. From the Gospel according to John

### 3.1. Jn 2:3-5 and its immediate context

<sup>1</sup>Three days later there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. <sup>2</sup>Jesus and his disciples were invited to the wedding. <sup>3</sup>At that time, when there was

*no wine, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no more wine".<sup>4</sup> Jesus answered, "What have you and I to do with it, O woman? My hour has not yet come".<sup>5</sup> The mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you".<sup>6</sup> There were six stone jars there for the cleansing of the Jews, each containing two or three barrels.<sup>7</sup> Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water", and they filled them to the brim.<sup>8</sup> He said to them again, "Now draw some water, and bring it to the master of the table. And they brought it to him.<sup>9</sup> And when the master of the table had tasted the water that had become wine, which he didn't know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), he called the bridegroom<sup>10</sup> and said to him, "Every man serves good wine at first, and when they are a little drunk, less good wine; but you have kept the good wine until now".<sup>11</sup> Jesus did this as the beginning of the miracles in Cana of Galilee, manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him.*

At this wedding feast there is a lack of wine (v. 3): this situation prompts Jesus' mother to address her son explicitly and directly with a phrase that seems very simple and referential, for example from the nature of its subject ("they have no wine"). A shortage such as the one that has emerged, if not filled, would have had serious repercussions on the reputation of the spouses in their vital social relationships. There would have been a widespread belief that the bridegroom did not have sufficient material resources not only for a decent marriage, but also, in the long run, to ensure a worthy life for the newly formed family unit.

The discreet but evident involvement of the mother in the situation seems to have precisely the purpose of guaranteeing the maintenance of the social honour of the ones being celebrated, and the present and future quality of life of the bride and groom.

Jesus' indirect request for involvement provokes a double distance on his part, underlined first of all by the appellative addressed to the mother (woman). This vocative is never used in the Bible in reference to one's own mother except in Jn 19,26, while it is attested 9 other times in the NT with multiple recipients (cf. Mt 15,28; Lk 13,12; 22,57; Jn 4,21; 8,10; 19,26; 20,13.15; 1Cor 7,16). Jesus emphatically points out that neither he nor his mother is directly involved in the matter. On the other hand, at this moment of the narrative, Jesus and his mother see their relationship to the feast and its natural protagonists in two different ways.

Jesus emphasises what is most important to him: the moment of his 'public' intervention has not yet arrived (a global observation, in relation to Jesus' existential history and its effects). This hour, like the rhythm and mode of Jesus' historical mission, depends on the will of the Father. Therefore the hour of Jesus' intervention, which obeys this perspective of filial relationship with God (cf., in particular, Jn 7:30; 8:20; 12:23.27; 13:1), is removed from any human influence, even that of the mother.

However, the woman's involvement in the event does not stop: she seems to know the fundamental tendency of the sequel, even if she is not aware of its concrete details (v. 5). This condition of hers, in fact, is inferred from the words she addresses to the servants present, which are as specific as they are general. This is evidenced by the contextuality of the imperative verb, which gives an instantaneous and punctual order (= do), and of the most indefinite pronoun possible (= whatever): Mary passes from the reading of a difficult human situation that she wishes to be able to resolve (how?) to a state of active availability before the irruption of the revealing event that is about to follow but that she does not yet know. This action of the mother's will have a clear effect on the subsequent action of Jesus.

Mary's presence in this passage has, therefore, three values, all of an intensely relational character:

- the mother of Jesus
- the detector of the needs of married couples as regards the joy of the feast, and therefore a successful life;



- the motivator of those who can overcome the difficulties that objectively exist in directing them towards relationship with the one in whose abilities she fully believes.

### 3.2. Jn 19:23-27

<sup>23</sup>When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and made four pieces, one for each soldier, and the tunic. Now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. <sup>24</sup>Therefore they said among themselves, 'Let us not tear it, but cast lots to see who should have it. Thus the scripture was fulfilled (Ps 22:19): They divided my garments among themselves, and cast lots on my tunic. And the soldiers, on the one hand, did just that. <sup>25</sup>They stood on the other side by the cross of Jesus, his mother, his mother's sister, Mary of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala. <sup>26</sup>Jesus then, seeing his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing there, said to his mother, "Woman, see your son!". <sup>27</sup>Then he says to the disciple, "See your mother!". And from that hour the disciple took her into his house.

The passage has two precise Johannine "precedents": the prophecy of Caiaphas (cf. 11:49-52) and the prophetic statement of Jesus (cf. 12:32-33). The two main characters of our passage, who are complementary to the Nazarene, do not have their own names: their identity is essentially their personal relationship with the one on the cross. In fact, we speak of the mother of Jesus and of the disciple whom Jesus loved.

Nevertheless, the relationship of the two with Jesus is globally different: if Jesus' mother represents Israel and a physical relationship that develops in faith, the disciple represents a relationship that was established by choice by Jesus himself and to which he responded positively.

Jesus asks his mother to recognise in the disciple an authentic descendant of his (cf. Jn 8:37-47). From his point of view, the disciple is invited to integrate himself into the tradition of Israel. The centre of gravity of the new family of Jesus will no longer be the messianic tradition of Israel, but the gospel of the Passion (cf. in this regard Jn 4:21-24).

The word mother recurs insistently. From three references in Jn 2,1.3.5 one can see here a clear relational progress: one passes from his mother to your mother. From the relationship with Jesus we come to that with the disciple bound to Jesus by an evangelically essential relationship (the intensely fraternal love that lasts over time) through the fundamental characteristic for which Mary is present in history, in Christian origins and in the biblical texts (especially the Gospel versions): the condition of motherhood.

The expression 'near the cross of Jesus' indicates the ultimate proximity to the person of the crucified one as the point of arrival of the discourse (cf. 3:14.16; 8:28; 12:31-32) in which we know definitively who the Son of God is. Jesus first of all sees his mother and the beloved disciple and this perception is followed by an imperative that urgently invites them to do the same thing: see. The first seer deciphers for others the destiny, the vocation, the profound identity of those he sees. Jesus' profound vision must be shared by the two recipients of his words. This is not just a simple recommendation addressed to the two. It is a precise mandate that concerns first the mother and, in corresponding and complementary terms, the disciple.

The final expression of verse 27b points towards the idea of belonging or existential communion. Everything that constitutes the proper good of the true disciple is affirmed here. It is essentially the bond that connects one to Jesus in the culminating and conclusive choice of the sacrifice of love: one's faith in him, one's union with him, the spiritual space in which Jesus lives. This understanding of Jesus, from the disciple's point of view, is what is proper to him.

All this means that

- Mary is urgently asked to commit herself to loving the disciple as she loved her own biological son;

- the disciple, the individual explicit object of his Master's love, is asked to love Mary as his own biological mother, being equal to his son who is on the cross and who is humanly about to die.

Both are invited to look clearly at how the one on the cross has shown love, from the beginning to this tragic end. The disciple immediately makes the determination to involve Mary in what is particularly close to his heart, in all that is familiar to him. This means perhaps also the materiality of one's own home, but overall, one's own condition as disciple and son on all possible levels.

To sum up, also in view of the following vv. 28-30, it is possible to note the specific and universal value of the three characters in the story just examined:

- Jesus, witness to the Truth, that is, to God's love for human beings beyond all limits and restraints, comes to the end of his earthly presence. He puts the final seal on his testimony, concretely proposing his kingship to those who listen to his word. His mother and his disciple are faithful in their faith, that is, in their trust in this love. Consequently Jesus can reveal to them the depths of their mutual vocation.

- The mother of Jesus is designated in her vocation as woman and mother, a condition that allows her to symbolise the messianic people that awaits, gives and gives birth to the Messiah. From there, in the inescapable reference to a donation of love that begins in Cana of Galilee and culminates on Calvary, she directly helps the birth of every believer in the God of Jesus Christ.

- The beloved disciple is the personification of the perfect disciple (cf. Mt 5:48), the true believer in Christ, the believer who has entered and is called to remain always in the existential logic of his Master. He is the emblem of those who have faith and live it in a credible way.

Each person is identified with his or her own vocation and representative capacity. It remains always and in any case a circuit of love that is completely enveloping and densely concrete, beyond any preceptism, any moralism, any externally compulsory exercise of freedom.

#### **4. Is Mary also present elsewhere in the New Testament?**

There are other New Testament passages in which Mary of Nazareth is mentioned in various ways: see Gal 4:4; Mk 3:31-35 (par. Mt 12:46-50; Lk 8:19-21); Mk 6:3 (par. Mt 13:55-56); Lk 11:27-28; Acts 1:14. If we consider them from a chronological perspective, at least at the level of the final editing of the individual books of the NT, we can make some observations that do not add much to what has been said previously.

In all these passages the importance of Mary's role appears much less conspicuous than in the Lucan and Johannine passages examined above. In fact, what emerges from the texts proposed in the preceding paragraph does not add anything to the depth of the relationship between mother and son, nor to the historicity of that relationship, but it does significantly reaffirm that the bond to which the Gospel Jesus attaches the greatest importance is not the carnal one, that of blood, but that of the heart and of the existential choices deriving from an effective interiorization of the divine will.

On the other hand, several of his contemporaries show that they are guided simply by the past and by current visual perceptions, not by an open and passionate listening to the words of the Nazarene: they try to reduce the impact that what he says has on listeners who are not prejudicially hostile.

The passage from the Acts of the Apostles constitutes, in a certain sense, the stylised conclusion of Mary's life, particularly from Gabriel's announcement onwards: prayer, in the dimension of the first community of disciples of Jesus Christ, is the qualifying mode of expression to render the search for a relationship with God himself. And this shows that Mary, by accepting to be part of the small group of those who accepted to be disciples of Jesus after

his infamous death as Crucified and his appearances as Risen and before Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:1ff), was able, whatever the difficulties, to existentially accept the word of her son, confirming herself in all the daily power of her faith.

Another case discussed in particular is that of Rev 12:1-6.

<sup>1</sup>*A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.* <sup>2</sup>*She was with child, crying out in labor pains.* <sup>3</sup>*Then there appeared another sign in the sky: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems;* <sup>4</sup>*his tail dragged a third of the stars of heaven, and he cast them down to the earth. The dragon stood before the woman, who was about to give birth, to devour the child as soon as she had borne it.* <sup>5</sup>*She gave birth to a son, destined to rule all nations with a scepter of iron. And her son was taken up to God and to his throne.* <sup>6</sup>*But the woman fled into the wilderness, where God had prepared a refuge for her to feed her for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.*

The woman of whom this passage speaks - a text that has known countless representations in the figurative arts over many centuries - is not necessarily Mary, mother of Jesus: in the history of exegesis and hermeneutics, the readings have been varied. The figure of Israel or the Church are the other most recurrent ones.

Only the outward description of this woman (v. 1) is clearly compatible with the three alternative interpretations mentioned above. In fact, the same statement about the violent abduction of the newborn child could only be explained for Israel: Christ, though begotten of Israel, was taken away from him because of his unbelief. But how, then, are we to understand the attention and care that God lavishes on the woman, even after the child has been taken from her? (cf. E. Corsini, p. 311).

A plausible explanation is that, considering the contrast between the splendour of her clothing and the tragic nature of the agony of childbirth, the constellation surrounding her head is a people in waiting, the messianic community: according to the symbolism of the angels of the seven churches, the individual communities and the church as a whole are earthly and heavenly realities. Certainly also this woman, now placed in heaven, then fled into the desert pursued by her antagonist, the dragon, and the desert is on earth. We know then that the woman does not represent an individual, but a messianic people full of hope. However, the gestation of men and women has always taken place on the path of a conflictual history. For the editor of the text, true salvation (the child) is already present, though “raptured”; it is now made visible in the individual and collective victories of a suffering church, and will become totally visible in the coming of Jesus (cf. R. Foulkes, pp. 805-806).

However, the idea that interprets the birth of the infant as the birth of Jesus as Messiah through his death remains stimulating, based on the symbolism of birth through death found in Jn 16:20-22: on the night before his death, Jesus said that the disciples were in labour like a woman about to give birth.

These brief remarks show how difficult it is to give a unilateral Marian reading of the images presented in this splendid New Testament passage and how legitimate it is to move on, always considering the attestations that are certainly attributable to Mary of Nazareth.

## **5. Concluding remarks on a “serious” Mariology**

Between the end of the first century B.C. and the first century A.D. Mary of Nazareth was an important figure for God and from God, for human beings and by human beings individually and communally. The verses in Lk 1-2, Mt 1-2 and Jn 2 and 19 - passages in which she is explicitly mentioned and directly active - clearly indicate the basis of this ethical and religious significance. This significance is essentially rooted in her choice of intelligent, responsible and passionate trust in the God of Jesus Christ. She is the believer who seeks to understand, in heart and mind, how she can be useful to the project in which God has invited her to participate with a decisive role.

Every other characteristic stems from this demanding and joyful, luminous and tragic task that she has accepted to carry out: to make way, in her womb, for the incarnation of God in human history.

Her virginity, her conception free from original sin, her bodily assumption into heaven - just to mention the most important aspects also at the level of religious piety - are to be understood always and only in relation to this fact. All of this without ever forgetting that only this first aspect - virginity before the birth of Jesus - is unequivocally mentioned in the biblical sources, while the others derive from traditions of faith and devotion that are not primarily based on the biblical texts, and which formed the basis for important ecclesial decisions well after the first century AD.

These reflections also show how unfounded in biblical terms, and therefore in Christian terms, are all forms of Marian worship that end up idolising Mary as such. They are based on a vain credulity, which has replaced serious commitment with, for example, “easy reliance on merely exterior practices: the sterile and fleeting motion of sentiment, so alien to the style of the Gospel, which demands persevering and concrete work” (Paul VI, *Marialis cultus*, n. 38; see in general nos. 28-39).

Either Marian veneration makes it possible to direct the life of the human being towards following the God of Jesus Christ, or it is completely extraneous to the Christian faith and therefore unacceptable in this context. In fact, Christians in general and Catholics in particular do not have the Trinity as God plus a woman, Mary. She is therefore not on God’s side looking towards men, but on the side of men looking towards the God of Jesus Christ.

The various Christian denominations can build a common understanding of the figure of Mary by showing the courage and freedom of heart and mind needed to put behind them elements of separation that are not based on biblically understood faith. While various Protestants will have to avoid any prejudicial distancing from the concrete figure of Mary, on the path to Christian unity “it will help if Catholics make their own the effort of the Reformation tradition to maintain in everything the unique mediation of Christ, the primacy of faith and grace, and the precedence of God’s word in the Bible also with reference to Mary. This fosters theological accuracy in Mariology and a sober moderation in the veneration of Mary” (Communio Sanctorum, p. 136), which is about as radically and respectfully Marian as one can get. How can this be achieved?

For example, by putting the following into practice more and more:

- praying with the Magnificat, from the liturgy of the hours to every occasion of public prayer and formation for prayer;

- removing all unbiblical encrustations and additions to the recitation of the Rosary;

- put in the background prayers such as “Salve, Regina” and any others that give space to an anthropology that is not very evangelical (human life cannot be looked upon above all as “a valley of tears”, otherwise why would God have created women and men, perhaps to predispose them to suffer?);

- eliminate as far as possible all interpretations and presentations of the figure of Mary that smack of ethical renunciation, childish and irresponsible reliance, sweet emotions (pictures, songs, prayers, homilies, etc.) because they have nothing to do with the mother of Jesus;

- remove all possible space from popular celebrations (processions, adoration, etc.) which appear to be manifestations of a pagan religious substratum simply covered in pseudo-Christian spirituality.

Mary is a woman of faith who is all the more exceptional as an adult and responsible religious model, even in our time. Marian devotion is certainly very important, but it must never be forgotten that one must come to Mary only in relation to the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth. The God of Jesus Christ shows Mary, who constantly invites us to look to him.

Constantly reviewing Marian cultic patterns and religious practices is an opportunity to ask oneself day by day what kind of Christian faith one believes one has.

Mary lived, from the annunciation onwards, in repeated discernment of what she was experiencing: this is what we all need today in this time of great difficulty and new opportunities for human life.

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