

Love and Truth in Marian Devotion

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The first expression of Marian devotion is found in the Bible, in Luke 1:39–45, and its central figure is Elizabeth. It is an episode of fundamental importance because Elizabeth's attitude toward Mary arises precisely under the action of the Holy Spirit: "Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry" (Lk. 1:41–42a). And so, under the action of the Spirit, she addresses three expressions of praise to Mary. The first: "Blessed are you among women" (Lk. 1:42). The second: "And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Lk. 1:43). This exclamation expresses Elizabeth's wonder and humility at Mary's visit: Why is this granted me? ("Who am I to receive so great a gift?"). Finally, the third: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Lk. 1:45). Thus, we need not be concerned with explaining or justifying our devotion to Mary, or with searching for further biblical foundations for it. This text is already eloquent enough: praise of Mary arises from the action of the Holy Spirit.

It would be useful, however, to evaluate our own Marian devotion in the light of this revealed Word. First of all, each of us should ask: Is my devotion truly inspired and nourished by the action of the Holy Spirit? For it is the Spirit who knows Mary fully. It is he, in fact, who works in Mary in an altogether singular way: he fashioned her according to the image of Christ and guided her throughout her life, finding in her complete and docile openness.

We are thus called to allow our Marian devotion to be enlightened and progressively transformed by the action of the Spirit. In this way, it can become ever more spontaneous and authentic, as it was in Elizabeth, without our having to seek continually new reasons or elaborate arguments for loving Mary. Love, in fact, does not arise from reasoning alone, but above all from an interior knowledge that involves the whole person. A reflection from Saint Thomas Aquinas is illuminating on this point: "A thing can be loved more than it is known, since it can be loved perfectly even though it is not perfectly known" (*ST* I–II, q. 27, a. 2). Marian devotion is called to mature in faith under the action of grace.

And it is precisely this that will make our devotion authentic: it will not be the product of our imagination, our desires, or our need to construct for ourselves a strong and reassuring Catholic identity. Rather, it will be a journey of gradual conformity to the truth, to what Mary truly is and to what pleases her in our devotion.

Let us continue: "Blessed are you among women" (Lk. 1:42), Elizabeth says. We might hear in these words an invitation to recognize in Mary a singular, unique beauty, in which the beauty of God's grace shines forth in a wholly particular way. If we seek a beauty capable of inspiring admiration, we find it in Mary. For consecrated persons in particular, if we wish to remain faithful to our vocation, a direct relationship with Mary enables us to bring serenity, peace, and tranquility to our search for beauty, admiration, and love. For we can be tempted to seek these things continually elsewhere, without finding lasting peace. Contemplating Mary—her interior beauty, her fullness of grace, the unsurpassable way in which she embodies womanhood—can

help us bring peace to these longings and lead them back to their deepest source. This does not mean renouncing the beauty of earthly affections and human relationships but learning to experience them with greater freedom. It does us so much good to stop and gaze upon Mary in order to rediscover, little by little, peace of heart and the joy of our vocation.

This is especially true of Mary's heart. Luke tells us that she kept and pondered in her heart all the events of Jesus' life (cf. Lk. 2:19, 51). Mary's heart preserves the Gospel not only because it treasures the maternal memory of Christ's life and teachings, but also because her entire existence was shaped and enlightened by the action of the Holy Spirit. In this sense, Mary is wholly evangelical. This means that her figure cannot be reduced to the cultural forms of any one era, whether medieval, baroque, or associated with the "*devotio moderna*." In her we rediscover the genuine fragrance and freshness of the Gospel, which the various historical manifestations of Marian devotion can express beautifully, but can sometimes also obscure.

For this reason, entering into an authentic relationship with Mary, allowing ourselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit, can help us receive from the Gospel the light we need to discern and understand our personal journey. Mary does not lead us away from the Gospel, but helps us receive it more faithfully, authentically, and deeply.

In this sense, popular piety is evangelical. Indeed, it can become a simple and profound way of approaching the mystery of Christ, without needing to leave Mary's maternal gaze—quite the opposite, by remaining attached to her gaze. As Pope Francis said, Marian popular piety is able to read "in this maternal image all the mysteries of the Gospel."¹ For many of the faithful, turning their gaze toward Mary thus becomes a concrete way of drawing near to Jesus. I have known a number of people who, because of problems, anger, and painful experiences, have distanced themselves from the Church. And yet they still keep a little image of Mary in their handbag or wallet. That apparently simple gesture made me reflect on how, despite their wounds and their distance, something of their bond with faith had not been entirely broken. And precisely through Mary, those people, in spite of everything, keep a door open to Christ.

In authentic Marian piety, truth and love meet and are united. Ordinary believers who turn to Mary know her, even if they are not always able to develop Mariological explanations or express the theological reasons for their devotion. They know her through other categories, other languages, other gestures. Their devotion, therefore, is not devoid of truth: it is a form of knowledge expressed through prayer, affection, trust, and spiritual experience. But alongside truth, it also preserves an intense love, an encounter of love that is a pure gift. It is in this perspective that we can understand Elizabeth's words: "And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Lk. 1:43). Why is this granted me? The Marian devotion that pleases Mary is not the result of our efforts or mental constructs, but a gift that we are called to receive and allow to mature.

I like to recall how the Aparecida Document describes the experience of a pilgrim who arrives before an image of Mary:

¹ FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), no. 285: AAS 105 (2013), 1135.

“Arrival is the encounter of love. The pilgrim’s gaze rests on an image that symbolizes God’s affection and closeness. Love pauses, contemplates mystery, and enjoys it in silence. [...] A living spiritual experience is compressed into a brief moment.”²

I would like to dwell on these words: love “contemplates mystery.” The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith’s Doctrinal Note *Mater Populi Fidelis* describes concretely how this experience is intimately connected to the truths of the Gospel:

“[Mary’s] countenance sings the mystery of the Incarnation. In the face of the Mother who was pierced by the sword (cf. Lk. 2:35), the People of God recognize the mystery of the Cross, and in that same face—bathed in paschal light—they perceive that Christ is alive” (*MPF* 77).

In Mary’s face, then, we contemplate the fundamental mysteries of our faith: the Incarnation, the Cross, and the Resurrection. This is not because Mary possesses something that the Father or Christ lacks, as though the Father were distant and Mary close, or as though Christ were the judge and Mary mercy. No, quite the contrary: Mary is the singular transparency of God’s closeness, his mercy, and his tender compassion, as revealed to us in the Gospel. This is a criterion for evaluating whether our Marian devotion corresponds to the Gospel and is therefore the work of the Spirit within us.

It could happen, then, that someone has studied Mariology for a long time, knows the theological controversies, and is able to discuss and argue competently about Mary, but has not yet developed that contemplative gaze which knows how to bring love and truth together. It can even happen that, from the pedestal of their own learning, they end up looking down upon the Marian devotion of ordinary believers.

But we must be careful. When we move from theological reflection to the concrete expressions of popular piety, we encounter yet another language. Many questions concerning Marian titles, formulas, and their interpretations occupy an important place in theological debates. This is legitimate work, sometimes necessary, and much loved by certain Marian groups. But we must not confuse these discussions with the ordinary experience of the great majority of the People of God, who express their love for Mary in another way, much more simply and without complications. They do so above all with words such as “Dearest Mother,” “My Virgin Mother,” or “My dear Lady.” They have no need of new or varied titles. What these expressions chiefly manifest is a profound filial trust, which needs little explanation to make itself understood. It is the trust contained in the brief invocation: “*Mater mea, fiducia mea*” (“My Mother, my trust”).

And we find this trust again in the concluding words of Elizabeth’s greeting: “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was promised her by the Lord” (Lk. 1:45). It is the joy that comes from trust. For this reason, true Marian devotion leads us to trust fully in Christ, who fulfils his promises and can cause goodness to spring up even in the midst of evil. Entrusting ourselves to Mary ultimately means learning to trust Christ with her and as she did. It is like feeling welcomed by the Mother so as to abandon ourselves more completely into the arms of the Son.

² LATIN AMERICAN EPISCOPAL COUNCIL, *Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean* (Aparecida, 13–31 May 2007), no. 259.

We must also add that Mary is the Mother pierced by the sword, who offers herself before the Cross, and thus the woman who understands all our sorrows. The People of God understand this closeness in suffering through their own experience, as a distinctive characteristic of Mary, even when they cannot formulate it with theological precision. I believe it is of fundamental importance to appreciate how the doctrinal note *Mater populi fidelis* expresses this:

“She is the Mother who gave the world the Author of Redemption and of Grace, who stood firm at the foot of the cross (cf. Jn. 19:25), suffering alongside her Son and **offering** the pain of her maternal heart pierced by the sword (cf. Lk. 2:35). From the Incarnation to the cross and the Resurrection, she was united to Christ in a way that is **unique and that far surpasses** any other believer” (*MPF* 32).

For this reason, the document recognizes Mary as the “**first and foremost collaborator in the work of Redemption and grace**” (*MPF* 22), and states that “Mary has a **unique** collaboration in the saving work that Christ carries out in his Church” (*MPF* 42).

Ordinary people also express this fundamental truth through the simple gesture of drawing near to the Mother. In this encounter, many recognize something that they feel they do not find elsewhere in quite the same way: a maternal closeness which, amid suffering, helps them find meaning in what they endure and perceive divine tenderness more concretely.

The Christian people often live this experience in popular piety without needing to delve into controversies over Marian titles, the various theological schools, or debates about particular formulations. In their hearts, they recognize in Mary the maternal face of a faith that has its center and fulfilment in Christ.

In this regard, what Pope Francis wrote in *Evangelii Gaudium* is significant. There he reverses the expression “Mary leads us to Christ” and says something surprising. After recalling Mary’s presence on Calvary, he states: “At the foot of the cross, at the supreme hour of the new creation, Christ led us to Mary. He brought us to her because he did not want us to journey without a mother” (*EG* 285). Consequently, it is not a matter of Mary leading us to Christ and then, once we have reached Christ, leaving her behind. No. At every stage of the spiritual life, we need her, our Mother. So the reverse also happens: Christ himself leads us to Mary. Otherwise, our experience of faith would lack the maternal face of divine love.

I would like to conclude by offering you a wish and a prayer. I ask the Holy Spirit to work in each of you who study Mariology, so that the action of the Holy Spirit may deepen and bring your Marian devotion to maturity, making it ever more conformed to the truth of the Gospel and ever more capable of finding expression in love. May your studies never distance you from prayer, nor your theological research cause you to forget the simplicity of the faithful who turn to Mary with a disarming trust, the kind of trust that pleases Mary so much. Above all, I wish that your study of Mary may continually lead you back to those two inseparable places: the Mary of the Gospels and the Mary loved by ordinary believers.