

## SPIRITUALITY OF UNITY

# Focolare - the 'Work of Mary'

Each year members of the Focolare deepen their understanding of one element of the spirituality of unity. In 2017 it was Jesus, crucified and forsaken. This year, it is Mary, the mother of Jesus. Bishop **Brendan Leahy** and **Judith Povilus** provide a context for our understanding of Mary and her place within the Focolare Movement.

**Mary, the mother of Jesus**, the mother of God. She is the woman most mentioned in the Gospel. More than any other woman in history, she has inspired individuals, families and nations. Indeed, throughout the centuries, countless girls have been named after her. Some countries even bear witness to her presence in critical moments of their history. Just think of how much Our Lady of Guadalupe, *The Morenita*, who appeared in 1531 to Juan Diego, means for Mexicans, and indeed for all of South America, right up to today.

From the very beginnings of the Christian story, Mary has inspired poets, song writers and theologians. The ancient oriental hymn known as the *Akatisthos* is a fine example. In the second millennium, the figure of Mary impacted Western culture in so many ways. Here we can think of how St Bernard praised her in the final song of Dante's *Paradise*: 'Virgin mother, daughter of your son', or Martin Luther's striking commentary on the *Magnificat*. And, of course, we are all familiar with the numerous frescoes and paintings, altar sculptures and statues with a Marian theme found in churches and art

Centro Ave Arte, Loppiano - Photo: Jan Morovic

galleries all over the world, not to mention the sublime Marian icons in the Orthodox tradition.

### Mary in a secular society

The era in which we now live, compared to others, is characterized by secularism. And yet, still today Mary is a reference point for many. Marian shrines still attract great crowds. In India, for example, the Basilica of St Mary of the Mount in Bandra, a suburb of Mumbai, is always crowded, not only with Christians, but also with Hindus and Muslims. Mary, as is often noted, is mentioned thirty four times in the Qur'an.

When it comes to contemporary art, music, film and literature, we might be surprised to note just how many references there are to Mary. The rock band U2's *Magnificent* is partly inspired by Mary's *Magnificat*. Colm Tóibín's *The Testament of Mary*, shortlisted for the 2013 Man Booker Prize, reflects on Mary in Ephesus. In the film, *The Passion of Christ*, Mel Gibson views the passion through Mary's eyes. And right around the world, we find modern artistic representations of Mary: the works of Ismael Saincilus in Haiti, Balagtas in the Philippines, Andy Warhol in the United States and the Jesus Mafa project in the Cameroon.

### Mary as the model of the Church

So, yes, Mary continues today to attract great attention and veneration. Nevertheless, there are also criticisms of Marian devotion. It is sometimes said that traditional Marian piety is the result of a patriarchal and clerical culture that presents Mary, on the one hand, as a submissive, servile type of person or, on the other hand, as a person honoured with so many exalted privileges and titles that she becomes distant from us.

In recent decades, attempts have been made to 'update' our understanding of Mary. For example, the Second Vatican Council depicted Mary no longer as an isolated individual, but rather within the people of God and as the model of the Church. And in the Churches

of the Reformation, there's something of a rediscovery of Mary, after several centuries in which her role was a source of controversy on account of some exaggerations in Catholic devotional piety that seemed to obscure the primacy of Jesus Christ as the one mediator.

### The Work of Mary

Chiara Lubich (1920-2008), founder of the Focolare Movement, didn't set out to offer an updated reflection on Mary and yet, in many ways, through her spiritual experience that has touched millions of men and

women across the world, she has helped many, not just Catholics, to rediscover and understand Mary in a new, modern way. Gifted with a particular charism, gift of the Spirit, Chiara's experience marked the twentieth century and beyond. As a pen in the hand of a painter, in the humility of knowing herself to be 'nothing', Chiara Lubich, with all her creativity, was chosen by God to give life to a Movement that was given the name 'Work of Mary', when it received official approval by the Catholic Church. The upshot of all this is a prophetic

experience that has helped and still helps many to notice the contemporary relevancy of Mary in a new way.

### Living Mary

'Mary' is one of the distinctive points of the spirituality of unity that characterizes the Focolare Movement – but she is much more. She is at the heart of Chiara Lubich's spiritual doctrine. One can sense the discreet presence of Mary, the mother of God, her 'style', as it were, throughout all of Chiara's life and in her writings. As she herself commented on one occasion to people following her spiritual pathway: 'My vocation, which is also yours, more than speaking with Mary... is to live Mary, to be her, to do as she did, and, above all, that she should relive in us.'

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Extracts from 'Mary – Flower of Humanity' by  
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