

SPIRITUALITY OF UNITY



The joy of discovery

We continue this year's theme on Mary, the mother of Jesus, with a personal reflection by **Callan Slipper**. Callan lives in the Focolare community in Welwyn Garden City. He is also an Anglican priest and was recently appointed as the National Ecumenical Officer for the Church of England.

Speaking about Mary is at once easy and difficult – easy because I feel my relationship with her strongly, but difficult because it is something intimate. Perhaps, however, it might be of interest because I belong to a Church that welcomed the Reform of the Western Church, namely, the Church of England.

A living relationship with Mary, however, is a gift I have received from my Roman Catholic friends and, in particular, from Chiara Lubich and her spirituality of unity. I was not born to it. Even though there are parts of the Church of England where Mary is honoured, and despite the fact that the Anglican Church has never completely forgotten her, (she is often commemorated liturgically more than any other saint), I come from a part of the Church where Mary was little spoken of. I think it is still like this for most Anglicans.

Sculpted by the Word

My discovery came about in this way... Bit by bit as I started to live the Word of God as it was proposed to me by the spirituality of unity, I began to have new experiences. One of these was to see Mary with new eyes. I felt myself being gently chipped away, sculpted by the Word and perhaps because, in much reduced fashion and only by grace, I began to be a tiny bit more like her, I understood her with new precision.

Like this, discovering the Gospel through life, I discovered Mary too. I experienced that the Word lived, opens up the Scriptures which then, when it is lived, give us life – life deepens Scripture and Scripture deepens life.

Becoming mother of God

I found that living mutual love with others was the linchpin of this new vision. In living out radical love with one another, we gave space to the presence of Jesus in our midst, as he promised 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them' (Mt. 18: 20). Jesus, therefore, in some real way, was born among us. Together we had a 'maternal' role towards him. More than that, I discovered Jesus not only outside, that is, in our midst, but also within, in the depths of myself, since love is him living in me.

Like that I saw Mary as a pattern for me and for us, because with his presence the Risen Jesus became 'embodied' in us individually and among us collectively, making us become 'mother of God'.

But this first discovery brought me to another one, almost more shocking. I found that the transformation I had to live was a kind of total self-annihilation. Which is to say that to live as 'mother of God' it is necessary to have all the attitudes of love, for example, knowing how to welcome the other, perhaps making a fuss of them, listening, even putting myself beneath their feet. What came into light was the 'negative' element implicit in love. It is necessary to become little through love, indeed 'nothing' and so become, in the nothingness of my finitude, 'mother' of the Infinite who is God. Paradoxically, but it is also a thing of great beauty, the more we find ourselves to be a created being, fragile, nothing in ourselves, the more we are capable of opening ourselves to the Creator, the Almighty, the All.



Photo: Città Nuova

I was fascinated, and I still am, by the fact that like this it is possible to see in Mary the infinitely small that contains the infinitely large, the shadow that puts in relief the light, the silence that gives way to the Word, the humble one that all generations will call blessed, precisely because out of her nothingness, as a creature, is born the All of the Creator.

The paradox of nothingness

This was not something abstract. I could see Mary also in people who lived like this. Hence I saw humility lived by someone who had been given tremendous light by God and who was naturally in a position of leadership. I remember a meeting of the young people of the Focolare Movement, where I saw such a person raise her hand to ask for our silence. It was a simple gesture, completely lacking in bossiness, but completely realistic in accepting her position in regard to us. I saw unfurling before me a picture of true humility: a person who, like Mary, was nothing in and for herself, but someone who in herself gave all the space to God.

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As the years have gone by, this 'paradox of nothingness' has become always more important for me. I have understood that it is the key to opening myself to life in God because it means the capacity to receive within me the Infinite that, otherwise, cannot be there. It is as if we can abolish the confines of our finiteness if, out of love, we live in nothingness. Then my purified humanity becomes capable of receiving God into itself.

And here Mary is the great teacher. She was the first to do it. Such a receptivity was the necessary condition for God to be born in her womb.

Behold your mother

But at the same time this making herself nothing is evident also in what she experienced at the foot of the cross when, desolate, she saw her son die and she had,



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because he alone saves us all, to let him go, forsaken by heaven and earth. In this way she lived a solitude parallel to his and, because she was necessarily excluded from his saving action, she was by the same token effectively included. Like this she teaches me how I can, indeed how I must, risk all for love of God.

But there is an important thing that hugely intensifies my relationship with her. In the Fourth Gospel (Jn 19: 26-27), Jesus on the cross gives Mary as mother to his beloved disciple and, at the same moment, gives

the disciple to Mary as her son. Yet precisely in that moment, dying on the cross, Jesus was generating the divine life, that is, himself, in all and hence also in that disciple. Mary, who had just one son, Jesus, therefore finds her son, Jesus, in a real way also in that disciple. And so, since with his salvific act Jesus generates himself in everyone, Mary finds herself with that same motherhood of him in everyone. In that case, the disciple at the foot of the cross represents the whole of humanity. If it is so for the whole of humanity, then it is so also for me. Therefore, because of what Jesus did, Mary is the Mother of Jesus in me; she is my mother.

A living person

In that case Mary is not simply a model to follow. As a model she is also a symbol or an icon that communicates to me, when I think of her, something beyond words and concepts, something that makes me grow in the depth of my being. But Mary is more. She is a person, a special person because she is a Mother. I meet a living person.

And I find that Mary is a presence accompanying my life. Something that happens in any relationship among persons is significant here: we change under the influence of the other, taking on, as it were, the colour of the other. Therefore, going beyond being a symbol or icon, the person of Mary communicates her being with a particular intensity. And the more I am in relationship with her, the more there grows in me a love for the nothingness full of God, the love of virtue and of all things that take us to God, a merciful love for others. I could say that Mary paints me with herself, even though between me and her there is an abyss.

And here I really must thank my Catholic friends, because they have taught me how to deepen this meeting with Mary. There are many other things that could be said, but perhaps these are the essential things of my personal experience at this point. It has been an enormous enrichment for my personal walk with God. I am grateful to God for the gift, but also because he has, so to speak, given me the grace to come fresh to the beauty of Mary. Understanding her in the light of the charism of unity by means of the twin axes of the Word and of life, I have seen things I believe I would not otherwise have grasped.

It almost takes your breath away when you become aware that God, because he is love, has made himself little before one of his creatures. But it is even more unnerving that, because he is love, he wants to make himself little before each one of us. 