

Mary's faith

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Introduction

Pope Benedict XVI invites us
to revitalise, celebrate and share our faith;
these pages aim to help us rediscover
the faith of Mary, mother of the Lord Jesus.

We will enter into the life
of a person who has given her all for her child.
It is a faith which is marked by love and passion,
fidelity and mission,
song, joy and adoration.

We will journey with Mary
through days of light
and starless nights.

She will teach us
to be “servants of the Word”
and “disciples of the Word” in a maternal way:
the finest love
we are capable of giving.

Mary leaves us with a secret:
faith, prayer, light and fidelity
are born in the sanctuary of the heart.

The year of faith

11 October 2012 – 24 November 2013

His holiness, Pope Benedict XVI, has invited the whole Catholic Church and each of its members to participate in "a year of faith". The apostolic letter "Porta Fidei" issued on the 11 October 2011 is the document promulgating this special year of faith. We may ask ourselves what is the pope's purpose and what goals does he envisage.

It is evident that the pope wishes that "faith" be the focus for a whole year so that it may be renewed, deepened, clarified, lived more consciously, radiated, rediscovered in order for it to become a daily reality in our life. The faithful should arrive at "an exact knowledge of the faith so as to reinvigorate it, purify it and confess it" (Porta Fidei, 4)

The pope has chosen the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of Vatican Council II and the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church to launch this year of faith. It is due to commence on the 11th October, 2012 and close on the 24th November 2013 on the feast of Christ the King. In October 2012, the synod of bishops is to take place with the theme: "The new evangelisation for the transmission of the Christian faith." (Porta Fidei, 4)

Why has the pope taken this initiative? It is because we live in a world undergoing rapid change. Progress in all the sciences is so rapid and many sided that succeeding generations lose touch with the previous ones and faith is no longer passed on from parents to children. "The basic contents of faith ... have to be confirmed, understood and explored ever anew so as to bear consistent witness in historical circumstances very different from those of the past" (Porta Fidei).

Today the cultural context is based on values other than those of faith in a world where the economy, finance, politics, the achievements of science and technology and short term gratification prevail. "To a greater extent than in the past faith is now being subjected to a series of questions arising from a changed mentality which, especially today, limits the field of rational certainties to that of scientific and technological discoveries." (Porta Fidei, 12)

It may be that the media are fiercely opposed to Christian values but, more often, they neglect them as values having little impact on how life is lived. We live in a secular culture and transcendent values are ignored without any ensuing drama. Faith is diminished not only among the faithful but also the pastors. The pope invites us to rediscover all the value, strength and beauty of faith which asserts that man is destined

for eternal life and called to a life which is full, beautiful, holy and everlasting. Faith is the key to an understanding of man and the universe. (Porta Fidei)

2- Jesus, the focus of faith.

The first means of fortifying our faith is to strengthen our relationship with the Lord, he who is "the source and perfection of our faith" (Heb 12,2). The return to Christ is at the heart of the pope's message; it permeates like a leitmotif. Benedict XVI writes: "May this year of faith make our relationship with the Lord still more substantial since only in him is found the surety to look to the future and the guarantee of an authentic and lasting love" (Porta Fidei 15). "Belief in Jesus Christ, then, is the way to arrive definitively at salvation" (Porta Fidei 3).

Our bond with the Lord is strengthened in prayer and in meditation on the Word of God, in our participation in the liturgy, in the eucharist, in a life of service towards our brothers and sisters, ("faith without works is dead") (James 2,14-18) (Porta Fidei 14), in our attitude towards the models of faith, saints and martyrs, and especially the one who has been declared "blessed" because of her faith, the mother of the Lord (Porta fidei 13).

But the light of faith comes to us through study, spiritual reading, conferences, meetings and retreats. Our hearts must be open to welcome the Lord but the intellect must also play a part: faith is a texture of affection and intelligence. Saint Peter invites us "to know how to give reason for our faith" (1P 3,15), to explain it, communicate it and transmit it through all the means which modern technology provides. The church has always valued both the world of the mystical (love) and that of theology (thought).

The pope invites the whole church and each of the faithful to embark on this journey in the year of faith: "It will be a good opportunity to usher the whole church into a time of particular reflection and rediscovery of the faith." (4)

Following chapter 11 of the letter to the Hebrews which focuses on the models of faith the pope draws our attention to those who are our models of faith, the first being the virgin Mary: "By faith Mary accepted the angel's word and believed the message that she was to become the mother of God in the obedience of her devotion" (13). Through her example we hold our gaze fixed on Christ "the beginning and the end of faith" (Porta Fidei, 13).

The following pages aim to help the faithful journey with the faith of the young mother of the saviour and in the footsteps of Mary rediscover their faith, strengthen it, purify it,

activate it so that it is totally centred on the Lord. As Mary has centred her life on Jesus, the child given to her, so will our life centre on Christ and we will proclaim him to all those near to us.

3 A life of faith

“In faith Mary welcomed the word of the angel and believed the message that she was to become the mother of God in the obedience of her devotion (Lk 1,38). On visiting Elizabeth she raised her song of praise to the Most High for the wonders he works in all those who place their trust in him (Lk 1,46-55).

In joy and anxiety she gives birth to her son as a virgin.

With the help of Joseph, her spouse, she took Jesus to Egypt to save him from Herod’s persecution.

In this same faith she followed the Lord as he preached and stayed with him right up till his death on Golgotha.

In faith Mary tasted the fruits of Jesus’ resurrection and, keeping each memory in her heart, she shared them with the twelve gathered with her in the cenacle to receive the Holy Spirit (Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*).

This observation of the pope gives us a glimpse of the Virgin Mary’s life and shows that she is guided fully by faith. In faith Mary makes a total offering of herself to her child; she consents to having this child as the centre of her life; it is a maternal faith. Mary is aware that a mother is the first educator of the child; education entails intelligence, time, patience and freedom granted to the child. Mary will develop within herself a maternal, responsible love. Her reply to Gabriel demonstrates that precisely: “I am the servant of the Lord!” (Lk 1,38) She is fully at the service of the child. Jesus recognises that. He knows that he is loved; it is his first experience as a man: to be loved. True faith always leads to love and love opens wide the doors to the child’s growth:”Meanwhile the child grew to maturity and he was filled with wisdom; and God’s favour was with him” (Lk 2,40).”Jesus grew in wisdom, in stature, and in favour with God and me” (Lk 2,52). In this sound upbringing of Jesus is concealed a maternal presence, constant although discreet. With the support of Joseph Mary enacted her role as mother and educator. In his childhood Jesus benefited from a love which was both maternal and paternal thereby ensuring a balanced human character.

4 Between shadow and light, 1

We might happen to think:”Since Mary was immaculate and had received this extraordinary message, since her son was the son of God, everything would be straightforward for her and she would live an undisturbed life of faith.”

Let’s be aware that Mary lived through unique situations for which there were no precedents:”the nature of her maternity, the nature of the child, stripped of his divinity, with only his human nature in evidence.”Mary is surrounded by the mystery of God, something always greater than her, something beyond her understanding. From a human point of view that is unsettling.

Mary did not lack the light of belief. She was guided by what Gabriel had told her:”Nothing is impossible for God!” (Lk 1,37) Yes, the annunciation had been a time of enlightenment and the child’s titles ingrained in the light and in the attentive heart of the mother. Mary was intuitively aware that God loved her; she had a strong awareness of God’s presence: “The Lord is with you... the Holy Spirit will come upon you... the power of the Most-High will overshadow you”. These are powerful words which energise fully the heart of Mary and then this child who grows in her, who ravishes her heart and becomes the driving force of her life. She had heard the name of the child “Jesus”of whom the Letter to the Hebrews would say is:”the origin and perfection of our faith”

But God does not act like an anaesthetic. Mary had to journey through the dark valley of trust: How will Joseph fare? How will her parents and relations react on seeing her pregnant? What is the threat hanging over her? Will she be ostracised or stoned? It only remains for her to cling firmly to the words of Gabriel:”Nothing is impossible with God”(Lk 1,37).

“God is light!”(1Jn 1,5) There had been much light on the day of the annunciation and the child had appeared to Mary in the grandeur which Gabriel had presented him. She was so aware of this grandeur that she understood this child could not be of human origin. Despite this light, Mary will need throughout her life to reflect, pray and allow the annunciation to fulfil its potential. As a mother Mary will always keep an eye on the child who transcends her, surprises her and she is aware of times where she doesn’t understand. Simeon speaks of “the light of the nations, the glory of Israel”, but he adds that he is also”a sign of contradiction and that a sword will pierce the soul” of the mother.(Lk 2, 32-34). Of Joseph who is also present, the old man of the temple says nothing. Mary and Joseph don’t understand. And there is further misunderstanding when they discover their son in the temple during his first pilgrimage to Jerusalem:”Did

you not know I must be busy with my Father's affairs?" (Lk 2,49) And so this Son of the Father returns with them to Nazareth and stays with them for twenty years leading an ordinary life: but not so ordinary, for during this time the great prophet grows in maturity.

Isn't our faith like that of the young Mary who knew moments of light, grace and deep intimacy with God followed by the crossings of desert land where faith runs underground and is hidden in darkness. Mary walked in the valley of darkness, she walked to the cross and the cenacle and joins in the first prayer of the church. She journeyed right up to her assumption when the resurrection of her son empowered her fully, both body and soul.

Sr Emmanuelle Billoteau offers a striking reflection on the night when the ten virgins await the arrival of the groom: "The gospel points to the theme of darkness: night of faith, night of a world from which God seems absent, night of our own heaviness of heart; but, in contrast, night of the exodus from Egypt, night of the resurrection, night of the return in glory of Christ. So let us not flee the night despite the fears that haunt us and the trials that test our fragility. Rather let us experience it by allowing ourselves to be enlightened, guided, liberated by the word of God. Is it not the word that awakens us, draws us?"

5 Between shadow and light, 2

If Elizabeth praises Mary on account of her faith it is because she recognises this was no easy task. And if Luke portrays Mary as “happy for having believed” it is to offer a model of faith knowing that faith is never easy and it is difficult for us to have faith even the size of a mustard seed.

For the sake of the promised child Mary accepted risking the loss of Joseph, of being rejected by her clan, of finding herself quite alone without support, she who was only an adolescent girl in a world ruled by men. She was aware of the penalty of stoning for a woman being unfaithful and found pregnant while unmarried or due to be married. We can recall here the words of Jesus: “A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends” (John 15,13). Indeed, for Jesus, his mother had put at stake her whole life. When the woman caught in adultery was brought before Jesus (John 8) it is possible that he thought of his mother: he disarms the hands poised to kill her and saves the adulterous woman because his mother had risked the same fate: the virgin redeems the adulteress. Although these tragic possibilities don’t obscure Mary’s joy they weigh heavily upon it. The Church also celebrates its joy daily while facing difficult situations. In fact trials serve to nourish the joy of faith.

Elizabeth praises Mary specifically for her faith. Carlo Carretto makes this striking statement: “It was easier for Mary to conceive Jesus in her womb than to conceive him in faith¹.” For Mary it was a great joy to hold her child in her arms but there was no evidence of his divinity. And how could the Magnificat be sung while the powerful were still seated on their thrones, while the lowly had to flee by night to Egypt and while the innocent infants were slaughtered in Bethlehem? Both faith and prayer were needed to realise that her son who should have died then was spared in order to bring to men a means of salvation. The powerful at that point of time were not strong enough to frustrate God’s plan. Jesus was not to die as a child; he was destined to grow into adulthood and become a prophet and messiah and so enter into his passion, death and resurrection². The Word sent by the father will not return without having fulfilled the will of the father. Mary had the experience of being among God’s chosen little ones. The marvels of God blossom in a race of liberated slaves and so also in a virgin heavy with the Saviour.

¹ Carlo Carretto, *Beata te che hai creduto* 2 *ibid*.

² Carolo Carretto, *Beata te che hai creduto*: **Idées prises dans différentes pages.**

The faith of Mary relies on these deeds while the powerful remain powerful, while the rich continue to forget the poor, while kings oppress, while the weeds seem more healthy than the wheat. Jesus, her son, will become a victim of these forces. Yet it is from him that will emerge the new human order which Mary sings of in her Magnificat.

6 Between light and shade, 3

When Jesus, a twelve year old, stays back in Jerusalem, Mary becomes aware of the freedom and mission of her son; for a time she is taken by surprise. Her maternal love is put into question; it has to clear a new path in expressing love for this extraordinary young man. The freedom of children precedes their duty to obey. A son is not something to be owned but someone to be guided on the path of his free choice. This reality confronts Mary and Joseph so suddenly that they cannot comprehend (Lk 2,48). Mary, however, has the precise instinct of one who believes; she stores all this in her heart; she allows it to mature within during prayer and the passage of time. Light will not delay in making clear these unexpected moments. To understand is not necessarily to believe while it is true belief to keep in our hearts every word and sign of God. Faith challenges our intelligence. For the Hebrews the heart was also the source of their feelings as well as wisdom. But it is an intelligence which functions in an atmosphere of trust, love and prayer. Prayer is the laboratory of faith.

Then Jesus returns to Nazareth and Mary realises that her son's freedom is growing. It is time for the mother who, until then, had been the teacher to fade into the background and become a disciple while continuing her pilgrimage of faith as Vatican II states³.

Mary experienced stages of growth in her faith. Such was the case when the family seemed to be opposing Jesus (Mk 3,20-21 & 31-35), when the Jewish authorities regarded her son as someone possessed and plotted to kill him and even at Cana when her son replied to her that his hour had not yet come. The greatest time of growth in faith for Mary was at the foot of the cross. Her faith took her along narrow paths from which it emerged stronger. One might believe that to grow in faith is a sign of weakness but nothing is healthier than a faith which grows because it is attentive, alive and confronts difficulties. Mary's faith integrates both joy and suffering. The sword foretold by Simeon truly pierced the mother's heart. She became, like her son, one accustomed to suffering.

It is faith which during the night awaits the dawn and during the night it is wonderful to believe in the dawn⁴. Being faithful is no easy matter, it is not a question of knowledge nor a vision of the mind. It is easier to reason about faith than to have faith. Faith is a

³ Lumen Gentium, 58

⁴ Br Basilio Rueda, A new space for Mary, 1976.

loving act of trust in God. It is easier to compose a theological discourse on faith than to really give one's life to God⁵. Now Mary's life has been truly and fully given to God.

We should understand that we consider the historical events of salvation from afar, after two thousand years of Christian culture. These events were taught to us when we were young and we celebrated them each year. But this was not the case with Mary. She was involved in making history. She lived through the drama of the incarnation and passion as a participant, not a spectator. A great responsibility hung over her. But the shadows were all permeated with light and the light overcame the shadows. Mary knew intuitively that she was partaking in a great story of love.

⁵ Carlo Carretto, *Beata te che hai creduto*, p. 20.

7 A faith with many facets, 1.

There are numerous aspects to Mary's faith. She is mother and servant; she is trusting and remains faithful; she is a person on mission; she stays close to us; as a woman of interiority she lives in the sanctuary of her heart; she is possessed by the word and nourished by it; she is the dwelling place of the Word made flesh and illumined by the child being formed in her; she who believed without having seen prays in the church discreetly.

1. Faith and availability. When Mary was called she displayed her readiness. She declares herself as servant and her whole life becomes open for the child which grows in her womb. But she is a servant-mother who gives of herself with all the strength and nuances that maternal love knows. Mary puts at the disposition of Jesus a generosity without bounds: intelligence, heart, body, today, tomorrow, eternity, in the joy of Christmas, in the flight to Egypt, in the daily ordinariness at Nazareth, so long and simple, and in the great sorrow of her son's death. This availability is essentially one of love. And it is a humble availability of a servant in the biblical sense of the word "civil servant – servant", understood in the nobility of meaning which the anawim, the poor ones of God, had given it

2. Faith and trust. Mary lives a faith which is one of trust. She doesn't plan all the journey she has to make, but if God tells her: "I am with you! The Holy Spirit is coming to you! The power of the most high will overshadow you" then Mary shows complete trust in God and takes the adventurous route of the Messiah who comes. Cardinal Angelo Camastri when he was bishop of Loretto described the "yes" of Mary in this way: "In her yes Mary doesn't ask God for the road map in order to learn about the route and calculate the difficulties. Her faith is a yes given while looking at the eyes of God and trusting blindly in the goodness shining in those eyes."

3. An awakening faith. Mary is like a woman who keeps the door of her house open so that the messengers of God may enter. She is constantly evangelised by Gabriel, by Joseph, by Elizabeth then by the shepherds, the magi, and in the temple by Simeon and Anna. She awaits the first words of Jesus: "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" (Lk 2,49) and stores them in her heart. Hers is a humble, attentive and growing faith which moves from surprise to surprise under the impulse of the Spirit. Mary is ahead of all our experiences of faith. Just as for us Jesus is also for her a person ever new whose words open new horizons. He surprises, astounds and disturbs. He doesn't allow our faith to settle and he takes this strange path to Calvary so opposed to

human nature and to a mother's heart but so in accord with the wisdom of God. At Calvary Mary is not absent; she remains standing quite close to the cross. She follows the way of her Son living the faith of one who has given all to the Son, the faith of one who has given us the Son, the faith in the Son which lays bare everything and which is total gift. It is a logic which defies the reckoning of our logic; it is the logic of God, "the foolishness of God wiser than our wisdom" (1 Cor 1,25).

8 – A faith with many facets, 2.

4. A heart felt faith. The faith of Mary can be likened to a plant growing in the heart. It grows in the shade of reflection and prayer. It is a faith preserved every day and throughout life. It becomes the light which enlightens the first two chapters of Luke's gospel. The Annunciation was a day of fire. Mary kindles this fire in her heart throughout her life and that becomes the light which enlightens our faith. The heart which preserves all that is said of Jesus and all that the Master says becomes the testing place of our faith. "As for Mary she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. His mother stored up all these things in her heart" (Lk 2,19 & 51).

5. Faith and the word. The Magnificat is interwoven with reminiscences of the Old Testament. And there we discover a new richness in the heart of Mary. It is filled with the word of God and lives on God's word. Her faith becomes strong thanks to her familiarity with the word of God. Through it she is enlightened, awakened, nourished and emboldened. The word of God was the basis of Mary's prayer and the expression of her faith. The apostolic exhortation, *Verbum Domini*, in describing Mary's faith states: "...one should consider the point where the reciprocity between the word of God and faith is fully enacted, that is to say, Mary, in her yes to the word of the Covenant and to her mission, fulfils perfectly the divine vocation of humanity... Mary, from the Annunciation to Pentecost, presents herself to us as the woman totally available to the will of God ... as an attentive virgin she lives in full accord with the word of God⁶."

6. Faith and solidarity. Mary prays the psalms of her ancestors; she is in communion with the faith of her people. It is a faith which is born within the communion of saints. It is not a faith in isolation but rather a walk with the poor of God in the light of the word. The Magnificat is a summary of the story of God's people. This story starts with Abraham who had received the promise and leads to Mary and her child who fulfil all the promises. But Mary covers all the generations while seeing them caught up in the mercy of God. She is thus revealed as someone strongly entrenched in her people and their adventures. In describing this woman full of the word of God and already inhabited by the word of God *Verbum Dei* states: "The Church must be immersed in the word to allow itself to be protected and nourished as if in a mother's womb. Following the example of the Virgin Mary, *Virgo Audiens*..."⁷

⁶ Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini* November 2010

⁷ Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* November 2010, art. 79-

It is not only in solidarity with the prayer of her people for at Cana we witness Mary involved in all our problems. Mary's faith-solidarity is ingrained both in the history of her people and in our current situation. So we portray Mary as close to us in the present.

But at the same time Mary's faith is supported by the faith of her people. Faith is also a gift of the community of believers. When Mary calls on God who is faithful from generation to generation, she evokes, in a certain way, the faith of her people. She also lives the faith of the poor. In her is to be seen the faith of the prophets and the faith of David, the great ancestor of the Messiah.

Mary lived not only the faith of those who preceded her but the faith of Joseph opened the way to Mary for a secure motherhood. By his faith and availability Joseph saved Mary and the child she bore; he safeguarded the future of the child and the mother. Joseph's faith helped stabilise the crisis which the Annunciation had created. Faith exists in the communion of saints. Mary is not only a bountiful source of grace. She is also one who receives much from others, from Joseph, Elizabeth, Zachary, the shepherds, the magi, Simeon and Anne... and later from the apostles and especially the beloved disciple and those who pray with her in the cenacle. Mary is like a huge crossroads where the faith of her ancestors and those who live with her are connected and from where begins the faith of future disciples, the faith that we live today.

9 - A faith with many facets, 3.

7. Faith and joy. There is also a joyful aspect of the Virgin Mary's faith which allowed her not to be too overburdened by the threat of dangers and not to face the future in anguish. This joy rings out in her Magnificat and reveals the interior disposition of Mary: she experienced more joy from the child she was carrying than any anxiety over the real dangers weighing on her. Jesus was not only a source of problems for Mary but much more a source of peace, strength and joy. Faith is not an adventure lived alone. The one in whom we believe is with us and for Mary this was the reality of the child within her. The letter to the Hebrews will speak of Jesus who is "the leader of our faith and who brings it to perfection"(Hb 12,2). The first word of Gabriel had resounded clearly in the ears of Mary:"Rejoice!"We note that that the joyful faith of Mary illumines the first two chapters of Luke's gospel. These two chapters are full of songs of joy. Elizabeth commences the series, followed by the Magnificat, Zachary's song, the song of the angels on Christmas day, the song of Simeon and Anna on the day of the presentation of the child in the temple. Joy comes down from heaven and spreads over the earth. It is the joy of messianic times.

8. Faith and fidelity. In Mary faith also takes the form of fidelity. This extends throughout the life of Mary. From the time of his conception, then in his childhood and adolescence and when the call to become the messiah slowly matured, Jesus remains connected to his mother. Mary will be present at the first sign given at Cana and the final sign given from the cross; she goes into the house of the beloved disciple and joins in prayer with the first group of believers in her son. It is a prayer made in anticipation of the Spirit, a prayer which invokes the Spirit and is the constant prayer of the Church. Today Mary dwells in the Church and her prayer is concealed in the prayer of the Church. We see that the life of Mary is one of total commitment. Fidelity is one of the pillars of faith.

9. Faith and mission. Faith is gauged also in mission. The treasure must be brought forth and presented, the lamp must be lit to bring light to the house, the perfume must be poured out for it to fill the festive hall. The visitation offers us a precise picture of a mother on mission. We can surely attest that Mary's journey to the hill country of Judea is the first Christian mission. Mary carries her child along earth's highways and introduces him to the family of Zachary who become the first Christian household as Elizabeth speaks of Mary and her son: "Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord!"(Lk 1,43). Cana provides another episode in Mary's mission. She urges her son to make himself known and reveal his glory so that the faith of the disciples might take root. The mother's faith lights up the faith of the disciples. Her faith

is contagious. It takes on responsibility for human problems. It is a human faith rooted in reality: “They have no wine!”(Jn 2,3). Her gaze is on Christ but it is also fixed on us.

Mary is still on mission when among her family Jesus is considered as being out of his mind. She takes charge and leads the family towards her son. The meeting with the son will clarify the issue. In the first group of disciples who await the coming of the Spirit are the relatives of Jesus. They passed from a state of being scandalised to one of faith.

10. Faith and its fruits. “For every tree can be told by its fruit”(Lk 6,43). Mary gave to the world the fruit of life and was the first to love God in human form. This maternal love consisted in taking care of the child, living with him, feeding him, protecting him, educating him, introducing him to prayer and the life of his people and creating opportunities for freedom. Such faith encompasses all the suffering inherent in motherhood not only at the time of birth but in all the anguish a mother must face to lead her son to full maturity. When this life becomes a dangerous drama the mother makes herself more present; “Standing at the foot of the cross was his mother” (Jn 19,25). Chapter 25 of Matthew reveals a king who is poor, hungry, thirsty and in prison.. Jesus does not say he is the friend of the poor, of the hungry... but that he, himself, is hungry, sick and in prison. Mankind and his Lord are sick together, are in prison together because they are one... Mary loved and protected a harmless child whom others wanted dead. She guided him by her words and wisdom; she supported his first, hesitant steps. Mary’s faith is pure love. Jesus becomes the absolute centre of her life. In every aspect of Mary’s faith love is present. Faith is not a concept but a concrete and practical passion.

10-To walk with the unexpected things of God, 1

Mary experienced in her life a succession of unexpected events which confronted her in God's plan of the salvation, a plan hidden for ever. Each of these unexpected events placed her in a painful life situation. In the unexpected, there is always a call towards greater life. She knew she was loved by God and called to place her trust in Him. But we also see Mary summon up her human and spiritual qualities to respond to God's surprises. In this, she is close to us; our life also is full of the unknown and surprises in the world of work, health, family relations; they can become paths to resurrection.

All the unexpected events in the life of the Virgin Mary came from Jesus. She had undertaken a project of ordinary life, that of her human love with the young Joseph. She was already his wife when she received Gabriel's visit. She was far from expecting the message which came to her from Heaven and guessing what a unique child was being proposed for her. The first words of Gabriel: "Rejoice full of grace, the Lord is with thee", shook the young Mary. She guessed that the greeting was full of the unknown and was asking her to redirect her life towards a future shrouded in mystery. Even after she had said: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord" she was heading towards uncertain situations: "how will Joseph react? What welcome will his family give it? What opinion will the men of Israel have of her?"

Thus she was far from realising that she would have to set out immediately for Bethlehem: as the Emperor Augustus wanted, but also Joseph and especially God. It is certain that Mary, a young mother, dreamed of a beautiful birth for her child, but he would be born in a manger, he would be visited by poor shepherds and by Magi coming from afar and bringing to their journey's end the perfume of the Orient. If in Jerusalem, Herod was upset, at Bethlehem the young Mary must have been completely surprised.

There followed the going up to the Temple to present her "first-born" Son. All began very well. The elderly Simeon adorns the child with prestigious titles: Messiah, salvation prepared before the nations, light of the people, and glory of Israel. Mary's eyes are focussed on this old prophet so full of the Spirit. Suddenly everything darkens: the child

will be a sign of contradiction, many will be tested by his name, and a sword is foretold for the mother, a sword which will pierce her heart.

The presentation of the child having been achieved, the young peasant from Nazareth hears Joseph tell her: "Herod wishes to kill the child. We must flee, take the road to Egypt." It is terribly unexpected for the whole of this little family: to hasten down the path of exile with all that haste, anguish and difficulty of life suppose. It is good that the child is at the centre of all this, it is for him that they live; since the day of the Annunciation he has captured their entire hearts: he has become the treasure of their lives. But since that day, she has learnt that God is unforeseeable; there has been surprise after surprise, but she is sure that God loves her.

11-To walk with the unexpected things of God, 2.

After the return from Egypt, there follow days of peace; the child grows healthy and robust. When he is twelve, the time has come for his first pilgrimage to Jerusalem on the occasion of the Pasch. The holy family spends a joyous week in the holy city, singing in the Temple the psalms and praises of their ancestors amidst clouds of incense. Comes the time to return, Jesus is not with them, nor is he among his relatives. The soul is struck with anguish, the search commences. How could Mary have been able to guess that? She could feel the sword pierce, implacable; she holds herself responsible, she is the mother who has lost her son, and what a Son! Mary and Joseph live the Passion before all others: three days without their Lord, three days without their Son, and three days in Jerusalem right at the time of Passover. And when they do find him it is no longer their son but the Son of the Father: "Do you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" The adolescent Jesus begins to detach himself from his earthly family. It is a real revolution in the heart of the mother, she guesses that he will separate himself one day to be the prophet, the brother of all, in a universal family. And yet the young adolescent comes down with them to Nazareth. There follow long, peaceable years. Mary sees the prophet grow : he speaks unique, shining words, he reveals to his mother deeply human feelings. She guesses that he will sway the crowds, that many will acclaim him, and many will come to him with their wounds, he will allow them to touch the fringe of his garment to be cured in their body and to have a soul that chants the Magnificat.

It is good what occurred and yet all will finish on Calvary: he on the Cross, naked, nailed, mocked, in agony, with that mysterious cry: "My God, my God why hast thou abandoned me?" And he dies as she continues the barely begun psalm. And then just before, he poured out from the heart a limitless maternity on all his disciples, a maternity suitable for the unexpected things of God: "Woman, behold thy son!" Who would have been able to say on the shining day of the Annunciation that the light of the world would extend itself over Calvary and that the maternity of Mary would pass from the Son to the sons?

It is not easy to walk with this unforeseeable God. It is required to have a heart so stripped, so confident in the will of the Father. He is not a distant God; he makes choices so contrary to our nature: he also is in his Son, nailed, defenceless, he also chose to leave himself submerged by the wickedness of men in order to envelope all in the pardon of his mercy. It has been truly said that we reach him by narrow paths.

Mary has made her path through all these unexpected happenings. Doubtless, she heard Gabriel say to her twice: "The Lord is with thee. Fear not Mary." She has well understood that the salutation of the angel was above all love, then strength and then fidelity: God was with her, on her, in her. She had given a response of love to the love of God: "I am the servant of the Lord". But in her reply, which lasted a lifetime, we also find typically human qualities. The first is within her the need to understand, an effort of intelligence to see clearly: to understand the greeting of Gabriel, then all that was said of the child, then to preserve in the heart all that could not be immediately understood. Mary is an intelligent woman. At the same time she is a woman of interiority, of reflection, of maturity, she sees much in the sanctuary of the heart, where is born the light, or fidelity becomes a habit. Mary is also a woman who can adapt herself to the vibrations of God. The Magnificat reveals a woman who has already made the choice of the Son: the humble, the deprived. She is also on the same wave length of our human needs ; she alerts the Son when the wine begins to fail in the festival of love.

We ourselves also respond to the unexpected with all that we are, with the qualities that are in us, with the solidness that is within. Mary has not avoided the unexpected, she has faced up to it, first of all because her heart is so full of the Son; it is love which causes one to walk difficult paths. We also face the hurdles of life following the heart which beats in our breasts. The choice of Mary has often opened the route to the Son. With him she has walked with the various unexpected things to the day of resurrection, the day unforeseeable and yet announced.

12-Mary's faith

In the joy of the Visitation, Elisabeth terminates her song to the Mother of the Lord with this beatitude: "Blessed are you who have believed..."

This is the first of all the beatitudes in the New Testament, and it is for the young Mary. It will also be the last of the beatitudes in the gospels: « Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed » (Jn. 20: 28). One may be surprised by the way the faith beatitude is formulated here, because we have a tendency to apply what is said to our faith. We are today the ones who believe without having seen. But the text expresses a past : « Blessed are those who have not seen and yet *have believed* ». Who can these people be who have believed without having seen? Certainly Mary, for at the Annunciation she lends her faith to all that concerns her Son's future. She believes in things to come. But there are also the persons standing at the foot of the cross and whose faith is fidelity, love, presence, attachment to this Son engulfed in death. Among them, two persons are highlighted : the mother and the beloved disciple. In the darkness spreading over Calvary, their faith is tending towards the light of Easter.

This beatitude is also the basic beatitude on which all the others depend: « Blessed the poor, blessed the meek... ». The beatitude of faith accepts Christ, accepts the one who is poor, meek, a peace-maker, persecuted..., accepts the one who is the model and aim of every disciple.

If Elisabeth terminated her praises of Mary with his beatitude, it was also to underline that it was not an easy faith. Mary is living something unheard of: in her womb a child is forming who is the Holy One, the Son of God. She has no previous example to fall back on. She would even have against her faith the traditional faith of her people: the one God, not yet manifest as Trinity. Mary abandons herself to the angel's word: « Nothing is impossible to God... ».

John's gospel gives Mary's faith an even more luminous image. In the first sign at Cana, John places Mary as the model of the woman who believes. When Jesus says to her: « Woman,

how does that concern you or me? », he calls forth the faith of his mother which springs forth completely when Mary tells the servants: « Do whatever he tells you ! » And the mother's faith passes to the disciples: « They saw his glory and believed in him. » And ever since, that faith travels from disciple to disciple and has come to enlighten our own faith. In our faith shines the Mother's.

All the signs in John require faith. But they form a sort of **V** where, in the first part of the letter, faith, starting from the mother, diminishes from sign to sign. The paralysed man of chapter five has no faith in Jesus; many of the disciples in chapter six abandon Jesus. Here faith becomes negative. As we see in Chapter 6, the greater number of Jesus' disciples demonstrate a "negative faith;" they depart from the Messiah. For them, Jesus is an occasion of scandal; his words are hard to endure. It is at this point that the Evangelist first mentions Judas, the one who betrayed Jesus. Judas serves to illustrate the ultimate stance to which a negative faith descends.

In the second part of the letter **V** faith becomes stronger and stronger: with Peter in chapter six, then the man born blind in chapter nine, with the cry of Martha and Mary at the resurrection of Lazarus, but absolute purity is attained at the Cross by the beloved disciple and by the mother: it is a faith fidelity, whatever happens, nourished without a doubt by the love of the one who loved right up to the end. Thus Mary's faith and her maternal presence form an inclusive framework to John's gospel. Mary is the mother of Jesus, but for us she is the great model of faith.

13-The Holy Spirit and Mary

Through her maternity, Mary is closely linked to the Son and this bond is the most obvious, the one which speaks most to our hearts. She is for us the one who holds Jesus either in her arms or in her heart: she is his monstrance, his throne, his sanctuary, his mother. This is the case in the Gospels, where she is called the mother of Jesus 28 times.

Yet there is a gift which precedes the child and makes it possible: this is the gift of the Spirit: « The Holy Spirit will come upon you!... And so the child will be holy and will be called the Son of God » (Lk 1:35). Matthew also informs us of this priority: « she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit » (Mt 1:18).

This gift of the Spirit to Mary, as God's presence preceding the incarnation of Jesus, reveals the divine logic: the Spirit preceded all the great moments of Life. Over the chaotic waters of the beginnings hovers the Spirit, and then there springs forth an organized plenitude of life (Gn 1: 2). The people of Israel is no more than a mass of dry bones, but the prophet calls the Spirit from the four corners of the earth. The bones take on sinews, flesh, skin, and rise up like an army of the living (Ez. 37). Mary is a virgin, but the Spirit will come upon her and from the virgin will be born the new man, Jesus. At Pentecost, in the cenacle, there is a group of disciples closed in on themselves. The Spirit comes down on them as power and as fire, and the Good News fills the streets of Jerusalem: it is the official birthday of the Church. The Eucharistic species consist of a little bread and wine, but once the Spirit comes upon them they are the body and blood of Christ present among us. It is the Spirit who stands at the threshold of all great transformations.

One may say that, starting with the Annunciation, the Spirit never leaves Mary. When she enters the house of Zachary, rich with the infant she carries, her greeting to Elisabeth makes the little John the Baptist leap with joy, and, filled with the Spirit, Elisabeth begins to prophesy and to weave the first great praises of the mother of God. The same, when Mary places her child in the arms of Simeon, the latter, filled with the Spirit, prophesies, glorifying the child « light of the nations and glory of Israel ». Finally, the final concerns of Jesus on the cross are for the mother and the disciple, first living cell of the Church. The last simultaneous presence of the Spirit and Mary is the day of Pentecost. But then, Mary the mother, yields place to the mother Church, and she blends into the community of the faithful.

When God makes a gift, he makes it forever, it becomes God's faithfulness. Over Mary there will always be the Spirit, with Mary there will always be the child. It was true yesterday, it is true today.

To go to Mary is to place ourselves in the ambiance of the Spirit. To stay with Mary is to have the chance of hearing for ourselves too: « The Holy Spirit will come upon you! » So we will have the chance of having Jesus become incarnate in our lives also.

14-A yes in the full light of day

(Lk 1: 26-38)

In the Annunciation event, Mary passed from deep trepidation to a yes given in the full light of day, with a conscience fully enlightened.

In fact, we find a young Mary concerned with understanding, so that she can give the right response. Mary appears as a person who reflects and is attentive, who lives within the sanctuary of the heart.

The greeting of Gabriel: “Rejoice, so highly favoured. The Lord is with you,” is followed by profound dismay: “Mary was deeply disturbed by these words.” But her interior strain, her disposition before the message, was an effort to understand it: “she asked herself what this greeting could mean.”

Gabriel is essentially responding to this interior strain to understand. He tells Mary not to be afraid and then enlightens her: “You are to conceive and bear a son, and you will call him Jesus.” We are in the immediate future tense, almost like a present, as if the conception had already commenced, as if Mary were unable to withdraw from this immense grace which is for her and for all humanity.

Then, with a leisurely rhythm, the angel goes on to disclose, drop by drop, the various elements of the child’s identity, giving Mary time to listen, to integrate in her consciousness, to assimilate these aspects of light:

“He will be great,
and will be called Son of the Most High.

The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David;
he will rule over the House of Jacob forever,
and his reign will have no end.”

Gabriel has given Mary time to accept, after successive illuminations, the spiritual profile of the child announced. Beato Angelico, in his Annunciations, always presents Mary with her face held towards Gabriel, in an immense attentive listening.

Mary's reply reveals how she has understood Gabriel, in the measure that the idea she has gained of the child is very correct: he will be born of woman and will be called Son of the Highest, he will inherit a kingship that embraces the fullness of time and space and will penetrate eternity. Her reply insists now on the how. It is another desire for interior light: "But how can this come about, since I am a virgin?" In the depths of her consciousness, Mary intuits that this child cannot come from a human love, cannot be the son of a man and a woman. The child announced is immeasurably greater, full of time and eternity, and his throne is the heart of all mortals. It is as if Mary said: "I do not know a man capable of giving me such a son; and so, how will this be done? How will human incapacity be overcome?"

The angel illuminates Mary's spiritual intelligence more deeply: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And so the child will be holy and will be called Son of God. Know that Elizabeth... for nothing is impossible to God."

Clear, serene, total light illumines the mind, heart, will of the young Mary: the child announced emerges into full light. This is how the painters of the Renaissance see it through their lenses on the Nativity: Jesus, source of light, casting light on those present and, above all, on Mary. The Virgin's yes: "I am the handmaid of the Lord; let what you have said be done to me," germinates in this light. Mary is pushed by this light and by the Holy Spirit to open herself totally to the child announced. And so is born in her a mother's love, a love without limits, a passionate love, the first love for Jesus.

In the Annunciation, light predominates; Mary pronounces her yes in the full light of day. This light is not an anticipated revelation of the future, but a knowledge of the will of God which is converted into the confidence and power of the yes. It is a vision of the child that contains in germ all that the evangelists, Paul, Peter, John, the author of the Apocalypse, will say about Jesus, the alpha and omega of the whole history of salvation.

The welcome the Virgin reserves for this child is the first budding of Christian faith, a faith full of love, the faith of the mother.

15-An enthusiastic yes

The Annunciation narrative ends with Mary's answer: "You see before you the Lord's servant; let it happen to me as you have said."

Coming down from heaven the wonderful gift of God's son is left in the hands of a young girl favoured by the Holy Spirit, the child taking shape at that very moment. We may ask, what was the nature of Mary's *Yes*?

The word **servant** is often underlined to emphasize Mary's humility, as, for example, in Mary's Magnificat: "*He has looked on the humbleness of his servant.*" Astonished to discover herself in the presence of God's majesty, Mary becomes aware of her nothingness. She situates herself among the crowd of the servants of God, Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets who looked for the coming of the great servant of God and humanity who will give his life for the ransom of the multitude (Mt 20:28, Lk 22:27).

At the same time, Mary understood the words of the angel, "*Full of grace*" – filled with God's love, beloved by God. Besides, she understood well the angel's words of assurance: "*Do not be afraid, Mary, the Lord is with you.*" Gabriel's invitation to rejoice and be wrapped in the love of God enlightened and comforted Mary's heart: she felt deeply loved.

It is worth mentioning that the way she answered, "*I am the servant ...*" was in those days one of the common formulas for pledging love and at marriage ceremonies. Ruth had used a similar formula when she said to Boaz, "... spread your covering on your maid" (Ruth 3:9). Abigail, upon being asked to marry David, answered, "Here is your maidservant, ready to serve you and wash the feet of my master's servants" (1 Sam 25:41). Ruth and Abigail answered by committing themselves completely to a human love, but Mary was the first one who dared to use a marriage formula with God. Indeed her reply was par excellence a loving answer to Love. It was the expression of her total commitment, of her readiness to serve the child she was receiving. In Mary, the covenant made by God with the people of Israel, reached its highest point, as foretold by the prophets: it was a covenant of married love. So, humility and love weave themselves into a cradle to welcome Jesus into Mary's heart.

Moreover, the second part of Mary's reply, "*let it be done to me according to thy word,*" is an expression of intense desire, of joy at receiving such an immense grace, as if saying, "Oh! Let what you have said come to be!" Her reply brings to mind Jeremiah, who devoured God's longed for words (Jer 15:16).

David had experienced a similar situation when he was told by the prophet Nathan: "The Lord is with you and he will build to you a house. I will be a father to your descendants, and these will be my sons. Your house and your royalty will last forever!" (2 Sam 7:3-25). Hearing that promise David prostrated himself and begged Yahweh to realise his word: "Keep your promise and do what you said!" At the annunciation all that the angel said of the child was for Mary an echo of Nathan's prophecy. Like David, she begged God to realise his words. Gladly, lovingly, she committed herself to God's plan of salvation.

At that moment something new and unique took place. The promised child began to take flesh within her, at the same time Son of the Father and Son of Mary, God and man. Through the action of the Holy Spirit this was a new beginning for all who would welcome Jesus: "To all those who received Him, he empowered them to become God's sons" (Jn 1:12). We are all children of the yes of Mary.

16-The Way of Acceptance

With the Annunciation, Mary opens the way of acceptance to the Lord. By her yes, Jesus is accepted for the first time by a human being, accepted in a total love. Mary opens a highway for humanity to accept God himself.

This acceptance will be repeated constantly in the people of God, in all centuries, in all cultures, in all times. Already in the gospel, after Mary there is Joseph with a similar readiness, then the family of the little John the Baptist with singing and joy, then quietly the shepherds; the Magi end their long journey on their knees before the new born King of the Jews. At the threshold of the Temple there is the astonished and prophetic joy of the aged Simeon who takes the child in his arms: « the Light of the nations and the glory of your people Israel», and of the elderly Anne who hurries to proclaim to all the deliverance of Jerusalem.

Peter too receives the glance of Jesus and weeps bitterly. Yet Peter's ultimate response to Jesus is the words, "You know that I love you." Zacchaeus will welcome Jesus with great joy and with a total reform of his life. Lazarus and his sisters welcome Jesus into their home as a friend. The sinful woman pours precious nard upon the feet of Jesus. The Good Thief stakes his death and his life upon the death and life of Jesus: "Jesus, remember me" The Beloved Disciple welcomes into his home the mother of Jesus; and Joseph of Arimathaea places in his own new tomb the body of Jesus. The disciples of Emmaus say to the resurrected Jesus: Stay with us Lord, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over. Paul makes bold to say, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?"

This is a passionate acceptance which runs through the whole history of the Church to reach us with John Paul II, with Mother Teresa, with Bishop Romero and those who over the years have given their lives for Christ. Salvation travels from yes to yes, from hardships to fidelity. Since the time when Mary first welcomed her son, welcoming arms have every remained open to him. The Church has never forsaken the white tunic of the bride who accepts the bridegroom and cries out to him, « Come, Lord Jesus! » It is the « Yes » of Mary that has opened up this wide and spacious road of love.

And today thousands of people, thousands of *young* people are searching for the Lord, are welcoming him, are following the Way of the Cross, are bearing their own crosses, are announcing his Resurrection, are pronouncing their “Yes” to the Lord. Mary’s “Yes” bears its fruit in those spoken today. A French song puts it this way, «All that is most precious in your love remains forever hidden in our harvests.”

17-The First Christian Mission

In the Annunciation we have a glimpse of Mary as she *receives* the Good News. At the Visitation, she *bears to others* the same Good News; she shares it; she sings it. A *family* becomes Christian: “Mary set out at that time and went as quickly as she could into the hill country to a town in Judah. She went into Zechariah’s house and greeted Elizabeth.”

Mary’s journey is the *first* Christian mission. What Mary bears within her, what she brings to the family of Elizabeth is *Jesus*, the Messiah. Mary “went quickly,” and she went with the child in her womb. Mary went quickly and she was already intoning her Magnificat. Indeed, all the members of Elizabeth’s family will rejoice that Mary has come to them, Mary and the child in her womb. Mary sets in motion the diffusion of the Good News. Mary’s journey to her cousin may be taken as *foreshadowing* of *Paul’s* first missionary voyages, those of *Peter*, those of *all missionaries* who spread the Good News throughout the Roman Empire, of missionaries throughout history and those of the contemporary world.

Mary-like, they all bear Jesus to others; and all who receive the Good News with an upright heart overflow with joy. In Acts, we see examples of such joy: the Ethiopian who encountered Philip and was baptized by him (Acts 8); the family of Cornelius (Acts 10); and Lydia (Acts 16). Prior to all the others, however, Zachariah’s family is the first to welcome *as Lord*, the infant who resides within Mary’s womb. Elizabeth speaks truly when she calls the infant, “My Lord!” Her words constitute the first profession of Christian faith, pronounced in the midst of the first Christian family, who are experiencing, through Mary’s presence, the first Christian mission. Every true Christian addresses Jesus with the words, “You are my Lord.”

Two expressions give the key to understanding the concept of mission: (1) “set out as quickly as she could,” and (2) “upon the road.” In the first instance, the Greek word is ‘**anastàsa**’, meaning “set out,” cognate with “**anàstasis**,” the word for “resurrection.” After the resurrection of Jesus, the nascent Church *set out* as quickly as it could upon the pathways of the world in order to announce the Good News. In the Visitation, Mary is image of the Church. The second key word is “pathway” in Greek “**hodos**.” The word is found several times in Luke’s texts, Gospel and Acts of the Apostles. Luke weights “pathway” with theological significance, because it is “along the pathway” that *evangelization* takes place.

The Evangelist’s focus *is* upon Mary, but we are also drawn to *another* consideration. We see not only *Mary’s* mission, but the mission of Luke himself, the mission of the nascent Church, and that of so many generations of disciples whose faith reaches to the shores of the contemporary world. The “water of mission” coursing through the centuries serves to irrigate *our* faith. Our faith has its origins in the first Christian mission, that of Mary.

In the footsteps of his mother, Jesus begins his journey upon the pathways of the world. He will remain faithful to the end, and will come to join us as we walk the Emmaus road. He even sends *us* on mission, with the consoling words, “I am with you always; yes, to the end of time” (Mt 28:30).

Mary's mission met with great success. There was a springtime of joy when Elizabeth, John the Baptist, Zachariah and Mary were gathered as one in the home of Zachariah. The joy broke out in canticles praising God's enduring love and celebrating the wondrous titles that belong to Mary's child: Lord, Rising Sun, Salvation which frees us from our enemies. The parents of John the Baptist express their faith in the child of Mary, their young cousin. They will share their faith with their son and so enable him to be Precursor of the Messiah. The faith of Elizabeth and Zachariah is the rich soil in which the mission of the Baptist will take root.

Mary is invoked as « Queen of Apostles. » One may apply the last word to *all* who announce the Lord. Pope Paul VI gave Mary the title, "Star of Evangelization." We too are people on the journey, and our journey intersects with the journeys of countless others. Happy shall we be if *our* greeting, like that of Mary, stirs within them the child of the Kingdom.

18-The first song in honour of Mary

Lc 1, 42-45.

Usually our bibles render the song of Elizabeth in prose style. However, many exegetes have remarked that upon translating the text from Greek to Aramaic, the poetic element is discovered.

Of all women

You are the most blessed,

And blessed is the fruit of your womb!

Why should I be honoured

By a visit from the Mother of my Lord?

For, do you see,

The moment your greeting

Reached my ears,

The child in my womb leapt for joy.

Yes, blessed is she

Who believed

That the promise made to her by the Lord

Would be fulfilled.

This was the first song of praise addressed to Mary; she is declared blessed as the Lord's Mother; her greeting prompted the unborn John to leap in his mother's womb; here,

unmistakably, it is Mary who is praised, Mary who is sung to. A closer look reveals the unique spiritual wealth of the song.

After the first stanza of compliments, Elizabeth honours Mary with the highest possible attribution: she calls Mary's son not only "the Lord", but "my Lord". The bond between cousins is profoundly enriched: Mary is **my Lord's Mother**.

The name given to Jesus, "the Lord", acknowledging the divinity of Jesus, expresses the faith of the Church community for whom Luke wrote his gospel around the year 80 AD. In writing as he did, Luke was inspired by 2 Sam 6:1-11 referring to the return of the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, when David uttered the prophetic words, "How could the Lord's ark come to my home?" The ark was the dwelling place of God, His Word preserved in the tablets of the Law – just as for Elizabeth, Mary had now become the dwelling place of the Lord, the very same Lord. Here in the New Testament text, four hundred years before the Council of Ephesus, Mary had been addressed by the title **Mother of God**.

The finale of the hymn is linked to the blessing at the beginning, "Happy are you who believed...", a significant recognition that Mary's faith is the basis of all her other blessings, as our faith is also. To live the beatitudes, "Happy are the poor, the merciful ..." one must have faith. The same affirmation is repeated in the last of the beatitudes to appear in the gospels, "Happy rather those who believe without having seen" (Jn 20:29). Mary was the first to live a faith exclusively centred on Jesus – she was the first one to live a Christian faith.

We observe too, that Luke uses the an irenic structure similar to the chiasm referred to earlier. Here in a circle are the characters in Elizabeth's song: Mary and the child, Mary and the Lord, Elizabeth and the child, Mary and the Lord – at the base, the Lord, the object of our faith; at the summit the Lord child, the object of our Christian faith. The characters are found in couples: Mary and Jesus, Mary and the Lord, Elizabeth and John. Symmetrically, the mothers look at each other, and the children do the same. The Lord is at the base and at the summit.

This first hymn in honour of Mary enjoys impeccable authentication: the Holy Spirit inspired it, Luke inserted it into his gospel, Luke's community welcomed it, the apostolic Church proclaimed it as an integral part of Revelation, and today all Churches read it with love and reverence.

Elizabeth's song foreshadows and inspires many other songs through which, in the Orthodox, Coptic, Armenian, Anglican and Catholic Churches, the Lord's Mother has been revered through the centuries.

*Virgin Mary, Mother of God,
 you are the golden thurible
 that carried the burning coal.
 Blessed is he who receives him from the sanctuary
 for he remits sins
 and destroys our faults.
 He is the Lord's Word,
 who incarnated himself in you,
 the one who offered himself to the right Father
 as pleasant incense and sacrifice.
 Rejoice Virgin Mary,
 Holy Mother of God, true advocate
 Of all humanity.
 Pray for us in the presence of Christ
 Your Son.*

(From the Coptic Liturgy, Ethiopia)

19-The Magnificat

Luke 1:46-55

The Magnificat hymn is a sort of portrait of Mary's soul. This hymn is wholly woven from biblical threads, that is, threads extracted from the Word of God. Thus, Mary showed herself very conversant with the Holy Scripture, referring to it with great ease. She spoke and thought by using the Word of God. That Word became her word, and her word was born from the Word of God. She revealed that her thoughts and her will were in tune with God's thoughts and will. Being so well penetrated by God's Word, she could become the mother of the incarnate Word. Finally, Mary was a woman who loved. How could it be otherwise? As a believer who thought with God's thoughts and willed with God's will, she had to be a loving woman.

(Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, No. 41, 25 December 2005)

Mary's song in response to Elizabeth's hymn is known as the *Magnificat* - the first word of the Latin language version. Throughout this song Mary directed all her praise to God whom she glorified from the first verse to the last. This was characteristic of Mary: she always centred herself on her Son Jesus, as at Cana, or on God as in this case. Today places of Marial pilgrimage reflect this aspect of Mary: the Eucharist is celebrated, and her Son is constantly invoked and praised.

The Magnificat has its place among the psalms of praise, and in the development of those we call "the new canticles". A new canticle was an improvised psalm woven from a number of spontaneous biblical quotations. On this occasion, Mary is like "*an open bible*", to use the term applied to it by a Protestant theologian, Frances Queré, in her book, *Marie* (Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1996). Mary's song bounds from one quotation to another, as if the entire Old Testament permeated her voice and passed into the New Testament through her.

But if the Magnificat is an improvised song, we can wonder what spontaneous and daily portrait of God Mary possessed, and, in turn, what portrait of herself emerged from the song the young woman improvised.

Beraka

In the Old Testament	In the Magnificat	In the New Testament
1-I will sing to the LORD, for he has gloriously triumphed; his horse and chariot he has cast into the sea; his strength and my courage is the LORD... (Ex 15:1-2)	My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. (Lk 1:46-47)	1-Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us... (Lk 1:68-69).
2-My heart exults in the LORD; my horn is exalted in my God. There is no Holy One like the LORD; there is no Rock like our God. (1Sam 2:1-2)	For he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden... (Lk 1:48)	2- Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. (Eph 1:3...)
3-Begin a song to my God with tambourines, sing to my Lord with cymbals. Raise to him a new psalm; exalt him, and call upon his name... For God is the Lord who crushes wars... (Jdt 16:1-3)	For he who is mighty has done great things for me... (Lk 1:49)	3- Giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. (Col 1:12)

One could extend the list of the examples of Beraka, both in the Old Testament and the New: in the Church, the *Te Deum laudamus* is in the same vein. This helps us understand how much Mary is the daughter of her people, faithful to their prayer forms. We also discover the continuity existing between the prayer of the people of Israël and that of the early Church. There are many common elements in the prayers labelled Beracha, but two are particularly characteristic:

1-*praise of God* for

2-*the wonders* he has performed.

20-The Magnificat's portrait of God

God's portrait is a very rich one, its main nuances being:

1 *He is a saving God.* God is not a theoretical saviour merely heard and spoken about, or simply a being occasionally experienced by the Israelites. On the contrary, he is a personal God, "God my Saviour!" We need not guess who that Saviour is for Mary, since she had been told that the Son's name was to be Jesus, "God saves," "God the Saviour."

2 *He is a God used to working wonders.* Looking at what is happening to her; Mary finds it extraordinary – she is to become God's mother. This marvel brings to completion the wonders that God has done for his people: delivery from slavery in Egypt, the gift of the Covenant and of the Law, and Israel's election as God's chosen people. He is a God who gives life, freedom and nobility abundantly.

3 *God's love and gifts to humanity are entirely gratuitous,* never deserved, never owed, always the generous free bounty that is one with the holiness of God.

4 *This God favours the little ones.* He scatters the proud, pulls down the powerful, sends the rich away empty. When David, and in turn, Ahab abused their power God rebuked them through the prophets and threatened to destroy them. The psalms keep on reminding us of God's love for the little ones and his judgment of the proud.

5 *God is present and among his people.* Mary, who knew her people's history very well, and now confirms that in the Old Testament he is already what he will be in the New testament, the Emmanuel, the one who walks with his people.

6 *God is faithful.* In her song Mary retraces the whole history of Israel back to Abraham, the father who received the promises: what was promised to Abraham has been carried out throughout the ages, and is now fully realised in Mary's child.

7 *God is the God of Love.* Mary understands Israel's whole history as one enfolded in God's love, illustrated in the seven actions that follow. While in prayer she contemplates the face of God, she already dreams of her child.

21-The Magnificat's Portrait of Mary

In the Magnificat, much of Mary's spiritual identity gradually emerges.

1 *She is a joyful woman*, a joy is full of gratitude and wonder, sparked by the first word of Gabriel, **“Rejoice!”** Mary could not ignore this greeting and invitation, enlightened as she was by its message of joy. The greatest source of her joy is the child taking shape in her womb. She has no apprehension in the face of consequential threats: repudiation, loss of face in society and among friends, or the extremes of the Law. Her strength comes from above, for “Nothing is impossible to God.” An ancient prayer addresses her as *Causa nostrae laetitiae* – the Cause of our joy – since her child is our full joy too.

2 *Mary is an intelligent woman*. She understands and proclaims what God has achieved in her, “The Lord has worked wonders for me!” It is characteristic of her to reflect, to seek to understand, to ponder in her heart as a sanctuary of prayer; she even has the clear intuition about what the wonders worked in her will evoke in the future: “all generations will call be blessed.”

3. *Mary is truly humble*. She knows the truth of herself, is confident of her acceptance of unique mission, and happily calls herself “the humble servant”, placing herself not among the proud, but among Israel's little ones, the *anawim*.

3 The heart of Mary is *fashioned by the Holy Spirit* to resemble Jesus. Like him, she chooses the humble and the hungry, keeping her distance from the proud, the rich and the mighty. This leaves her free to make courageous choices.

4 She is a woman *deeply rooted in the history of her people*. Her Magnificat is not the song about a solitary, but about a woman who depends on others. She claims a place among a people engaged in an adventure with God, her heart beating in harmony with that of her people.

5 *Mary is a woman of deep faith.* It is only through faith that the presence of God can be found in the events of history. Through faith she is able to discover what God has in mind for her: no accident, this child of hers, but the gift of a loving God coming to save us. The portrait of God that she paints in her song is the fruit of her faith.

6 *Above all, Mary has a grateful heart.* With the Jews, gratitude was always expressed by praise and blessing – the words “Thank you” did not exist in Hebrew. For them, singing the praises of another was equivalent to saying “Thank you.” Expressing joy is saying “Thank you.” Acknowledging that she is loved and blessed forever is an expression of a gratitude that was spontaneous and joyful.

When we read, pray or sing the Magnificat we try to imitate the faith, joy and praise with which Mary glorified God, and we become one with the multitude among “all generations” who have called, and continue to call her blessed

In his commentary on the Magnificat, Martin Luther wrote: “This holy hymn of the blessed and sweet mother of God should be memorised by everybody. ... In this canticle Mary teaches us how we must love and praise God, with a detached heart, without seeking our own interest.”

22-Take Mary into your home

An angel invites Joseph, the just man, the son of David, to take Mary into his home. This is a young woman he loves with all his heart, one filled with grace and splendor and, according to St. Luke, a virgin yet now his wife. But, as the angel says, the young woman he is welcoming is much more than simply one filled with grace. She is also a mother, bearing within herself the Son of God. Joseph is being invited to welcome this gift from the Holy Spirit.

His human love for the young woman now draws him into the history of salvation. His becomes a love that no longer simply involves a marital relationship between him and Mary but one centered on Jesus and rooted in the nature of Divine Love. Joseph is the second person in the world to welcome the Son that has been given to us and to dedicate his life to serving Him. Yet to this second person welcoming Jesus, the Son of God, the angel says, “Take Mary into your home.” Not just this Son, but Mary too.

With his openhearted welcome Joseph becomes the ideal for every true Christian and the Church: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her.” (Mt 1, 20) The Church too welcomes Mary as bearer of the Son of God for us. Not just Jesus, but His Mother – “Take Mary into your home.”

The Beloved Disciple in John’s Gospel will experience a similar situation when Jesus entrusts him with the care of His Mother. The Evangelist writes, “And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.” (Jn 19, 27) During the earliest days of Jesus’s presence on earth Joseph is the man who welcomes Him. As He is about to die, the Beloved Disciple is the one to open his arms and heart. Here we have two situations that serve to include the entire span of Jesus’s earthly life. Both times Mary is there, being welcomed. Yet Mary is also an image of the Church. “Do not be afraid to take Mary into your home” – these are words addressed to every disciple. “Do not be afraid to welcome the Church into your home. Like Mary she is also bearing Christ. She too is a mother nurturing the work of the Holy Spirit.”

Beginning with Joseph taking “Mary into his home,” a steady stream of people welcome the Mother of the Lord into their lives, a phenomenon that might surprise us and bring solace to our prayer life. After Joseph, the preborn John the Baptizer and his family welcome Mary and her son. After that, The Magi bow down before the child on Mary’s lap. At the presentation in the

23-Jesus freely given to Mary and Joseph

Given to a family

When we read verses 18-25 in the first Chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, an introduction to the ancestry of Jesus, we need to focus on the central role of the child and also the rich and compact text used to describe the other persons involved.

The passage begins, "Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about..." It's quite clear that everyone else will occupy a place around Jesus and serve him. Let's look at this way:

Holy Spirit

the Angel of the Lord

Jesus

Mary

Joseph

These verses in Matthew abound with references to humanity. What we have here is a genuine incarnation. Mary and Joseph are identified more than ten times, either by name or their respective pronouns. On the other hand, the Spirit and the Angel of the Lord are named only twice. This text shows Mary and Joseph working side by side as events unfold. From a human standpoint, they have starring roles in the Incarnation of Jesus.

As for the child, he is gratuitously given to Mary ever Virgin, and to Joseph, who welcomes him, not as the son from another man, but as this unique, extraordinary son, the handiwork of the Holy Spirit. Mary is informed about how the Spirit will overshadow her; Joseph learns that the son he is about to welcome is the fruit of the Holy Spirit. The “Yes” given by both of them are spoken with reference to the same child.

Mary is taken aback by the Angel’s message. It creates a moment of confusion in her mind; she sees no possible human explanation: “How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?” (Lk 1, 34) In other words, “The son you’re talking about can’t come about through human love.” The Angel clears up Mary’s confusion: “the holy Spirit will come upon you ...for nothing will be impossible for God.” (Lk 1, 35, 37)

Mary’s yes – “Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word,” (Lk 1, 38) – prepares the way for her son to come into the world. This, however, creates a new set of circumstances in Joseph’s life. As a just man he’s confused, seeing no valid way to resolve this mystery. The angel provides the solution, given from a higher realm: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her...” (Mt 1, 20) The son freely given to Mary is also given in a completely gratuitous way to Joseph. Jesus is a gift freely bestowed on Mary, Joseph and all of humanity. Everyone one of us can welcome him but he cannot come to us through purely human means.

To contemplate how the situations of Mary and Joseph are comparable, let us analyze the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Mary In Luke	Joseph In Matthew
A young woman, Joseph’s wife.	A young man, Mary’s husband
A virgin... who will conceive a son	The prophecy that a virgin will conceive a son is called to mind...

Full of grace	A just man
Daughter of Zion (The Lord is with her)	Son of David.
An Angel appears to her	An Angel appears to him
She struggles to understand what is happening	He goes through a period of confusion
The Angel says, “Do not be afraid, Mary...”	The Angel says, “Joseph, do not be afraid...”
Mary doesn’t find a human explanation	Joseph doesn’t find a logical answer...
God’s messenger gives the explanation	God’s messenger provides the answer
“The holy Spirit will come upon you...”	“It is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived...”
The Angel reveals the child’s name: Jesus	The Angel reveals the child’s name: Jesus
The Angel says, “You shall name him Jesus.”	The Angel says, “You are to name him Jesus.”
Mary expresses her willingness: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord...”	Joseph shows his willingness: “When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him...”
Through Mary, Jesus becomes a member of the People of God, Israel.	Through Joseph, Jesus becomes a member of the family of David, with a birthright to the titles of Son of David and King.
Mary, Jesus’s mother, continues her life as Joseph’s wife	Joseph, Jesus’s father, continues his life as Mary’s husband

All of this implies that the child has been born into a family. He has a mother and a father and will be the object of their profound love in an everyday family.

Starting out, Mary and Joseph loved each other directly – the woman full of grace loved the just man. That was already a most attractive and beautiful love. Now their personal and shared love centers on, and passes through, the child.

For the first time the First Commandment deems a Child must be loved with one's whole heart, whole soul and whole mind - with all the drive and love that God alone deserves.

24-Father to a son he adopted

The passage depicting the flight to Egypt in Matthew 2, 13-23 underlines the paternity of Joseph while at the same time discreetly and insistently pointing out that Joseph was not involved in bringing about the conception of Jesus.

The child is the focal point of these verses. Reliving the history of his people, he is being persecuted and needs to be delivered from harm. The narrative names him no less than eight times, describes his fleeing to Egypt and calls him Son and Nazarene. (Behind the title *Nazarene* can be found an allusion to David, the word *nʒr* meaning *shoot* or *offspring* and hinting at the prophecy in Is 11, 1-10, “A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse,” David’s ancestor. Matthew is implying that Jesus is the son of David).

Joseph is set before us as a true father. He is the one responsible for the child and its mother, the head of the family. As such, he receives instructions from on high and carries them out. He does everything in his power to protect the child and its mother from danger, fleeing by night, setting out on the road to exile, and on the return journey making sure not to settle in Judea. The child will be safer and more secure in the town of Nazareth in Galilee. We recognize in all of this the true fatherhood of Joseph: he takes responsibility, saves the child and its mother, takes on the perils of living in exile and shares in receiving the threats being made to the child, to this family just starting out.

Joseph’s mission is to be a true father. Although Matthew constantly reminds us that Joseph is not the man who sired the child, ***he’s as precise as can be in establishing the nature of the bonds that tie Joseph to this family.*** On four occasions the Gospel writer uses the phrase, “Take the child and his mother” rather than “Take your son and your wife.” He makes clear the biological link between the youthful Mary and her child while never mentioning anything about Joseph’s tie to the boy.

The verses in Matthew 2, 13-23 echo a text in Exodus 4, 19-20. There Moses experiences circumstances similar to those of Joseph. However, while the passage in Exodus states that Moses “took ***his*** wife and ***his*** sons and started back...,” twice using

the possessive adjective, Matthew's text has the angel saying to Joseph, "Take *the* child and his mother," not using "your." In these verses, quite surprisingly, Mary isn't even described as Joseph's wife. Matthew strongly reinforces the notion that Joseph was not involved in the conception of this child.

Joseph had already dealt with all of this at the onset of his bewilderment (Mt 1, 18-25). He knew that he was not the father of the child that Mary was carrying in her womb. As time went by he would realize that this son wasn't begotten by another man but emanated from the Spirit. Notwithstanding, the angel invited Joseph to become the boy's father and welcome Mary into his home.

From his own vantage point, Luke too affirms that Joseph did not play a role in the incarnation of Jesus. He has Elizabeth recognizing Mary as mother and doesn't mention Joseph. In taking a close look at the hymns in the first two chapters of Luke, we see that Elizabeth, the mother of John, praises the mother of the Lord, Mary the mother of Jesus gives thanks to God and Zachary, the father of the Precursor, glorifies God and extols his own son as the prophet preparing the way of the Lord. No hymn of praise is attributed to Joseph. On the contrary, the elderly Simeon is the one to proclaim the greatness of the child Jesus.

Joseph's notable absence is intentional. It indicates that he's not in any way involved in the incarnation of the child. Here we find another take on Mary's affirmation: "I have no relations with a man (to enable me to conceive this child)." Indeed, salvation will come from the world of the Divine, not from earthlings; the Savior comes as a gift for humankind.

This is how to interpret Christmas icons in which Joseph always appears off to the side of the main event, contemplative, glancing elsewhere.

Invited to welcome Jesus, the child emanating from the Spirit, Joseph demonstrates that he's ready to do just that. He's willing to place his heart and mind, time and energy at the child's disposal, taking on situations laden with risk and anxiety, the road to exile and the

surprises coming from this very extraordinary child. This is how he becomes the father of Jesus.

Looking into Joseph's heart and contemplating his faith, the angel in his dream said to him, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary *your* wife into your home. For it is by the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and *you are to name him Jesus...*" (Mt 1, 20-21) In using the expressions "your wife" and "you are..." the text shows that Joseph is naming the child and the child is *his*. And when it comes to Mary, the child's mother, she is said to be Joseph's wife.

The Gospels allude to the paternity of Joseph at other times: "*The child's father* and mother were amazed at what was said about him..." (Lk 2, 33), and "...his mother said to him, 'Son, *your father* and I have been looking for you with great anxiety.'" (Lk 2, 48)

Joseph is not involved in the conception of Jesus; rather he becomes Jesus's father on account of his heart's openness and generosity.

On the Feast of the Holy Family, in the Mass for the first Sunday after Christmas, the Church offers us the reading from Matthew 2, 13-23, reaffirming that Joseph is truly the father of Jesus, forming an authentic family with Jesus and Mary, the ideal and exemplar for all others.

25-Thanks, Joseph

In the mystery of the Incarnation, which especially catches our attention at Advent and Christmas, we rarely think of what we owe to Joseph.

In fact, his yes, his readiness to do what God asked him, to take in Mary and the child, smoothed the path of the Incarnation so that the mother was protected and the child had nothing to fear. On the contrary, he found the love of a family. The child was able to enjoy that balanced love provided by a father and a mother. Joseph's yes defused a dramatic situation, avoiding the mother's disgrace and possible stoning. Joseph's availability covers everything, his yes discretely cloaks the whole mystery. He guards the drama in the depths of his heart, in his integrity as a «just man» (Mt 1:19). The most extraordinary birth in history is vested in normality and Jesus has every chance of having the same life as any other child.

Joseph was «a just man» on three levels. With regard to the law, he wished to respect it, to the point of giving up his beautiful dream of love with the young Mary. But he was still more just towards persons, since he wished to respect and save Mary. Joseph lived his highest justice, however, in searching for the will of God: «What was God telling him through this pregnant Mary?» Joseph probably knew that God was at work in Mary, that she had become like the ark of God. No one could approach the ark of God, no one could take possession of it without being called to do so. God's ark was his exclusive possession.

Faced with this woman expecting a child, Joseph feels the need to withdraw from the scene. Whether he discovered her condition in a roundabout way or, as is more likely, Mary told him herself, he has two problems to confront. What role does he have in all this? And what is to be done to shield Mary from the inevitable judgments of family members and neighbours, and perhaps even worse consequences? An informal divorce appears to be the only, if unsatisfactory, option.

In sleep and dream the mystery is revealed to him, and the angel tells him what he must do: « Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife: the child she has conceived is from the Holy Spirit » (Mt 1: 20). Because Joseph was a « just man », accustomed to the ways of God, he knew how to read in the dream the divine will. Confronted with the evidence of this will, he makes himself totally disposable: « Joseph did what the Angel of the Lord had told him: he took his wife into his home... » (Mt 1: 24). Joseph abandons his own well-meaning but maladroit plans. He accepts Mary, he accepts her with her child. The way of salvation is smoothed out: Christmas can come, the public life, the passion, death, resurrection, Pentecost, the life of the Church. Joseph's yes catches up with our own spiritual adventure today.

Joseph's life now has a new centre: the child given. All his energies are put at the service of this child. He saves mother and child from Herod's executioners; he protects them on the road to exile. To both he assures affection and protection. To him falls the little boy's education: he introduces him to social life, initiates him in prayer, leads him to discover the world of love, teaches him his own craft so that Mark will call Jesus « the carpenter » (Mk 6: 3).

Joseph's yes leaves the yeses of Mary and Jesus free to bear their fruit. Jesus will be able to enter upon a normal social life: he will be a child of Israel and live the history of his people. From Joseph Jesus acquires a family, the family of David, and ancestors, many of whom were kings. It is from Joseph that he inherits the title of « Son of David » the title used by the blind, lepers, and all the poor people who call on him in expectation of healing: « Son of David, have pity on us » (Lk 18: 38-39). The title is also a Messianic one, pointing towards the true royalty of Jesus: « God will give him the throne of David, his father; he will reign over the house of Jacob and his reign will last forever!» (Lk 1 : 32-33). The title of King will be the last accorded Jesus. On the cross, the reason for his condemnation is: "Jesus, the Nazarean, King of the Jews!" (Jn 19: 19).

These are our reasons for saying thank you to Joseph, « the just man », the available man, the humble man, the man who built the family and saved it, the man who loved Mary, his wife and put his whole heart at the service of the child who was given him. Joseph also preserves a discreet presence in the two great Messianic titles of Jesus: « Son of David » and « King of the Jews! ». They were as passed on by him, given by him.

We owe no small thanks to Joseph.

26-And she gave birth to a son, her first-born

Luc 2, 7

This is an extremely discrete text, but it brings us face to face with a true childbirth. The whole human aspect is there. Mary becomes the witness par excellence of the incarnation, of the humanity of Jesus. She gives birth and is immediately occupied: Jesus is a human baby, in need of being wrapped up and placed in a cradle. Mary's humanity and the humanity of Jesus go perfectly together. And Mary's gestures, wrapping the child up and laying him down, show that he is welcomed in love.

Jesus' first experience of human life will be one of being loved. Mary and Joseph are the ones who assure that, and it is magnificent that the first thing our humanity offered God was love. « In our time, the organisation of instruction means that parents are no longer the only ones to look after the whole education of their children: the complexity of our culture forbids this. But, in the world where Mary and Joseph lived, the parents were the ones to provide all or almost all. There was certainly religious instruction in the synagogue, but the essentials one learned in the house of one's father and mother. Mary and Joseph were those with the mission of 'forming' Jesus. » 201. They had to introduce him to the demanding challenge of becoming a man.

Towards the end of Jesus' childhood, when it is said "he went down with them to Nazareth and lived under their authority!" (Lk 2: 52), Richard Rohr comments: "Jesus must have found an extraordinary love in them. We can affirm that about Mary and Joseph with regard to Jesus. A person as integrated and free as Jesus would have had to have extraordinary parents. They must have loved him without manipulation, without those primitive schemes which inculcate shame and fear and are so common. (And for Joseph he adds) I believe that Joseph must have been an extraordinary man and father, otherwise Jesus would not have been able to call God 'Abba' so spontaneously. He would not have been able to believe so totally in his heavenly Father, and accept the masculine word for God, if he had not had a human father who had been for him very, very good." 202 Bernard Martelet, quoting Father Fabre, writes: "At the beginning, God created the human being in his own image and likeness", thus expressing God's extraordinary love for us. Now a woman communicates her likeness to God. This also expresses the extraordinary love between a mother and her child; this child who is God." 203

And when we think of 'mission', there is none more appropriate for a Christian than to give Jesus to the world. Here we touch the high point of Mary's mission. Not only has she given the world the child of promise, but she has loved, educated, guided him, together with Joseph, and what they have offered us is an adult man, of a unique psychological equilibrium, a man fitted to be the Messiah, Saviour, Son of God as Elisabeth and the whole early Church recognised.

27-And she gave birth to a son, her first-born, 2

Luc 2, 7

Verse 7: “And she gave birth to a son, her first-born”, requires an explanation. The Bible of Jerusalem has a very clear note: “In Biblical Greek, the term “first-born” does not necessarily imply younger brothers, but emphasizes the child’s dignity and rights.”

It is above all a juridical term in Jewish society linked to the promises made by God, and it is also a term embodying a religious value, since the first-born belonged to God.

The first-born was, as it were, especially consecrated. We discover this aspect with Esau and Jacob, Manasseh and Ephraim. Recalling the case of Esau, the Letter to the Hebrews, 12 : 16-17, says: «Be careful that there is no immorality, or that any of you does not degrade religion like Esau, who sold his birthright for one single meal. As you know, when he wanted to obtain the blessing afterwards, he was rejected and, though he pleaded for it with tears, he was unable to elicit a change of heart. » Ruben was the first-born of Jacob, but he lost his dignity because he had sexual relations with one of his father’s concubines (Gn 35: 21-22...). The death of the «first-born » of Egypt was significant because the nation was struck in its most representative part. « In a patriarchal family, the eldest son has a privileged position: he succeeds his father as head of the family and receives a double portion of the inheritance (with a special blessing that recognizes the right of age). » Israel, who was « the eldest son of God », (Ex 4: 22) also had a privileged role in the history of salvation, and Egypt paid dearly for not giving the « eldest son » his freedom.

The « eldest son » is especially characterised by his special belonging to God: « Consecrate all the first-born to me, the first issue of every womb among the sons of Israel. Whether man or beast, this is mine » (Ex. 13, 2). This will subsequently be extended even to the produce of the soil (Lev. 22).

For certain Protestant groups, however, the expression « first-born » suggests subsequent births and so Jesus is not the only child of Mary and Joseph. Not all Protestant theologians think this way. François Bovon of Geneva asks: “Why does Luke employ this expression « first-born »? By itself this adjective “first-born” does not offer any decisive proof for the existence of brothers of Jesus according to the flesh. Does this adjective not send us back to the first will of the Creator God to whom Jesus belongs? Or, is it not a Christological title to designate the Lord in his incarnation and

resurrection as the first-born of a new humanity? This qualifying adjective is very rare in the bible. The word recalls the birth of the fathers or even the existence of Israel, the first-born of God. In any case, Luke places Jesus in his unique relation with the Father, and not in his relation with brothers or sisters.” Luke picks up this title again in the account of the Presentation, with the precise clarification that “the first-born male belongs to God”.

For Luke the meaning of the title is ‘this child belongs to God in a quite special way, he is his First-born.’ I think, in fact, that the term ‘first-born’ forms part of the titles given to Jesus in the birth pericope. These titles offer us the following picture: in the city of David, and Jesus will be called son of David, Mary gives birth to a ‘first-born’ son, who is Saviour, Christ, Lord. Luke is preoccupied with the identity of Jesus. For the Lutheran Frederick W. Denker, the title ‘first-born’ emphasizes that this child has a right to inherit the throne of David (Cf 2 Chron 21: 3).

THE FIRST-BORN

In the Bible, the term “first-born” has a sociological and theological value.

The term refers to the dignity and rights, to the role of the first-born in society at that time and, in general, to all traditional societies based on agriculture or farming. The first-born is the one who normally becomes head of the family or clan. When problems arise, in the absence of the parents, the first-born is the one who calls the family together, guides the discussions and sanctions the decisions. He creates and assures the unity of the family. His social importance is such that he is always called “first-born” even if he is the only child. The writing on a tomb stone found in Jerusalem bears witness to this: a mother died giving birth to her “first-born” son.

But the term also assumes a further theological value. Then it stands in relation to other passages of Scripture which throw light on Jesus:

- 1-“Every first-born boy will be consecrated to the Lord” (Ex 13:2; Lk 2:2).
- 2-“(Jesus is) the first-born of all creation” (Col 1:15).
- 3-“he was the first to be born from the dead that he should be first in every way “(Col 1: 18, and Apoc. 1: 5).
- 4-«Christ has been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of all who have fallen asleep! » (1Cor 15 : 20).
- 5-“so that his Son might be the eldest of many brothers” (Rom 8: 30).

6-« And he the eldest will not be ashamed to call us “brothers” (cf Hb 2: 17).

7- Those saved by the Son form the Church « in which everyone is a ‘first-born son’ and a citizen of heaven” (Hb 12: 23).

8-The prophet Zechariah describes the lamentation for the just one as that made for a first-born: « They will look on the one whom they have pierced; they will mourn for him as for an only son » (Zc 12: 10).

Luke situates himself on the theological level, as does John in his Prologue where the Word is presented as the only Son, full of grace and truth. Biblical thought embraces all the dignities of this first-born son.

28-The mother's face

Benedict XVI, in his homily of 1st January 2010, said: « (Mary) was the first to see the face of God made man in the fruit of her womb. The mother has a special rapport, unique and in some way exclusive, with the new born child. The first face the child sees is its mother's, and this look is decisive for its rapport with life, with itself, with others and with God. This look is decisive for it to also become « a child of peace » (Lk 10: 6).

The first face the child sees is its mother's. In fact, the child has started discovering its mother already: it knows her voice, the caresses she has given it while still in the womb, the beating of her heart. It hears the often repeated name which it ends up understanding as its own in the society of men. The child discovers its mother's eyes, smile, different tones of voice, the warmth of her body when she holds it against herself, and feeds it. The mother sets the child on the road towards full human maturity.

But his mother's face is also the last thing that Jesus sees: « Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother... Seeing his mother and the disciple he loved standing near her, Jesus said to his mother: « Woman, this is your son! ». Then to the disciple he said, « This is your mother! » (Jn 19 : 25-27). In these three verses, Mary is the first named and the last, and the word "mother" is repeated five times. The text says explicitly that Jesus looked at her. In the midst of his agony, Jesus has his eyes full of his mother's face. Then the disciple takes the mother into his house, he fills his house with the mother's presence, he acts like a new Jesus.

On Calvary, Jesus bestows on Mary a new motherhood, she becomes mother of the beloved disciple, symbol of all disciples. But Jesus also engenders the Church, mother of all disciples. Mary and the beloved disciple form the first cell of the Church: living under the same roof, they form the same community.

At Christmas, it is Mary who engenders the child; he depends in everything on her. For us, in our history as disciples, it is the Church which bears us, calls us by name,

nourishes us and sets us out on the paths of love and apostolic work; she has made sons of us. Mother Church never abandons her children.

But on Calvary, it is Jesus who engenders the mothers: Mary, to whose care he confides us, and the Church who gives birth to us in baptism and then educates us in the faith, until we become ourselves fathers, mothers, pastors, of so many disciples still in process of growth and in need of affection. On Calvary, it is Jesus who gives us mothers, and by the resurrection he makes us sons. On Calvary, the new humanity is born.

At the two moments of Christmas and Calvary, the mother's face is important. God is telling us that the adventure of salvation is first of all an adventure of love, a family adventure.

29-The mother and child

In mother and child beat the heart of life. A pregnant mother carries within herself a new person, a unique human universe. The seed of mystery sprouts in her, takes root in her body, her heart, her intelligence: genesis of a new eternity.

The mother loves, nourishes, soothes, protects, educates and also takes on the share of sorrow inherent in all motherhood. She welcomes into herself another person, assists the emergence of another person into the light in the best climate of love possible. With her love, intelligence, sense of responsibility, the mother lays the foundation of the child's psychology.

Between Mary and the child Jesus there is a unique density of humanity. Mary constructs and penetrates the whole of the substance of Jesus' humanity. Take away from a person what the mother has contributed, and the person's personality collapses. The child is nothing without the mother. But the mother, too, is totally changed by the child she bears. There exists a deep communion-osmosis between these two persons, and, in our case between Mary and Jesus, a communion which is physical, affective, psychological,

spiritual. In his admirable Letter to Women of 25 June 1995, John Paul II wrote: « Thank you to you, woman-mother, who welcomes the human being, in the joy and pain of a unique experience; you become the smile of God for the child who is born, you guide its first steps, sustain its growth... » Benedict XVI picks up this thought: « She (Mary) was the first to see the face of God made man in the fruit of her womb. The mother has a special rapport, unique and in some way exclusive, with the new born child. The first face the child sees is its mother's, and this look is decisive for its rapport with life, with itself, with others and with God. This look is decisive for it becoming also « a child of peace: » (homily of 1st January 2010).

Christa Meves, mother, scholar, psychotherapist, with ten years of experience of dealing with children carrying inner traumas, says: « When the child is born, it knows the heartbeat of its mother, her voice and even the taste of her milk, so similar to the taste of the amniotic liquid... Instinctively, mothers turn to crying children on their left side so that they may rediscover the beating of the heart, the rhythm they have known since the mother's womb. » (In *Journée de prière en l'honneur de Marie, Mère de tous les peuples* – Pentecost, 31 May 2009, LanXess-Kolnarena – Cologne – Germany.)

“Each one of us has been given his own share of grace... (for) building up the body of Christ” (Eph 4: 7, 12). But Mary was given the grace of accepting into her womb and giving flesh to the body of Jesus Christ himself.

These are the bonds God weaves between mother and child, between him and us. Our humanity is penetrated with divinity, while God takes our flesh. The humanity is illuminated by it, while the divinity is eclipsed by our opaque flesh.

Mary loved Jesus,
who is the perfect Love.
Mary said “yes” to Jesus
who is the perfect “YES”.
Mary has given birth to Jesus
who is our full Life.
Mary, with motherly words, has cradled Jesus:
who is the Word since the beginning.
Mary has fed Jesus
who is our Bread of life.
Mary helped the first steps of Jesus,
Who is our unique Way.
Mary taught Jesus the meaning of things;
Jesus, who is the Wisdom from above.
Mary showed Jesus how to pray;
Jesus, our only Prayer.

True human love comes to dwell
in the heart of God.
our time, into Eternity, our life, in Life!
Always passing through our human flesh.

30-The heart, the shrine of faith

Luke 2: 19, 51

Twice, in almost identical terms, Luke presents Mary in this way, “s for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Lk 2:19), and “His mother stored up all these things in her heart” (Lk 2:51).

Mary is presented as a woman who keeps and meditates in her heart all that happens to her Son. In the bible, the word “heart” signifies the most important aspect of the person, the person’s inner sanctuary where the person is genuine, and God takes his abode. It was in the heart that Mary prayed, keeping carefully in mind all that was said of her Son. “Keeping in the heart” is a sustained and daily action that characterises a person who lives a spiritual life. We find Mary in this state on the first Christmas Day, and again twelve years later when Jesus was lost in the temple. For Mary, such contemplation was a habit she grew into.

What did she keep so deeply in her heart? She kept all the messages that deepened her knowledge of Jesus. In this sense, Mary was constantly evangelised through external events and other people: she pondered on them, meditated on them all. Through Prayer she came to acquire clearer understanding and vision of her Son. Occasionally, she did not understand the full significance of certain events, such as Simeon’s words about the Child or the reply of the adolescent Jesus to her in the temple: “*Did you not know that I had to be in my Father’s house?(Lk 2:49)*. Her response, however, was the fruitful attitude of the believer, storing these things in a prayerful heart, waiting for light.

One may wonder why Luke did not end the *Infancy Narrative* with the visit of the shepherds and the circumcision of the Child. That would constitute a fitting conclusion for the cycle of the birth events involving the parallel sketched between John the Baptist and Jesus. In this parallel there is a general climate of joy as the angel confirms, “I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of

David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord” Luke 2: 10-11. (The idea of two different conclusion is not well translated)

After this first conclusion, however, Luke adds the Presentation to the Temple, Luke 2: 22-38, and the loss of Jesus in Jerusalem, Luke 2: 41-42. These two events heralded suffering: the sword that would pierce the soul of Mary and the loss of Jesus for three days – a first painful training to the Passion. In these two cases, Luke used the verb “*to keep*” in Greek “*terein*”, but he adds a prefix to the verb.

For the joy of Christ’s birth he writes “*synterein*”, for the various elements fit each other naturally, they have a centripetal tendency. The prefix “*syn*” indicates this fact, as in the words “*symphony*”, “*sympathy*”, “*symposium*”, and “*synthesis*”.

In the two additional episodes when suffering dominates, the elements have a centrifugal movement and it is more difficult to keep them together. In this case, Luke uses the prefix “*dia*”, and “*diaterein*”. This prefix indicates the tendency to separation as in the words “*diaphragm*”, “*dialysis*”, “*diameter*” and especially “*diabolical*” (related to the word *devil* Satan being the great divider of the human heart) .

In time of joy or in time of suffering, Mary knew how to store up all things in her heart, leaving time for reflection and prayer to help her understand them. We can thus regard Mary as the first Christian mystic and theologian.

We admire this woman who stored up everything in her heart. We are convinced she was a person of great depth in whom reigned a peaceful and reflective heart fostering the silent prayer that is called contemplation.

We do not hesitate to assert that such was Mary’s usual style of prayer but the gospel narrates other prayers of the Lord’s Mother which we might term as prayers of circumstance. The Annunciation was surely a mystical moment of deep intimacy with God. Then at Elizabeth’s home, she prayed the song of joy, the Magnificat. As the child was taking shape in her and was showing himself alive by moving in her womb, she

certainly started to speak to him, to call him, to tell him loving words and to give him his first caresses. The child perceived those words and gestures very well. They inspired him with serenity. At the nativity, when she looked at her Son's face for the first time and was swaddling him, her prayer was one of joy, ecstasy, and praise. Luke sets up this parallel: while the mother was wrapping the child in swaddling clothes, God was enveloping the shepherds in light. When Mary dotes on Jesus with her love, God showers us with his love.

Cana was also a place of prayer. To tell the Son, "They have no more wine" is a very concrete prayer. Above all, Mary prayed at the foot of the cross. Her presence, her silence, her faith and her deep sorrow constituted her prayer. It was a loving prayer that had no need to be expressed in words. It was a complete adhesion to the Son so that the Word could fill up this silence with his Word, "Woman, here is your son", "Here is your Mother".

Jesus died while the Church, mother and son, were born.

In Luke, the final picture that we have of Mary is the one of her praying at the Cenacle with the first Christian community, Acts 1:14. Afterwards, Mary is no more heard of in the Scriptures. But she has always been in the Church praying with us for the coming of the Spirit so that the Pentecost may continue in the world.

31-The cry of a woman

Saint Luke, in Chapter 11: 27-28, has preserved for us a woman's cry, a precious cry, but as if overshadowed, as if Jesus wanted to extinguish it.

« Now as he was speaking, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said: « Happy the womb that bore you and the breasts you sucked! » But he replied: « Still happier those who hear the word of God and keep it! »

The woman's cry comes from her admiration for the prophet Jesus and is directed at him: The mother is happy to have such a Son. It is all motivated by the greatness of Jesus: he is the centre of the awe and the praise, and this praise embraces his mother also. The awe-inspiring greatness of Jesus is also the motivation behind all true Marial devotion.

And this praise springs from a woman. A woman knows from experience what binds her to her child, for she has borne it in her womb and fed it with her milk. In Judea in the time of Jesus, as in Africa today, the woman finds glory in her children; she loses her own name to become called « the mother of... ». John, the evangelist, knows Mary only as « the mother of Jesus ». For him, Mary's ecclesial identity is being « the mother of Jesus ».

This spontaneous cry comes from out of the crowd, from the good sense of simple people. Isn't this crowd an image of the Church? In the Church, there are so many simple voices repeating to Jesus: « How lucky your mother has been! » It is the greatness of Jesus which arouses praise for the mother. When Jesus grows in us, when his light fills us, then his mother also grows in our hearts.

So a cry inspired by Jesus, addressed to him, a cry rising from woman's deepest experience, it comes from the crowd, from the humble ones whose praise is true; it is a precious cry.

Yet Jesus seems to cast a shadow over this woman's enthusiasm: « Still happier are those who hear the word of God and keep it! ». Jesus appears to extinguish this praise of his mother, but, in fact, he amplifies it. He gives it two new dimensions.

The first is that Mary's greatness lies in her listening, a listening which allowed the Word of God to take flesh, to become this Jesus we all admire. Jesus returns us to the source, to the day of the Annunciation, to the Yes of Mary, which is total disposability. Then she had this listening attitude which is « to observe and preserve in her heart everything concerning Jesus ».

In the second, Jesus makes us pass from the singular to the plural, from the grace offered the mother to the grace offered to all: « Still happier are *those* who hear the word of God and keep it! » Mary's call, which seemed extraordinary and unique, reverberates for all: « hear the word and keep it ». Those who hear and observe enter into the beatitude of the mother. Jesus proposes his mother as a model to them.

Luke did well to preserve for us this woman's cry: it is precious, it is evangelical, true praise of the mother, it opens the door to us: we can enter the family of Jesus.

32-“And grace upon grace”

John’s Gospel, presenting the Word in the Prologue, says: « From his fullness we have all received, and grace in return for grace » (Jn 1: 16). Everything is grafted onto the fact that « The Word was made flesh » (Jn 1: 14), he willed a mother and to be carried in a woman’s womb. The one « full of grace and truth » (Jn 1: 14), has poured out on us from his fullness « grace upon grace »:

The Word was made flesh,
 he lived among us,
 and we saw his glory,
 the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father,
 full of grace and truth...
 Indeed, from his fullness we have all received,
 yes, grace in return for grace » (Jn 1:14,16).

The source is the Word : all graces are in him and come from him:

« Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
 who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in
 Christ » (Eph 1: 3).

If we have all received « grace upon grace », the first to benefit from the infinite love of God was surely the Virgin Mary whom we call the Immaculate One.

Now the source of the new humanity is found, not in a creature, as for the first humanity, but in God himself, in the Son, in absolute holiness. Mary is the first to « be

clothed in the garments of salvation and wrapped in the cloak of integrity » (Is 61: 10), she is « the woman clothed with the sun » (Ap 12: 2). In our humanity, Mary is the source of the absolute Source of the new humanity: Jesus. The Son irradiates his mother with his holiness. It is here that we find the reason and the light to call Mary Immaculate. Between mother and Son the union is such that the latter, Holy by nature, enlightens the mother's whole being.

When Gabriel appears, bearing a message from heaven, the name with which he addresses Mary shows this young woman's identity in the eyes of God: she is « the full of grace » (Lk 1: 28). To speak of grace is to speak of God's gift to Mary. But when there is correspondance, grace also becomes an acquired value: « Mary loved is also ready to love » and in fact she will love the Son with all her being, as the first commandment requires. In this love, she is going to receive one grace after another. It is in the logic of things that the one who has will receive more (Lk 19: 26), « grace upon grace ».

She is born Immaculate, but she grows to the point of being called « full of grace ». She who is « full of grace », goes farther in carrying the Son in her womb. In the acceptance she gives the child, she becomes « first daughter of God » : « To all who did accept him he gave power to become children of God » (Jn 1: 12). Bearing the Son, Mary undertakes the first Christian mission to the family of the little John the Baptist. It is because she is in this state of mission that she notices that we « have no wine ». She knows that she has the grace to intercede. Present at the first sign, at Cana, Mary is again present at the cross. Here, Jesus expands his mother's heart so that she can embrace all the disciples, even all mankind, in her maternal love. Her presence at the Cenacle, in the first group of disciples and in the first prayer of the Church, is another grace of fidelity and motherhood. The Assumption, finally, crowns a whole life of love. Mary receives « grace upon grace ». But the cause and the source is always the Son.

But the text of the Prologue speaks about us and therefore in the plural: « From his fullness we have, all of us, received grace upon grace ». On us, too, has been poured a grace without measure, a grace which is renewed at each turning point in our lives: we have been saved, baptised, enlightened by the Word, nourished by his body, called friends, brothers, fellow citizens with the saints, of the family of God, sent on mission, filled with the Spirit who keeps alive in us the flame of passion and mission.

With all that, the « full of grace » is given us as mother. All the graces in Mary, there they are at our disposal; her extraordinary holiness is for us to enter into life. Mary is no stranger, she is our mother. We should not regard her as different from us, but as mother among us. Jesus said: « I will not leave you orphans ». Mary will love us with all the strength of the love her Son has put in her heart. The mother's heart beats in rhythm with the heart of the Son, the heart of God.

If it is true to say: « How holy the mother of Jesus is », since he has introduced us into his family we should also say: « How holy our Mother is! ». It is in this holiness that we also grow, in the holiness that has its unique source in the Word:

« From his fulness we have all received,
yes, grace upon grace » (Jn 1: 14,16)

**33-“There is no greater love
than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”**

(Jn 15: 12)

The chapters of John’s Gospel that narrate the last supper present a Jesus who speaks at length; he is the Teacher who knows his hours are numbered. So it is a time of intimacy, of profound revelations. He has come to the time of great love: “Jesus, knowing the time had come for him to pass from this world to the Father, having loved those who were his in the world, loved them to the end.” (Jn 13: 1).

In these chapters, the Church contemplates her Lord. The Church knows she must traverse with Him the royal road of total gift of self: “No greater love has any one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” Jesus is the first to give himself completely for us; he does so because he loves us, he calls us “friends”. He surrenders himself right to the end, to the end of the man Jesus, to the infinite end of the Son of God: all is surrendered in time and in eternity. The passion is the moment of the great gifts. Among these is the gift of the Mother: “Behold your Mother!” (Jn 19: 27).

But why give us his Mother unless she has herself followed this royal way of love? She had put her life completely at the service of her Son. At the Annunciation, Mary consecrates herself to the child who is offered her. She directs to him her heart and body, her time and intelligence, the love of Joseph and the family life, today and tomorrow. With him she walks the roads of the Visitation, the nativity, exile, the roads of the Messiah’s mission in Galilee, in Judea, and then the long road that leads to Jerusalem and Calvary. She will be in the Cenacle, present at the first prayer of the infant Church, the prayer invoking the Holy Spirit. And Mary will retire into the Church, family of her Son.

Looking at his Mother, Jesus could certainly have said: “Greater love than this...” His Mother had been guided by the same Spirit who guided him, by that love, divine in nature, which tends to give itself without reserve.

For the saints, the martyrs, for us, followers of Jesus, there is no other way than that of love. Joseph, Peter, Paul, Ignatius of Antioch and so many others down the centuries have traversed this road. It is true that we walk stumblingly; it is certain that our giving is not total, not constant. It is a path punctuated with falls. But love is authentic only if it makes a gift of itself. There is no other way that leads us to God, no other way that leads us to man.

When Mary dedicated her whole life to her Son, she dedicated it, in fact, entirely to us. In her we discover the truth of Jesus' words: "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends". And the Church can say of Mary: "And having loved her Son who was in the world, she loved him to the end."

34-A feast of love

John 2: 1-12

Mary and Jesus were invited to the feast of love, to the wedding at Cana – a beautiful and symbolic occasion. John suggests that we too should invite Jesus and Mary to our joyful celebrations.

Both were invited but perhaps Mary was the special guest chosen to keep an eye on the progress of the event. Indeed, she quickly noticed that the wine was coming to an end and addressed the problem. She spoke to the waiters and was listened to as a person in authority.

Mary was wonderful! She noticed a human problem threatening the merry atmosphere of the occasion. Mary took on the challenge thereby showing her solidarity with people in difficulty. Additionally, she had an instinctive sense of her Son's power. She could have tried to solve the problem making use of other persons on duty and so have left Jesus alone for he was only a guest. But she knew her Son. It was her request to him that radically changed the course of that wedding feast. Jesus became the central actor, and it was Mary's approach that placed him at the centre. Thanks to Mary, the waiters obeyed Jesus, "Do everything he will tell you". We move from the wedding of a human couple to the nuptials of the Messiah, from a local feast to the celebration of heaven and earth.

Mary said two sentences only, "**They have no more wine**". Both then and now she refers problems to Jesus. "**Do everything he tells you**" – we must listen to that too. Once she had made her two interventions, Mary withdrew, leaving the action to Jesus.

Do you think the miracle was easy to obtain? "Woman, what do you want of me? My hour has not yet come." There was nothing impolite on the part of Jesus when he said "**woman**" to his mother. Jesus used to address women that way. He uses the same word on the cross

where it cannot have any negative connotation. Does he not help Mary to understand that she is the **new Eve**, the one who is in relationship with the new Adam? Mary's prayer is then answered in a prodigious way.. The jars are filled with water, symbol of baptism, that became the best of wine, foreshadowing the Eucharist. Jesus revealed His glory, the disciples believed in him. A new group springs up with Jesus at the head, then his Mother, his brothers, and his disciples. Jesus who had arrived at the wedding in the second place moved to the forefront, thanks to his Mother's intervention. This sign obtained when it was not yet the hour allowed all the other signs to happen "when it is not yet the hour". All those signs point to the SIGN of the cross, the SIGN of the HOUR and they announce it.

(Jesus too, will see his prayer refused at Gethsemane: "Father, if it is possible, take away from me this chalice". But the Father asked his Son to ascend the Calvary in order to show us who God is: *Love without any limit*. On the Cross, Jesus revealed his glory infinitely more than at Cana and this is where he saved us. This is a lesson to remember when we have the impression that our prayers are not heard by the Father).

The movement of the text at Cana goes from Mary's faith to the disciples' faith that becomes the faith of the Church and our faith today. The faith of Mary set Jesus at the centre and reached the disciples who entered the mother's faith. Cana heralded the Son's weddings and Mary facilitated them.

35-Mary the disciple

At the end of a talk on Mary, one of the listeners remarked that the best title one could give to her was that of *disciple* of her Son and he saw this title as more important than « *Mother of the Lord* ».

A disciple is one who has a teacher, who follows in his steps, who models his life according to his master's message and gives testimony of it to others: « You are my friends if you do what I command you (Jn 15:14)... The servant is not greater than his master (Jn 13:16 and 15:20)... You will be my witnesses even to the ends of the earth (Acts 1 :8)» For the disciple his life becomes totally available to his master.

Most of the disciples who set out to follow Jesus knew him only from his public life, when he was the great prophet, the Messiah, whose praises the crowds sang after each miracle, the one who would die on a cross and rise again at Passover. Mary, however, placed her life at her Son's service from the day of the Annunciation. She was ahead of all the other disciples by at least thirty years, she outstripped them in love and knowledge of the Son. But can we call her a *disciple* during those thirty years of one who had to still to reveal himself as the Teacher?

During this period, Mary calls herself twice « *the servant of the Lord* », at the Annunciation, in her final reply to Gabriel, and in the Magnificat she sings on Elisabeth's doorstep. Thus she places herself among the ranks of the great servants of God, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, the prophets, where her Son will also place himself, as head of the procession « come not to be served but to serve! » (Mt 20 : 28).

As for the Gospel infancy texts of Matthew and Luke, they insist on Mary's motherhood, a reality also recognised by Elisabeth when she calls her « the Mother of my Lord! » The title of *mother* of Jesus goes hand in hand with that of « *servant* ». Together they express the fullness of Mary's personality. They are not mutually exclusive, nor is one more important than the other. Both are precious: *Mary is servant and mother*.

Mary acts as mother. When Jesus remains in the Temple and his parents are looking for him with anguish, his mother says to him: « My child, why have you done this to us? See how worried your father and I have been, looking for you » (Lk. 2: 48). At Cana, it is certainly as mother that she approaches Jesus and tells him: « They have no wine » (Jn 2: 3). And it as mother that she sets out to go to her Son when certain ones in the family were saying «he is out of his mind » (Mk 3: 21).

The gospels recognize Mary 28 times as mother of Jesus. It is certainly the most frequent title, and the one that continues the most glorious in the Church's devotion and most loved by the faithful.

But this mother possesses all the characteristics of the true disciple. She places her whole life at her Son's disposition ; he is the treasure, the centre of her life; she exists only for him. She keeps in her heart « every word spoken about her Son » (Lk 2: 19 and 51). And like any true disciple she gives him to the world, defends him, makes him known as Messiah. She becomes the first on mission for her Son when she takes the road of the Visitation. Besides, the terms « *servants, disciples, friends* » are often synonyms.

But in John's Gospel, after the wedding at Cana, we have a clear moment when we see Mary becoming *disciple*. She arrived at the wedding before Jesus. When the first sign is accomplished, Jesus heads for Capernaum. Mary is first to follow him: « After this, he went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers and his disciples » (Jn 2: 12). From now on, she follows her Son. She follows him to Calvary, she recognises him as Lord at the Cenacle, since she is one of those who believe in Jesus. So during his public life, she follows her Son, she is disciple.

For the others, however, she is a special disciple, she is *the disciple-mother*. John always calls her « the mother of Jesus ». When Luke lists the persons forming the first group of disciples at the cenacle, he speaks of Mary as « the mother of Jesus ». In John, she also becomes « the mother of the beloved disciple » and hence mother of all disciples. Mary is a disciple, but clothed with the greatness of her maternity. She combines the love of the disciple with the love of the mother.

Here, too, the two titles are not mutually exclusive, nor do they respect a hierarchy. They complement each other to describe Mary's total reality; both do honour to the Mother of Jesus.

It is not very useful to set up a catalogue of titles for the Virgin Mary, still less to accumulate her prerogatives around one while excluding others. Mary is at once full of grace and virgin, servant and mother, disciple and mother of disciples, mother of the Church and member of the Church, our mother and our sister, daughter of Sion and first in the new Israel. The Old Testament closes in her, the New opens in her, mother of Jesus and the first one saved by Jesus.

She is certainly an exceptional woman, but she is our Mother!

36-Here is your mother

John 19: 25-27

Near Jesus' cross, there were women and the beloved disciple. Jesus' look was fixed on two persons, on his mother and the beloved disciple. He set them apart and worked wonders on them. "Seeing thus his mother and near her, the disciple he loved, Jesus told his mother, "Woman, here is your son" He then told the disciple, "Here is your mother".

Jesus completed the circle of love. Jesus loved his mother and his mother loved him. Jesus loved his disciple and the disciple loved his Master. Here, Jesus established a new bond of love, linking the mother and the disciple now admitted to the dignity of the Son. Now the circle of love is completed: from Jesus, the Son, to the mother; from the mother to her new son, and from this son to the Master. It was Jesus' love that flowed through these persons. It was because Jesus loved his disciple that he entrusted his mother to him; she was a pure gift of the Son's love. And the disciple was given as a son to Mary because Jesus loved that disciple; he was a gift to the mother of a loving son. Thus, mother and son (disciple) were strongly united by the love of the dying Lord. We may say that it was in this way that Jesus signed his last will and testament.

The Son uses two family terms, *mother* and *son*, to clearly convey that those who follow him make up a family, his family, animated by his love and by his Spirit. After his resurrection, Jesus called his disciples **brothers** and he confirmed this by saying that he was ascending to his Father and **your Father** John 20:17. Jesus created two responsibilities. He entrusted his mother with the first one, "*Woman, here is your son*"; but a similar responsibility is entrusted to the disciple, "*Here is your mother*". Here, we have a beautiful figure of the Church, maternal and filial.

To whom is the mother entrusted? To John? The text does not use this name; it uses the term "*the beloved disciple*". Then we understand why the gift is made to all disciples. All Jesus' disciples are beloved disciples. All receive the mother as a proof of Jesus' love. You receive the Mother because Jesus loves you.

But when does Jesus give his mother? It is a moment when he is himself a complete gift, when he is fully involved in an extreme act of love, that limitless one of accepting the end. Mary is one of the Lord's great gifts "in extremis": Jesus gives his life up to the last drop of his blood. He gives us the Spirit when he dies; he establishes his Church that commences with the mother and the new son; he introduces us to the Father. Mary is a part of these great gifts. She is a part of the legacy Jesus leaves to us. The beloved disciple understands this very well "*since from that hour, the disciple took her into his home.*" To love, he responded with love, "*Whoever holds to my commandments and keeps them is the one who loves me*" John 14: 15 and 21.

And what mother does Jesus give us? Evidently his mother; a woman whose faith in God's extreme love is absolute fidelity to the Son; a woman whose faith is love whatever may happen. The one John had already presented as a faith model at Cana, he shows how far the mother's faith can go; she is a woman who passed through the crucible of the Cross, who shared in some way the martyrdom of her Son. Jesus gave us a mother schooled in suffering, able to understand our own pains and to welcome them in her heart. And when Jesus makes his mother our own, he also gives her all the necessary power to be a mother. Jesus does not give her an empty honorific title. Mary is made our mother with an infinite capacity to be a mother. That power comes from Jesus, the unique mediator. Can Mary intercede for us? Can we ask her to help us? Without a doubt, otherwise, we nullify Jesus' word. The same God who said, "Let there be light" also said, "Behold your mother". Jesus himself leads us to his mother. This act of Jesus justifies our prayers when we go to Mary with our problems.

37-The gift of the mother

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary, wife of Clophas, and Mary of Magdala. Seeing his mother and, near her, the disciple whom he loved, Jesus said to his mother: « Woman, behold your son. » Then he said to the disciple: « Behold your mother. » And from that moment, the disciple took her into his home. (Jn 19, 25-27).

In these three verses, the word « *mother* » is repeated five times, the word « *disciple* » three, and it is *Jesus* speaking just before his death. Everything is happening among these three persons. But if we know who Jesus and Mary are, the disciple remains anonymous. We may interpret this to mean that this disciple represents each of us: you, me. In this act, Jesus involves me, I am the beloved disciple: it is to me that Jesus gives his mother.

« Why does Jesus give us his mother? » The response leads us to the crossroads of revelation, about God, about salvation, about the dying Lord, about the mother and about the disciple.

Jesus gives us his mother because it is God's nature to give, to give himself, to be love even when conditions deny it. And his love consists in giving the best of himself, what is closest to his heart. When Jesus gives us his mother, he is telling us how precious she is to him, how he loves her. And he gives her to us because he loves us. This is how it is with God. He gives all that is precious to him. The Father gives the Son, the Son gives the Spirit. The Son also gives the mother, he gives the Church but under the protection of the Spirit. There is a sort of theophany here: God is love (1Jn 4 : 8), even on the cross, especially on the cross. The cross is the great revelation of God, on it he gives himself without reserve.

These verses also say what it is to be saved: it is to be assimilated by Christ, to become one with him. Origen observes that Jesus does not say to his mother: « Woman, behold, this one is also your son », but « Behold your son! », « Behold me in him, behold another Jesus ». Salvation is truly there, being enriched with the whole person of the Lord, being one with him, not by conquest but by gift. And every true disciple, in moments of intimacy, asks this of the Lord: to be filled with his plenitude, to become pure space for

the Lord, to know within what Paul speaks about: « It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me! » (Gal. 2 : 20).

These three verses strongly emphasize the words « mother and son ». Jesus' will is to create a new family. Those who follow him are invited to live a mother-son relationship. The Church takes the family as model. This is the will and project of the dying Jesus. In the Church, primacy ought to be with relationships of love, with the reciprocal responsibilities mother and children live in the family. The mother and the disciple form the first cell of the Church, the first cell of the spiritual family Jesus always wanted. The bond of love between Mary and the disciple is as lived in its pure state: « And from that moment, the disciple took her into his home ». When Jesus gives us his mother, we enter his family; when the mother is accepted, she enters the family of the disciple. The Lord's family and the disciple's family are bound together in the mother. When Mary enters the disciple's family, it becomes Church, becomes Jesus' family.

If we look at it from the point of view of the disciple, knowing the disciple can be any one of us, it is certain that Jesus wants us as sons to be able to continue in us his love for his mother. Every time we love Mary we revive the love Jesus had for her, and loving the mother is one way of being Jesus. In the hearts of his disciples Jesus continues to love his mother. Like the beloved disciple we, too, take into our home the one who is Mother of the Lord.

Looking at it from the mother's point of view, now that Jesus is dying, we discover the marvel of his incarnation. Truly he only wants to be one with us, and Mary is the first to be filled with this reality: God comes in her, the Son becomes incarnate in her and is one with her. God loves us beyond what we can imagine: he is close, he is within, he is Emmanuel, he wants to fill us with his plenitude. When the incarnation joins the cross, then the disciple becomes what Mary became at the Annunciation: totally united with the Saviour. It all started in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

These few verses are full of light. They tell us about God, salvation, the spiritual family, the will of Jesus to continue loving his mother in each of his disciples, and that each disciple is for him «the beloved disciple le disciple! He becomes another Jesus. »

38-Faith at the Hour of the Cross

This scene in John's Gospel which shows Mary at the foot of the cross is very well known:

Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his home. (John 19, 25-27)

How can a mother find herself there, in this dreadful place where her only son is suffering and dying, the one that she loves and who is the whole meaning of her life? Maternal instinct, maternal fidelity, undoubtedly, even if she can do nothing to help her son; she is helpless as is he; she is also engulfed in death.

What faith could have sustained Mary at that moment of the agony and death of her son? That is a faith called love, fidelity, intimate knowledge of the Son, faith which precedes seeing and which nonetheless has also already seen, faith which allows everything that concerns the Son to ripen in her heart. Better than Paul she can say: *"yet I love, no longer I, but Christ lives in me."* (Gal. 2, 20) From the beginning she had allowed herself to be invaded by the Son, her life had become the space of the Christ.

Works of art which represent Mary with her dead son in her arms are familiar to us. We call them *pietas*, the best known is Michelangelo's, on the right at the entrance of St. Peter's Basilica. The first meaning of the Latin word *pieta* related to the fidelity of soldiers right up to the point of death. Thus the first meaning of Mary having the dead Jesus in her arms is the fidelity of the mother right up to the point of death. Mary has been faithful to the end.

Mary's faith, at the hour of the Sons' death, expresses itself in a hostile context: injustice, hatred, contempt, mockery, the indifference of many, the exposed nude body of the Son, the deep solitude of Jesus and his mother. Who understood this sacrifice? The closest disciples saved themselves, hidden, isolated. Now that Jesus has his hands nailed, the leaders of the people remind him of his miracles and cry to him to come down from

the cross. That's the condition they set for believing: *"Come down from the cross that we may see and believe."* (Mark 15,32) *"And the rulers, meanwhile, sneered at him."* (Luke 23,35)

Mary doesn't ask for any sign, she is presence, fidelity and silence. She looks at her Son and Isaiah's description of the Suffering Servant comes to her mind: *"There was in him no stately bearing to make us look at him, nor appearance that would attract us to him. He was spurned and avoided by men; a man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity, one of those from whom men hid their faces."* (Isaiah 53, 2-3) How long had Mary compared this portrait of the Messiah to the announcements of the passion that her Son had endured? What was in the great sanctuary of the mother's heart that kept faith's flame alive? The veiled announcements of the resurrection? *"The Son of Man is to be handed over to men, and they will kill him and he will be raised on the third day."* (Matthew 17, 22-23) Had she learned what Jesus said to Martha a few moments before the resurrection of Lazarus: *"I am the resurrection and the life"*? It is certain the Mary didn't understand everything, but she had the ability to allow her Son's words that she didn't understand settle in her heart and in her prayer.

And then there was the silence of heaven, the silence of the Father. Mary's faith had to make that silence welcome. God had taken the road of silence and powerlessness; the Father and the Spirit put their steps in the steps of the Son. Jesus said: *"The Father and I are one."* (John 10,30) At Calvary the Father could also say: *"The Son and I are one."* The Son wishes himself powerless from human power; the Father and the Spirit wish the same which is amazing. God had taken the path of absolute love, he was going to reveal his absolute love, and the cross is the summit of absolute love. Mary is also silence, powerlessness, but in communion with the absolute love of her Son. She is there, she is present and the Son can say to her: *"Woman, here is your son!"*, announcement of a grand spring, hidden sign of the resurrection.

Considering the gift of the beloved disciple, St. Bernard makes this surprising reflection: *"What a terrible exchange. Mother, John is given to you in the place of Jesus, the servant in the place of the Lord, the disciple in the place of the Master, the son of Zebedee in the place of the Son of God, a simple man in the place of the true God..."* (Office of Readings for September 15) And so it is! We are all the beloved disciples invaded by the presence of the Son, by the sanctity of the Son, by his Spirit. Mary has only one Son, Jesus, all the others are sons within the Son. We are not seeing a decline of the motherhood of Mary but rather amplification without limits.

Here Mary revives the faith of the Annunciation; once again a mysterious maternity opens within her. Mary sees that her heart gives birth again when Jesus says to her: *“Woman, here is your son!”* The maternity of the Annunciation knows a new spring. Mary’s answer to the Angel Gabriel remains true forever: *“I am the servant of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.”* (Luke 1, 38) But now it is no longer Gabriel who speaks, it is her Son, he speaks his will.

39-And from that hour

The disciple took her into his home

John 19:27

From that hour... It is the hour of Jesus, an hour without end. It still goes on today when disciples of our time must take the mother into their homes.

The verb “to take” (*lambano*, in Greek) expresses a very particular nuance in John’s gospel. The evangelist reserved that term for Jesus, in the sense of welcoming to him or not. Used here for the mother, the author of the gospel wants us to understand how much the mother is a part of the Son. Indeed, Jesus gives what belongs intimately to Him and is very dear to his heart.

The disciple took her into his home. The home in Greek “*eis ta idia*”, allows for many translations: in the house, in the family, in his property, among his treasures. Thus, the mother who was treasured by the Son, became one of the disciple’s treasures. It is appropriate since the beloved disciple had been named a “son”. But, the home of the disciple was also the community around him, his Church. Mary was welcomed into the Church: within the new people of God she found her final place. This is the last picture we have of Mary: the mother among the disciples, exactly as indicated in Luke’s Gospel.

It was for this reason that the second Vatican Council (1962-1965) decided not to create a separate document on Mary, but rather to include her in the document on the Church. The Council did not wish to place Mary above God’s people but in the midst of the Church albeit as its pre-eminent member.

By his words, Jesus created new relationships of responsibility: of the mother to the son, of the son towards the mother. It is sometimes asked, “But how can one be responsible for Mary?” Simply by imitating John: he took the mother into his home, into his heart, into his life, into his community. Let us recall that the author of the fourth gospel reserved two choice places for her in the text: at Cana, the feast of love, and at the Cross where the deeper meanings are revealed. Why does John always call Mary, **Jesus’ mother?** As a sign of respect.

It was his way to convey the uniqueness of the woman. All her glory comes from Jesus. The love of the Master lights up the mother's countenance.

Origen comments: "In the Scripture, surely the Gospels hold the premier position, and among the Gospels the first place goes to John. However, one cannot grasp the *meaning* of John's Gospel without resting one's head upon the heart of Jesus, or without receiving Mary from Jesus as one's own mother." What Origen says of John's Gospel, every Christian who has some familiarity with Scripture, finds really true. John's Gospel is deep, mystical. John presents Jesus in a rather daring way which opens up a wealth of meaning. Each chapter brings with it a harvest of Messianic titles applied to Jesus.

For what reason does Mary appear in John? Answering the question has produced a great amount of theological research. The saints, for their part, know that "taking Mary into their home" helps to center one's life upon her Son with particular efficacy, while imparting to life an apostolic dimension that is both creative and daring.

40-Mary's Faith in the Gospel of John

(The following pages expand upon the text from p. 20,

Mary's Faith as Seen by John)

This title may seem odd and surprising to us for we are accustomed to seeing a high priority given to Mary's faith in the Gospel of Luke: "Yes, blessed is she who believed..." (Lk.1:45). Such is the way that Elizabeth responded to Mary's greeting, a response inspired by the Spirit, a response embraced by the Lucan Church, and subsequently by the entire Church of the Apostles. This blessing in faith is the alpha and the omega of the Gospels; it is the basic blessing from which all of the others flow.

And yet, if we dare to say so, John goes even further than Luke in presenting Mary as a model of faith. No longer is she the mother of the childhood of Jesus; she is now the mother of Jesus in his public ministry when he is the Great Prophet, the Expected Messiah. She is there when her Son begins his public life; she stands near her Son when his public life comes to an end with his death. Her faith in her Son flows from within her and remains with her throughout. John makes it possible for us to discover that Mary always walked with her Son from the Annunciation during which she played the role of « Mother-Servant » until his public life during which she plays the role of « Mother-Disciple ».

1-The Gospel of John:

It was completed about the year 95-100, some 30 years after the Gospel of Mark and was the last one to be written. However, the beginnings of the Gospel of John are from a tradition as old as that of the other Gospels. The facts that he reports have the same historical value. Elements of Jewish culture are more pronounced in John; he is very familiar with Jewish festivals, the pool with its five porticos (Bethzatha), and his references to the Sanhedrin reflect a greater understanding.

Three Great Events Characterizing This Gospel

1-The destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem: Just like those who were not Christians, the Christians of Jerusalem had to learn to live without the Temple. The Word, the Torah, would become the new focal point of the faith for those Jews who were not open to Christ and who were led by the developments of the Pharisees from Jamnia. The Logos, the Word-Jesus, would now become the new focal point for the Jews who had become Christians, those from Jerusalem as well as those of the Diaspora and subsequently for all Christians coming from the Greek and Gentile world.

2-The decision made by the leadership of the Pharisees at the Council of Jamnia around the year 74: The decision resulted in excluding from the People of God those Jews who claimed that Jesus was the Messiah... The 18th prayer that was composed at Jamnia is specifically against Jewish Christians...

When John refers to « the Jews », it is to designate those who identified themselves as JEWS as opposed to those who considered themselves to be followers of Jesus. Because of the decision taken at Jamnia, a yawning chasm was created between the Jewish People who remained faithful to the Pharisees and those who were followers of Jesus. The chasm would only grow deeper and wider over the centuries.

3-The Church at the end of its first 60 years: The Church had evolved, and it was better organized. Around the 80's, St. Ignatius of Antioch saw the beginnings of a hierarchical Church with a bishop as its overseer. Also, the Church experienced its first persecutions: firstly, under the emperor, Nero, in 67, and subsequently under Emperor Domitian around the year 85. Roman authorities had learned to differentiate between Christians and Jews. The Jews were officially recognized and were protected. The Christians, on the other hand, had no legal status. They were not officially recognized and were unprotected. As indicated in the Book of Revelation, they were to live while suffering persecution.

2- Characteristics of the Gospel of John

1. The Authors: John, the Beloved Disciple, and the Community of John are at the root of the early traditions. John the Elder, who was a disciple of John the Apostle, and the Johannine Community of Disciples who were near him are those responsible

for the final rendition of the Gospel. The narrator's inclusion of "we" clearly demonstrates the plurality of its authors.

2. The Gospel of John is the most profound, the most penetrating, the most original of the Gospels. The Prologue reverts to the eternal beginnings of the Word.

The number of components and signs that are used is new: Cana, the paralytic, the healing of a man born blind, Lazarus... The style is different: a statement is repeated several times with slight variations. A whole chapter is dedicated to a single sign; doing so provides Jesus with an opportunity to speak. In the synoptic Gospels, signs are multiplied in rapid succession within a few verses; they are like flashes of light. John, on the other hand, offers a single sign and develops it. The sign of the Bread of Life in Chapter 6 is elaborated over 70 verses...

3. It is a Gospel that is often written using a **chiasmus**, contrasting the « **transcendence of the above** » and the « **immanence of the below** ». The **Prologue** is a good example of this. Jesus comes from the Father and returns to the Father. This approach is used throughout the entire Gospel. Signs are arranged in the Gospel in such a manner as to form a chiasmus.

4. One might rightfully refer to the Gospel of John as **The Gospel of the Father**. The word Father or its pronoun derivatives are used 114 times, far more often than they are used in all of the Synoptic Gospels combined.

5. It is a Gospel under the signs of **intimacy** and **struggle**. The two approaches to Jesus are those who seek him and find him, and those who reject him. Here we find:

1. Intimacy: Nicodemus, the Samaritan Woman, all of the discourses of the Last Supper... those for whom the words of the Prologue were intended: "But to all who did accept him, he gave power to become children of God."

2. The disputes over Jesus' deeds and his words: Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10... which the Prologue had predicted with the words: « He came to his own domain, and his own people did not accept him. » It is the struggle of **light** verses **darkness** which runs through the entire Gospel.

3. Faith in the Gospel of John

A distinction must be made between **the faith of the Johannine Community** which was a post resurrection faith and **the faith of individual persons**.

1. The faith of the Community: that which bestows upon Jesus the lofty titles found as early as in Chapter 1:

The Prologue: Jesus is the Word, the Word with God, the True Light, the Life, the Creator of all things, The Word made flesh, the Fullness of grace and truth, the only Son of the Father, who is nearest to the Father...

From his very first encounter with individuals, such as John the Baptist and his disciples, he is the Lamb of God, the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, the Rabbi, the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of Israel... The Community expresses its faith which goes beyond those who are merely observers..

2. The faith of individuals: here we find a lack or a refusal of faith and a positive welcoming expression of faith:

1) He came to his own, and his own did not accept him, Jn. 1:11

2) But to all who accepted him, he gave power of becoming God's children, and the first to accept him was Mary, and in doing so she became the first of God's Daughters.

Refusal and acceptance, positive and negative expressions of faith are found throughout the Gospel, and are the beginnings of faith found in the very first verses of John.

3. Faith's final expression by way of an inclusion:

1) In the conclusion of Chapter 21, in verse 24, we read the following: "This Disciple is the one who vouches for these things and has written them down, and we know that his testimony is true."

2) More explicit yet is the expression of faith that preceded that declaration when, in Jn. 20: 30 we find: "There are many other signs that Jesus worked and that the disciples saw, but they are not recorded in this book. These are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is **the Christ, the son of God**, and that believing this you may have life through his name".

This final inclusion has two effects: first, it reiterates the faith that was expressed at the beginning, and second, the two titles used at the beginning are re-affirmed: **the Christ, the Son of God.**

3. When going through Chapter 20, two kinds of faith are found:

1- That of Thomas who **needed many signs**, but who nevertheless achieved a higher level of faith: “My Lord and my God!”

2- That of those who believed without having been given signs: **“Happy are those who have not seen and have believed!”** The form of the verbs used is in the past and not in the future. Who are those who have believed without having seen? It was Mary, who, as far back as the Annunciation, believed without having seen. It was she who was first to receive the earliest of the faith Beatitude with the words: “Blessed are you who have believed!” With the first and last expressions of faith, it is faith that is extolled and exalted.

But also: the less one believes, the more one has need of signs; for example, Thomas and the disciples in the Gospel of Luke.

The more one believes the less one depends upon signs: the Beloved Disciple believed upon seeing the empty tomb...also, Mary...

Each sign is an occasion for a moment of faith. For the sign of the cross, the evangelist writes:

« This is the evidence of one who saw it – trustworthy evidence, and he knows that he speaks the truth – and he gives it so that you may believe as well ». Jn.19:35

4. The development of faith from chapter to chapter in the Gospel of John:

Based on the Ecumenical Translation of the Bible, positive or negative aspects of the verb “to believe” appear in the Gospel of John **95 times**.

The chapters in which it is repeated most often are Chapters 6 and 11. The verb “to believe” appears 9 times in each of these chapters. This is followed by Chapters 3 and 12 in which the verb “to believe” appears 8 times, followed by Chapters 4, 5, and 20 in which this verb appears 7 times. The only chapter in which the verb “to believe” appears to be absent is in Chapter 15.

- 1) Chapter 2: Mary’s faith,
- 2) Chapter 3: the faith of Nicodemus, verses 16, 17...
- 3) Chapter 4: the faith of the Samaritan Woman and the Samaritans
- 4) At the end of Chapter 5: “If you really believed in him (Moses), you would also believe in me...”
- 5) Chapter 6: the lack of faith of the disciples who were asked if they wanted to go away and Peter’s profession of faith...
- 6) Chapter 9: the faith of the man born blind...and the lack of faith of the Pharisees
- 7) Chapter 10: “...you do not believe because you are no sheep of mine...” verses 25, 26...
- 8) Chapter 11: the faith of Mary and Martha...
- 9) Chapter 12: “Though they had been present when he gave so many signs, they did not believe in him...” v. 37 and “Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in the one who sent me”. v. 44. This is the final part of the Gospel centering on the theme of signs.
- 10) The chapters of the Last Supper all center on the theme of intimacy...

The verb “to believe” re-appears often in Chapter 14. In Chapter 17, Jesus speaks of the faith of the disciples.

In the Gospel of John, faith evolves, whether under the rubric of acceptance or of refusal, light or darkness....

The leading witnesses to the faith are: the Community, John the Baptist, the first disciples, Mary, Nicodemus, the Samaritan Woman, Peter, the man born blind, Mary and Martha...

However the primary witnesses are the Father, the Holy Spirit, Moses and Sacred Scripture...

Those who have faith in Jesus

those who lack faith in Jesus

1. The Community

2. John the Baptist

3. The first disciples

4. Mary at Cana

5. Nicodemus

6. The Samaritan Woman

Jesus

7. Peter (The Bread of Life)

8. The man born blind

9. Mary and Martha

10. His mother at the foot of the cross,

The Beloved Disciple

11. The Beloved Disciple at the tomb

12. Thomas' faith

13. The faith of those who believe without having seen

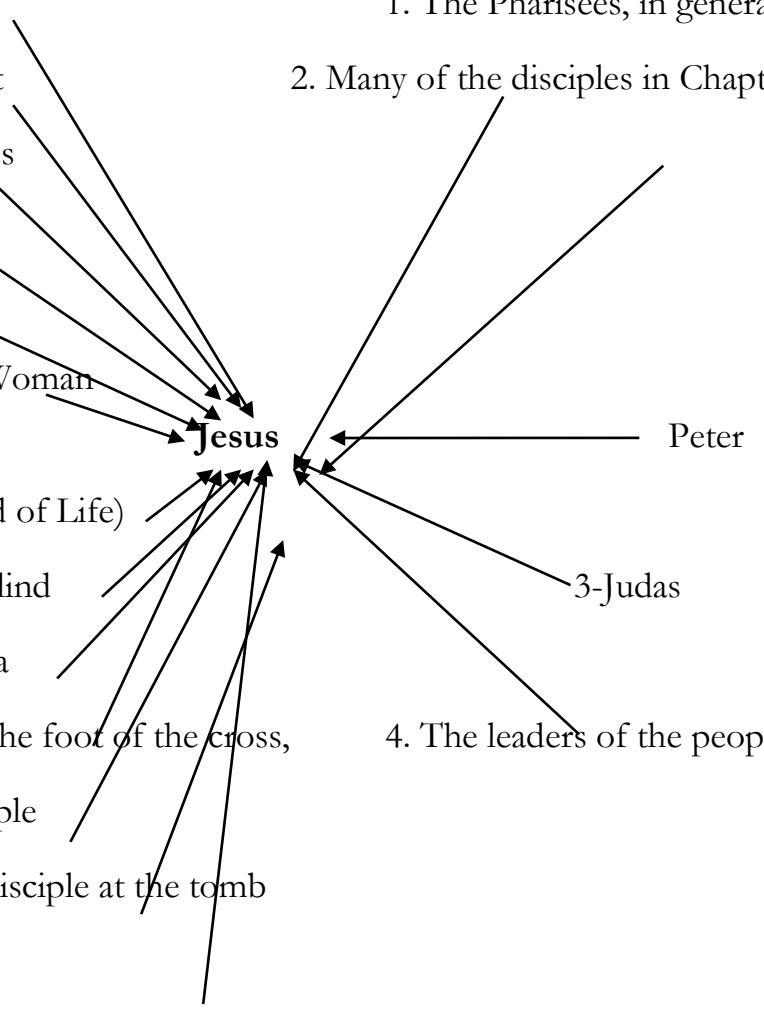
1. The Pharisees, in general: the Jews

2. Many of the disciples in Chapter 6

Peter

3-Judas

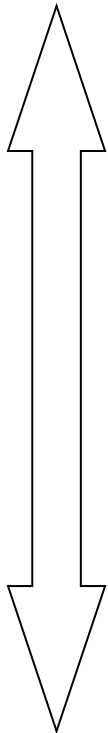
4. The leaders of the people



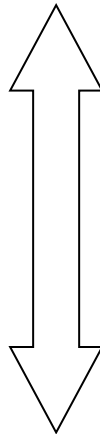
5. General Overview:

Faith in the main parts of the Gospel

Prologue, 1.
«But to all who did
accept him
he gave power
to become children
of God.»



The Signs:
Cana, 2.
Mary, the model of faith



The Sign
JOHN, 13



Ch. 12, 44
“Whoever believes in me,
Believes not in me,
But in the One who sent me!”

JOHN 20, 29
Those who believe
Without having seen.

Ch. 20, 30
“These signs have been written
So that you may believe...”

6. The signs and the Sign

The famous American biblical scholar, Raymond E. Brown, found that they were arranged in the form of a chiasmus.

THE CHIASMUS IS PRESENTED AS FOLLOWS:

1. **The Wedding at Cana, Mary is present – the hour had not yet come,**
Jn. 2:1-12 *Sign demanded – faith is required before the sign is given*
 2. **The cure of the nobleman's son, Jn. 4: 46-54)** *Sign demanded – faith is required before the sign is given.*
 3. **The cure of the sick man at the Pool of Bethzatha, Jn. 5:1-16** *Jesus initiates the sign – absence of faith.*
 4. **Miracle of the loaves, Jn. 6 :1-71** *Jesus initiates the sign – positive and negative expressions of faith.*
 5. **Cure at the Pool of Siloam, Jn. 9:1-41**
Jesus initiates the sign. Faith comes after the sign.
 6. **The Resurrection of Lazarus, Jn. 11: 1-44,** *A miracle is demanded. Faith is expressed before the sign is given.*
 7. **The death of Jesus, Mary is present, the HOUR had come,**
Jn. 19: 25-27. *The living sign is given. Faith is found in the sign.*
-

7. Mary in the signs

Mary's presence in three signs:

1. At Cana which is the archetype or original model of the signs.
2. In the multiplication of the loaves which is the central and pivotal sign.
3. At the cross which is not only a sign but which is THE SIGN.

THE CROSS

The ultimate Sign

CANA

The archetypical sign

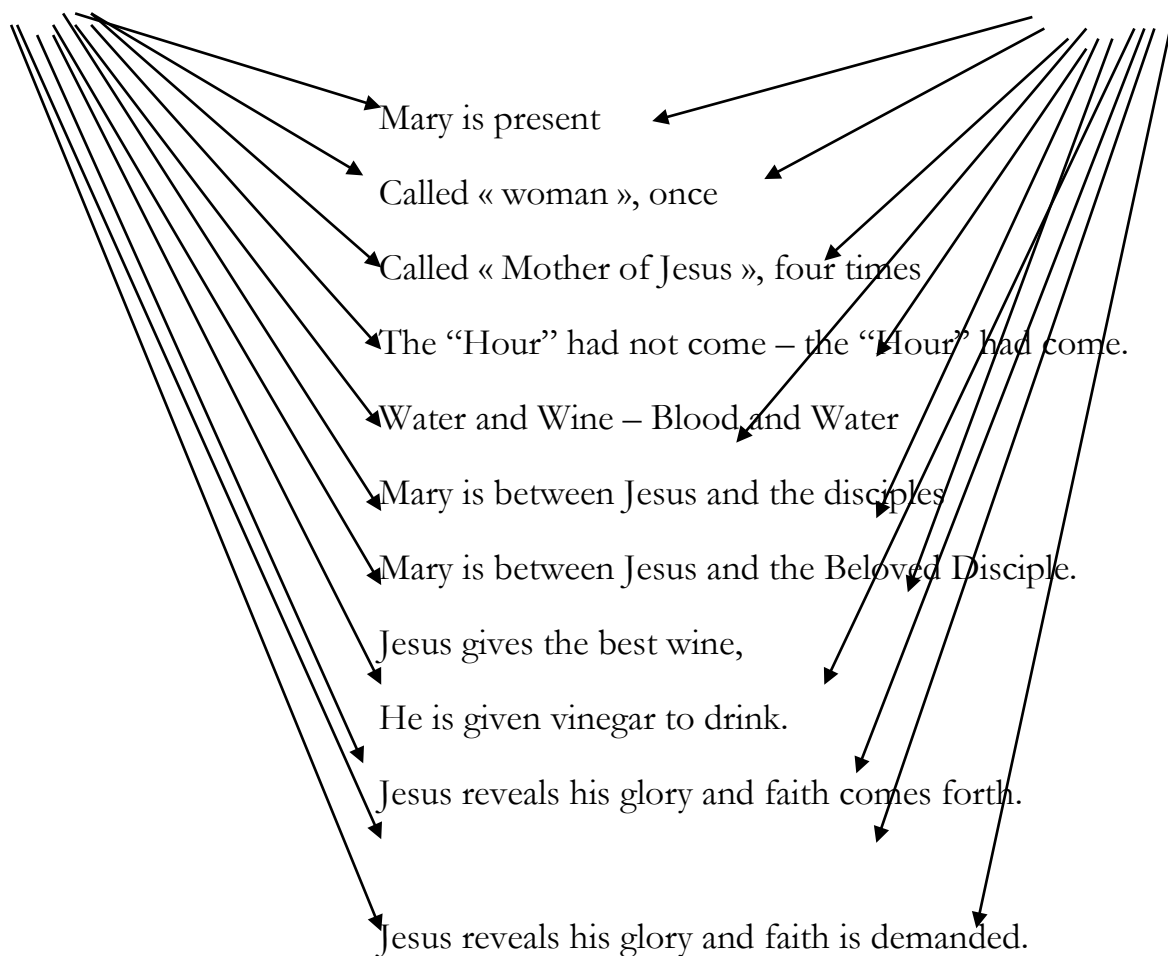
THE BREAD

the central sign

The interconnection of these signs:

Cana

The Cross

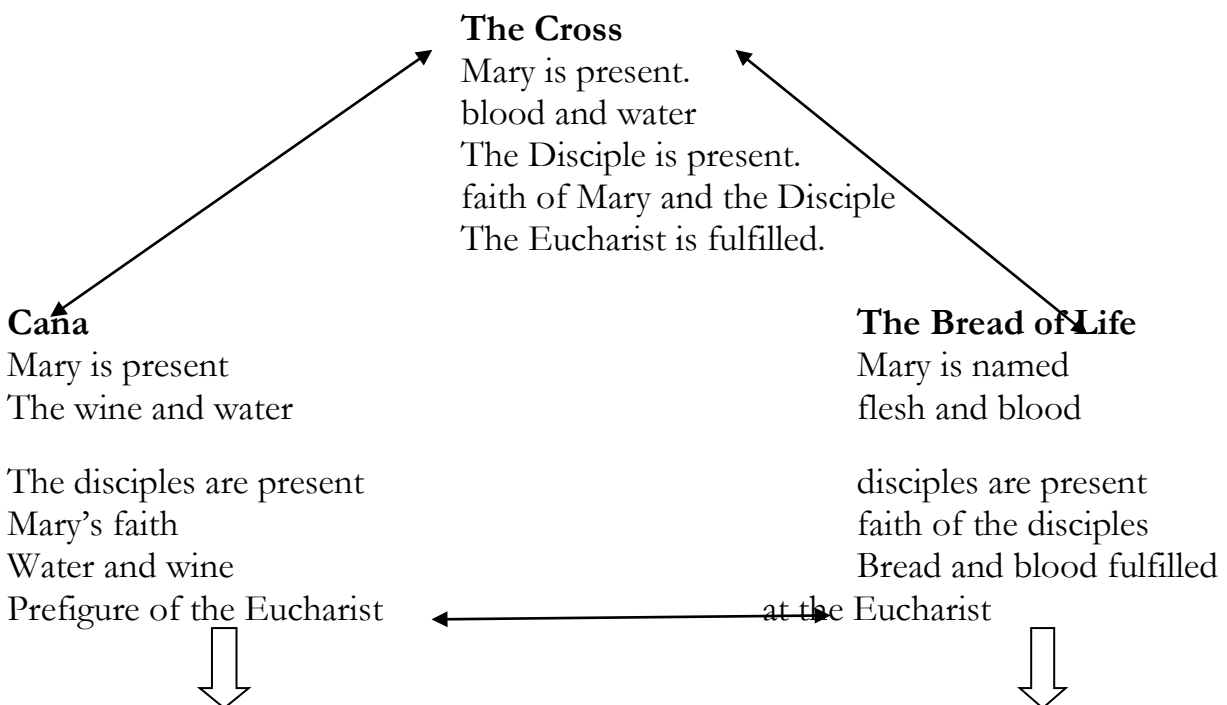


The public life of Jesus is lived out in the twofold presence of Mary:

(Notice how the Gospels are so skillfully crafted.)

Cana	The Cross
Mary is present and she is the first person mentioned.	Mary is present and she is the first person mentioned.
Mary is called the Mother of Jesus three times.	Mary is called the Mother of Jesus three times.
Mary is called « woman » once.	Mary is called “woman” once.
At Cana, the « HOUR » had not yet come.	At the cross, the veritable “HOUR” HAD COME.
At Cana, it is a question of water and wine.	At the Cross it is a question of blood and water.
To quench the thirst of the guests, Jesus makes « the best wine” available.	At the Cross, to quench Jesus’ thirst, he is given vinegar.
At Cana, Jesus awaits Mary’s faith.	At the Cross: “These things are recorded so that you may believe.”
At Cana, Mary is between Jesus and the disciples.	At the Cross, Mary is next to Jesus’ cross and the Beloved Disciple is next to the mother.

Interconnections between Cana, the Sign of the Bread of Life and the Cross:



<i>The 1st, 4th and 7th signs as key moments</i>		
<i>In the archetypical sign at Cana:</i> Love is in danger « They have no wine. »	<i>In the core sign : the Bread of Life</i> Faith is in danger.	In the Sign of the Cross: <i>Life is in danger, and it is lost.</i>
Love is saved by Jesus through the intercession of Mary. The best wine is made available at the banquet.	Faith is saved by Peter's response: "Lord, to whom shall we go?" It is an act of adoration.	Life is saved in both the Mother and in the Disciple, (The Spirit comes upon them) and in Jesus' Resurrection.

8. Faith as found in the signs

When we consider the chiasmus of the signs, one can note

:

- The diminishment of faith is in the first four signs,
- The increase in faith is in the last four signs,

thus providing an expression of faith in the form of a “**V**” in John’s Gospel.

1. At Cana, Mary’s faith is a response to a kind of challenge or obstacle...She is the model of faith, the faith of one who knows the Son, the faith which will be passed on from the Mother to the disciples. It is an expression of faith which is easily passed on allowing the Son to be in center stage, revealing his glory. It is faith celebrating love; it is faith pointing the way to the bonds linking the Son to humanity; it is a faith which initiates the building of the Church. At Cana, Mary’s faith looks upon Jesus, the disciples and humankind with its problems. She is at the beginnings of faith to which our own is intimately connected
2. . The faith of the court official in John 4:46-56 is wonderful; however, it does not immediately resonate with the breadth and scope of Mary’s faith at Cana. Nevertheless, it is still a model of faith that can encourage our own.
3. In the sick man who was cured at the Pool of Bethzatha demonstrates no faith whatsoever. He does not request a miracle nor does he thank Jesus for performing one. He quickly proclaims the name of Jesus to the Jews, a motion that is ill-defined at best, and Jesus is obliged to defend himself against the Jews.
4. In the sign of the Bread of Life, an entire group of disciples abandon Jesus, and for the first time, a reference is made to Judas, the one who is to betray the Master. Not only is there abandonment, but someone was already thinking of betraying his Master. It is a deadly expression of a negative expression of faith. Three contrasting components can be found :

1. The betrayer asks for 30 pieces of silver

2. The one who loves purchased a pound of very costly ointment in order to anoint the King and Savior
3. The one who loves pours a perfume that was sold for three hundred denarii on Jesus' feet which was the equivalent of a worker's salary for an entire year.

In the first series of signs we journey through Mary's faith to its antithesis with the abandonment of the disciples and the betrayal of Judas.

In the last four signs, faith progresses and reaches its culmination in the powerful expression of faith at the Cross.

1. In the fourth sign, Peter inspires a faith response with the question: "Lord, to whom shall we go?" You have the words of eternal life. We know and believe that you are the Holy One of God." Here we have faith being expressed after having received a sign; however, it is also a real act of adoration.
2. The faith of the man born blind in Chapter 9 ends with an act of adoration: "'Lord, I believe,' and he worshipped him". Jn. 9, 38. Would this be the first act of adoration in John's Gospel that is expressed not only in word but also in action? It is a faith that comes after a struggle, one that comes to Jesus' defense, one that expresses itself by being in union with Jesus. Here again, faith comes after the sign.
3. The faith of Mary and Martha precedes the sign. It is the fullness of faith professing its belief in the Divinity of Jesus. It is the faith that is called upon by Jesus. It is the kind of faith that exists between friends; the kind of faith enjoyed by those who have an intimate relationship with Christ, a faith in which nothing is lacking. Here we find ourselves in the realm of a super abundance of faith.

-“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died, but I know that even now, whatever you ask of God, He will grant you.”

-“Whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

-“Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God who was to come into this world.”

-Mary echoes the faith of Martha: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died”, but uttered these words at the feet of Jesus.

-To Martha who told Jesus that it was already the fourth day since the death of her brother and that he was beginning to smell, Jesus replied: “Have I not told you that if you believe you will see the Glory of God?”.

4. In the sign of the Cross, we have the faith of the Mother who is the personification of faithfulness in the midst of the suffering and death of her Son. It is a faith that is filled with love. The Son maintains his integrity and his Mother sees, the loss, suffering and death of her Son as being transitory, for her Son is eternal, and he is God. In her faith, the Mother understands that the apparent failure, suffering and death of her Son only contribute to his glorification. Her faith proclaims the greatness of God who gives of Himself without reservation; a faith that is in total harmony with her Son who surrenders Himself and dies.

The presence of the Mother is an expression of her faith in the Son at a time when all else seems to fade into the darkness of the tomb. Michaelangelo’s masterpiece, the Pietà, which is found at the entrance and to the right of Saint Peter’s Basilica, depicts Mary holding the body of the Savior in her arms and demonstrates the faithfulness of the Mother. The word “piétas » was a military term used in ancient Rome to describe the kind of fidelity required of soldiers in battle; they were to be faithful even to the point of death, if necessary. Mary demonstrates that kind of fidelity. She is one with her Son on the Cross. Here we have love’s final expression: Having loved his own, he loved them unto the end...” For Mary: “...having loved her Son, she loved him unto the end...”, also, “...a man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.” During her entire life, Mary lay down her life for her Son whom she loved. It was as if there existed a perfect “give and take” love relationship between the Mother and the Son.

9. More on the Signs

When looking upon the signs that make up the chiasmus, it is to be noted that each of those found in the second half of the chiasmus are relatively greater than the corresponding signs found in the first part of the chiasmus.

Thus:

1. As a sign, the cross is greater than that of Cana.
2. The resurrection of Lazarus is mightier than the cure of the nobleman's son.
3. The cure of the man born blind is more human, more compassionate, and more persuasive than that of the cure of the sick man at the Pool of Bethzatha.
4. In the sign of the Bread of Life, the segment dealing with Peter's profession of faith is more praiseworthy than the section dealing with the abandonment of the disciples, including Judas.

However:

1. In the first series, the sign of Cana is of paramount importance: it is The Love Feast.

Jesus is squarely placed at the center of the activity by Mary. He is the Groom. He begins his public ministry...

As a sign, Cana is superior in importance than the sign of the cure of the nobleman's son;

Cana is greater in importance than the cure of the paralytic...

2. Of all of the signs found in this series, the cross is the most significant. It is greater than the resurrection of Lazarus, greater than the cure of the man born blind, greater than the sign of the Bread of Life. It is a sign that is unlike all of the others which were a kind of springboard to a better knowledge of Jesus. The cross is THE SIGN par excellence whereby Jesus expresses himself directly. It is a theophany, a direct revelation of who God is: One who gives of Himself unto death, a death which gives us life.

Accordingly:

1. In John's Gospel, Mary is present in the greatest signs and demonstrates the fullness of faith.
2. She is found in the first and last sign; she is the Mother who is embodied in the entire public life of Jesus.

John makes Mary the model of faith; she occupies the place of honor.

John is also the only evangelist giving her such a prominent and enlightened role in Jesus' public life.

The outline provided below underlines what has been described in the previous pages. The sign of Cana is the most important one in its series. However, it is not as important as THE SIGN OF THE CROSS. The SIGN OF THE Cross is the most important in its series but is not as important as Cana. The sign of the nobleman's son at the point of death is less significant than Cana but of greater importance than the two that follow in that series. The resurrection of Lazarus is a sign of greater significance than the sign of the nobleman's son at the point of death and is greater in importance than the sign of the man born blind and Peter's faith. However it is not as great as the SIGN of the Cross.

1. Cana: the Wedding Feast

7. At the Cross

2. The nobleman's son

6. The resurrection of Lazarus

3. The paralytic

5. The man born blind

4. The Bread of Life

Judas

Peter

Mary's faith

Mary,
you welcomed Jesus,
you carried him,
gave
presented
sought.

For Him you were
a woman of faith
a courageous woman
a bosom that welcomed and protected,
time,
intelligence,
a mother,
an educator,
the first disciple,
open to his mystery,
open to his cross,
both member and mother of the Church.

You made Him
your centre,
your treasure,
the life of your life,
the beloved Son,
the absolute Lord,
God,

in our fragile flesh.

Keep my faith

Virgin of the Annunciation,
accept the yes of my response to the Lord's call.

Keep it in your YES,
for you know very well how I strive to say my yes,
fragile and partial,
given and re-taken.

Help me so that the joy and hope
that you brought to Elizabeth
may still sing the Magnificat
at my house's threshold.

Above all, may I be like you,
a missionary on his way,
poor in means, rich through your Son,
He who causes the children of the kingdom
to leap with joy.

You, the servant full of love,
make me humble and faithful in serving your Son
up to the cross.

May I let myself be saved by Him

so that he may be
my wisdom and my justice,
my holiness and my liberty.

Keep me on the way
that leads to the feast of Love.

Mary, blessed for your faith,

Welcome us into your faith.

May the Spirit and the Church say of us:

“Blessed you for your faith!”