

## INTRODUCTION

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

From the very beginnings of the Christian story, Mary has inspired poets, song writers and theologians. The ancient oriental hymn known as the *Akatisthos* is a fine example. In the second millennium, the figure of Mary impacted Western culture in so many ways. Here we can think of how St Bernard praised her in the final song of Dante's Paradise: 'Virgin mother, daughter of your son', or Martin Luther's striking commentary on the *Magnificat*. And, of course, we are all familiar with the numerous frescoes and paintings, altar sculptures and statues with a Marian theme found in churches and art galleries all over the world, not to mention the sublime Marian icons in the Orthodox tradition.

The era in which we now live, compared to others, is characterized by secularism. And yet, still today Our Lady is a reference point for many. Marian shrines still attract great crowds. In India, for example, the Basilica of St Mary of the Mount in Bandra, a suburb of Mumbai, is always crowded, not only with Christians, but also with Hindus and Muslims. Mary, as is often noted, is mentioned 34 times in the Qur'an.

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

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

In recent decades, attempts have been made to 'update' the understanding of Mary. For example, the Second Vatican Council depicted Mary no longer as an isolated individual, but rather within the people of God and as the model of the Church. And in the Churches of the Reformation, there's something of a rediscovery of Mary, after several centuries in which her role was a source of controversy on

account of some exaggerations in Catholic devotional piety that seemed to obscure the primacy of Jesus Christ as the one mediator.<sup>1</sup>

Chiara Lubich (1920-2008), founder of the Focolare Movement, didn't set out to offer an updated reflection on Mary and yet, in many ways, through her spiritual experience that has touched millions of men and women across the world, she has helped many, not just Catholics, to rediscover and understand Mary in a new, modern way. Gifted with a particular charism, gift of the Spirit, Chiara's experience marked the twentieth century and beyond. As a pen in the hand of a painter, in the humility of knowing herself to be 'nothing', Chiara Lubich, with all her creativity, was chosen by God to give life to a Movement that was given the name 'Work of Mary', when it received official approval by the Catholic Church. The upshot of all this is a prophetic experience that has helped and still helps many to notice the contemporary relevancy of Mary in a new way.

'Mary' is one of the distinctive points of the spirituality of unity that characterizes the Focolare Movement – but she is much more. She is at the heart of Chiara Lubich's spiritual doctrine. One can sense the discreet presence of Mary, the mother of God, her 'style', as it were, throughout all of Chiara's life and in her writings. As she herself commented on one occasion to people following her spiritual pathway: 'My vocation, which is also yours, more than speaking with Mary (...) is to live Mary, to be her, to do as she did, and, above all, that she should relive in us.'<sup>2</sup> And

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. See the ARCIC II document, *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* (2004).

<sup>2</sup> From a response to a question asked by young people preparing to enter a Focolare community, Loppiano, 18.5.78,

on another occasion, ‘Mary, mother of the Movement. This says it all. God has given her to us and we have always felt her maternity. As a child’s instinctive first word is “mummy”, so the Movement, right from its birth – and, we would say, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit – was unable to give itself any name other than the name of Mary: the Work of Mary.’

This book is a collection of texts on Mary as contemplated by Chiara Lubich on various occasions and at different points in her life. We have drawn on published and unpublished writings, diary entries and meditations, as well as extracts from talks given to various groups, and spiritual thoughts offered through regular telephone conference calls.<sup>1</sup>

While, on the one hand, it is true that Chiara Lubich presents the mother of Jesus as the ‘silence’ upon which ‘God speaks himself’, on the other hand, the picture of Mary that emerges in this anthology of texts is not at all that of a servile, passive or submissive person. Exhibiting both a ‘passive’ openness and an ‘active’ willingness in doing the will of God, and in loving, Mary is portrayed by Chiara Lubich as a vibrant, engaging model for all. She is ‘the flower of humanity’. More specifically, and in what seems a new perspective, Chiara proposes that Mary be seen as a model for those who set out on a communitarian spiritual journey. She highlights a Marian dynamic of faith and love that facilitates our bringing Jesus to birth not only ‘within’ us, but

---

<sup>1</sup> From 1980 onwards Chiara linked up by telephone with thousands of members of the movement spread throughout the five continents. Initially these telephone conference calls took place every two weeks and then monthly. They were a means of advancing with the members on what Chiara called the ‘holy journey’.

also ‘among us’ in our relationships. And this is a dimension that resonates very much with contemporary culture.

A recurring theme in Chiara’s spiritual Marian doctrine is that Mary should be loved and ‘lived’ more than studied (although Chiara also enthusiastically encouraged doctrinal reflection on Mary). Accordingly, in this book we have attempted to offer readers what might help them ‘relive’ Mary in the way Chiara presented her right from her first spiritual discoveries about Mary in the 1940s. We have structured the book in terms of the various phases of Chiara’s relationship with Mary as they unfolded in her own life story. Admittedly, there’s always going to be a certain arbitrariness in such a structure, but we felt it might be useful.

It should be remembered, however, that the main event that instilled in Chiara’s heart and mind the pillars of her spiritual doctrine on Mary was the mystical experience called *Paradise ’49* which she described as the ‘official entrance’ of Mary into the Movement and its spirituality. In order to grasp the identity of Mary as understood and lived by Chiara, it is always going to be necessary to refer to this mystical experience that is at the same time strongly trinitarian, Christological and pneumatological as well as anthropological, social and cosmological.

Mary is much more than a devotion for Chiara Lubich, even if we find the founder of the Focolare engaging in spiritual practices typical of those who love Our Lady. We see her, for instance, in the course of journeys she made, visiting various Marian shrines: Fatima, Lourdes, Einsiedeln in Switzerland, Częstochowa in Poland, Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico, Aylesford in England, the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington... We know that she often spent time before Michelangelo’s Pietà, contemplating the figure of Mary desolate whom she considered a culmina-

tion of faith and love. Throughout her life, in reciting the rosary, Chiara drew inspiration from contemplating the various mysteries, both for her own personal life and for those who shared with her the ‘holy journey’ of life.

In contemplating Mary, however, Chiara reflected upon Our Lady’s role within the whole economy of salvation which she described in summary fashion as the journey of history towards the realization of Jesus’ last will and testament: ‘That they may all be one’ (Jn 17:21). She made her own the words of Pope John Paul II who wrote that Mary is ‘an integral part of the economy of the communication of the Trinity to humankind’.<sup>1</sup> It is important to keep these perspectives in view, because otherwise this book on Mary, as a point of the spirituality of unity, could run the risk of presenting a deformed, reductive profile of Mary.

Often we hear in theology of the ‘hierarchy of truths’ as an indispensable key to reading any specific aspect of faith. In other words, everything must be seen and explained in the light of two central points: the mystery of the Triune God and the mystery of Christ, the incarnation that culminates in the paschal mystery. This is the perspective we find in Chiara, so much in tune with the Second Vatican Council which recommends that we ‘abstain zealously both from all gross exaggerations, as well as from petty narrow-mindedness in considering the singular dignity of the mother of God.’<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See Pope John Paul II, ‘Maria in prospettiva trinitaria’, in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, XIX (1996) 1, Vatican City 1998, p. 47, cited by Chiara Lubich in her talk given at the University of St Thomas in Manila on January 14, 1997 upon receiving an honorary doctorate. See *Dottorati honoris causa conferiti a Chiara Lubich*, Rome: Città Nuova, 2016, pp. 86-87.

<sup>2</sup> *Lumen gentium*, 67.

By way of introduction to the book that follows, we can outline some of the features of Mary that Chiara highlights in a particular way:

- *Mary and the Word of God.* If Jesus is the Word of God incarnate, writes Chiara, Mary is the Word of God lived. She is all 'clothed' in the Word of God, imbued with the Word. And in this she is a model for each Christian, called to 'repeat' Christ, the Truth, the Word, with the personality God has given to each of us. Obviously, this line of thought is significant for ecumenism.
- *Mary, mother of God.* Like all of creation, Mary is 'contained' by the Trinity and yet the incarnation brings us to understand how God, who is Love, out of love, becomes small before her, bringing it about that as the mother of God she can contain God. With amazement, Chiara exclaims: 'The sky contains the sun! Mary contains God!' Thus Mary lives a universal embrace, one in which we too, albeit on a totally different level, can share.
- *Mary, the perfect daughter of the Father.* In considering the dynamic of the incarnation and Mary's 'yes' to God, Chiara contemplates her as 'the masterpiece of Jesus', 'his greatest work'. In following him who said, 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you' (Jn 15:9), Mary became 'the perfect daughter of the Father'.
- *Mary desolate.* On Calvary Mary said a second yes to God. With her first yes at the Annunciation, she had consented to become the mother of Jesus. Now with this second yes at the foot of the cross, she was asked to let go of that maternity in order to welcome, in the place of Jesus, John and in him

all of humanity. Chiara viewed this second yes as full of meaning for the life of the Church and the Movement that was beginning. From Mary desolate we learn the way of holiness that involves a daily ‘knowing how to lose’ all that is not God in order to live with solemnity the present moment. We also discover by looking at Mary desolate how to share in Mary’s spiritual maternity of humanity.

- *Mary and the Holy Spirit.* In one of the texts that we have included in this book, Chiara writes of Mary as the ‘hidden guardian of the Spirit within’. She also observes how ‘in her the Holy Spirit grew’. Mary found in the Holy Spirit ‘rest and refreshment, strength and ardour, a capacity for living when many deaths would have crushed her’. It is from her that we can learn how to let ourselves be guided by the Holy Spirit.
- *Mary and the Church.* In considering the effects of Pentecost on Mary, Chiara came to understand how something new had come about in Mary after she had relinquished her son at the foot of the cross. Having become a ‘sharer in Christ the redeemer’, Mary became ‘another Christ’ (we can think of the line from St Paul: ‘I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me’ [Gal 2:20]). It is possible to consider, therefore, just how much, with him and in him, Mary is intimately linked to the communication of the Holy Spirit. It is for this reason that, just as Christian iconography portrayed her at the centre of the Upper Room at Pentecost, Mary plays an essential role in helping the Church to respond fully to God’s project for it, which is *to be a pres-*



ence of Jesus, by living as Mary did, totally open to God and open to one another. Chiara describes Mary as ‘a fountain for all to quench their thirst: full of maternity towards souls.’ Speaking at the 1987 Synod of Bishops, Chiara observed, ‘(Mary) is loved as mother and, in a certain sense, we want to relive her so that the Church may have in its heart, also in this century, a presence of Mary.’<sup>1</sup> It was in this sense that Chiara tirelessly promoted a spirituality of communion, in order to increase the typical contribution of vitality and holiness that the Marian profile brings to the Church. Chiara rejoiced in seeing other Churches and indeed members of other religions, welcome her understanding of Mary. She saw this as helping to prepare ‘the Church that will be in the future’.<sup>2</sup>

- *Mary, model of the Gospel revolution.* On several occasions, Chiara spoke of the Focolare Movement as a revolution of love in the world. Repeatedly she indicated Mary as a model of that revolution. For a number of reasons Mary can be seen ‘after Jesus, as the greatest sign of contradiction that ever existed’. In this context, Chiara read Mary’s *Magnificat* as a manifesto for social revolution and was convinced that reliving Mary cannot but bring about a transformation of the world.
- *Mary, humanity and creation fulfilled.* In contem-

---

<sup>1</sup> Chiara Lubich, Address to the 7th Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *La voce dei Laici al Sinodo*, Pontifical Council of the Laity, Vatican 1988, p.176.

<sup>2</sup> Chiara Lubich, Talk to the Bishop-friends of the Focolare Movement, Rocca di Papa, 24 January 1978.

plating Mary as ‘embedded as a rare and unique creation in the most holy Trinity’, Chiara understands her as ‘the flower of humanity’, ‘creation bursting into flower’.

- *Mary assumed into heaven.* In her assumption into heaven, Chiara writes, Mary is the woman who ‘brought creation bodily into Paradise’. Accordingly, Chiara views Mary assumed into heaven as an icon and pathway for those called to dedicate themselves in a concrete way to the renewal of our world. Mary’s glorified body is a symbol of all human endeavours in which divine love is incarnated, such as economics, art, social projects etc.
- *The Way of Mary.* Chiara interprets the spiritual journey of those committed to living the Gospel together with others in the light of what she calls the ‘Way of Mary’. It is a journey made up of various stages that stretch from the annunciation to the crucifixion, resurrection and glorification. All of these stages are mirrored in some way in our personal journey and we can draw inspiration from the way Mary approached each of these moments.

As these broad brushstroke summaries indicate, the topic of Mary in Chiara’s spiritual doctrine is both rich and varied. Much of what she writes speaks to us today and is well worth further reflection. Before he died, the renowned French philosopher, Jean Guitton, in speaking of the era in which we live, commented as follows: ‘I am convinced that this is the hour of Mary and that the Holy Spirit is blowing strongly in this direction. In the 21st century, Christians will understand Mary within the Trinity. (...) The 21st cen-

ture will be the century of Mary.<sup>1</sup>

We hope readers will enjoy the selection of texts we have put together in this volume. We recognize that those reading the book come from a wide variety of backgrounds and cultures, each with its own particular sensibility regarding Mary. Some might have preferred this or that aspect to be emphasized more, or less. However, we encourage readers to approach the texts in a meditative spirit, so that in their heart they might hear again the words Jesus spoke from the cross to the beloved disciple: ‘Here is your mother’ (Jn 19:27). This verse then tells us: ‘And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.’ He brought her deep into his life, just as Chiara did in an exemplary fashion by living the Gospel-imbued spirituality that God had given to her.

+ Brendan Leahy – Judith Povilus

---

<sup>1</sup> From an interview published posthumously, cited by P. Coda in ‘Mariologia’ in P. Coda and G. Filoramo (eds.), *Dizionario del Cristianesimo*, Turin: UTET, 2006, p. 665.