

*In the same charism*

*In the same charism*

*with responsibility*



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**COMPANY OF SAINT URSULA  
SECULAR INSTITUTE OF SAINT ANGELA MERICI  
FEDERATION**

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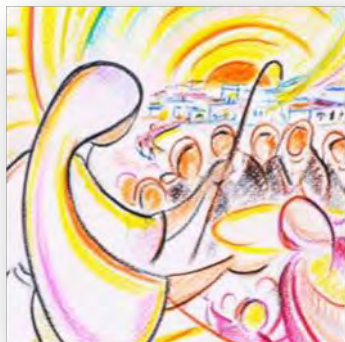
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# International Convention

In person and by streaming

*“United together to serve  
his divine Majesty”*



Rome August 22-25, 2021



Institute of Maria Santissima Bambina  
Via Paolo VI, 21 - 00120 Rome

# Acts

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## TO THE READERS



### *All... Some... One...*

At the August in-person and online convention we reflected on and experienced synodality....

We were taught a new way of being and acting responsibly. Something was turned upside down, reversed.

We were used to thinking that from "**One**" in particular (the Pope, for us Catholics) descended the teaching, the guidance, the way, the commandments.

We were accustomed to waiting for precise directions on how to live the Church's teaching to come to us from "**Some**" (the Bishops, the clergy, those who direct, those with responsibility...).

We had often forgotten that the Church is the People of God. It was even convenient for us to think of the Church as hierarchical... it was up to us to follow and obey, or to disagree and remain outside.

Now we are reminded that **we are the Church...** the People of God... and that the foundation is laid on this base, the mountain of salvation is built with a way marked out for all.

This mountain has a path to reach the top, and this way must be walked **together**.

And while we all are the Church, some in the Church have a task to discern, the Pope has the task to preside. We know that at every turn of the path...from the base, along the way, to the top of the mountain, Jesus Christ, the *Way, the Truth and the Life*, goes before us and accompanies us.

Our Companies, too, need to rediscover this **walking together**; indeed, it is precisely this "*togetherness*" that characterizes our spirituality, our charism: "*united together in one heart and one will*" (9<sup>th</sup> Counsel 1).

The way to do this *walking together* has been pointed out to us: encounter, listening and discernment.

The **meeting and the listening** during the convention in Rome made us taste the joy, the richness and the consolation of being together. Let us now



return to the meetings among sisters and with those in charge, let us experience synodality, let us read our reality, let us look into each other's eyes, let us listen to each other with the heart and invoke the gift of the Spirit.

Let's **discern**: let's consult each other and make decisions, even new and organizational ones if necessary, to live Saint Angela's charism today.

Let us ask ourselves what steps the Spirit invites us to take in order to grow as a Company, as a synodal Institute?

... The path of synodality is the path that God expects from the Church of the third millennium ... and it is the path that the Merician secular institute expects 486 years after the foundation of the Company and 63 years after the birth of the Federation.

We recall that the purpose of synodality is not so much to produce new documents, but *"to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, make hopes flourish, stimulate trust, bind up wounds, weave relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another, and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, and give strength to our hands"* (Synod, Preparatory Document).

**What dreams, what prophecy, what vision** did Saint Angela have when she initiated this new form of consecrated life? And do we still cultivate any dream, any prophecy, any vision?

Are the particular Company and the worldwide Company still capable of sprouting new saplings of hope, trust, strength and courage?

It is precisely we who should know the ways of Saint Angela: those *"thorny and rocky roads that we will find flower-strewn for us, paved with finest gold"* (Rule, Prologue, 27).

*Happy reading, happy synodal journey...  
with many sprouts and abundant flowering!*

Caterina Dalmasso

# INTRODUCTION TO THE CONVENTION UNITED TOGETHER TO SERVE HIS DIVINE MAJESTY

Valeria Broll, President of the Federation



May the **blessing of Saint Angela**, our dear Mother, descend abundantly upon each one of us, upon each one of you.

She greets and blesses each one of us, but we wish it to be a blessing and grace for Francesca who is present in the room and for Martina who follows us online, two Italian sisters who look to the Company to understand what the Lord desires to do with their lives and what they are willing to receive and give. Other sisters gathered with us experience this desire, and we hope for each one to perceive with clarity and truth the path that the Lord has planned for their joy.

There is no better incentive to perceive and know the call than to see "how they love one other" (Acts of the Apostles), how they live **"united together"** (St. Angela), and how **secularity is a mission** that expresses passion for God and for every man and woman in the ordinariness of life. This participation in the convention and being close to people who have already experienced this vocation for some time, nourishes and renews our/your call, which is concretized in transforming everything to the praise and glory of God, transfiguring the world (the place of our specific vocation) through our own daily conversion to the Gospel, through invoking and listening to the Spirit who makes all things new. This is the promise and the energy of our vocation. This is a mirror to reflect the image of the Company, of its members, of the secular woman consecrated in the charism of St. Angela.

To live our vocation every day (relationship with Jesus, our only treasure, communion and sisterhood, mission and gift) is not the fruit of human ability, commitment, effort and determination, but the fruit of a Gift received gratuitously from God in Baptism and nourished in the Church and sown like a seed in the furrows of history.

S. Angela tells us: "You must thank him infinitely that to you especially he has granted such a singular gift."

The **prayer** of thanksgiving, the watchful **gaze**, the disciple's patient and humble **listening**: this is the Gospel beatitude that allows us to walk through life with wings on our feet and fulfills/confirms what the psalmist sings: "*They will go from strength to strength.*" This is true for those who are searching and for those who already have many years of consecration in the Company. Walk ... do not stand still. Get up and walk ... Arise, O thou that sleepest.... Come forth ... leave thy land and go....

We are all here under the gaze of St. Angela, so that every **word** said and heard, every sisterly **gesture** shared may be a **light** that illuminates our vocation and mission, may be a **dew** that refreshes and regenerates our belonging to Christ, to the Church and to the Institute, may be **salt** that gives flavor and taste to everything and to every situation where we live, may be **yeast** that allows us to savor the bread that will be broken for us by the speakers, that we may have our hunger "satisfied" and then resume our journey (a bit like the experience of the prophet Elijah in the desert).

We are all here in person and/or connected in front of the screen, carrying life's baggage that has become a bit heavy in these two years of pandemic... loneliness weighs heavy, inertia, laziness, fear, uncertainty, words that pile up to make the world scenario quite dark and gloomy, words that are short of breath and sell illusory or hopeless hopes. Words that express concern for the health of citizens, but then for the sake of the economy choices are made that bypass the hunger of the poor and the thirst for meaning that every human heart perceives and yearns for. "We talk about justice and we ride on injustice".... "*Our adversary, the devil, never even sleeps... but, like a roaring lion, looks and searches for how he can devour any of us with his cunning ways, so many that no one could count them*" (Prologue to the Rule).

We are all in the same boat, but this does not console us; what consoles and comforts us is that at the helm of this boat is the Lord, the Lord of history, His divine Majesty, here in person because by the Incarnation this King became small like us and with us and for us continues to inhabit this world of ours, this turbulent sea of ours, these



troubled and distressed hearts of ours. He is in our boat and he cares very much about our fate. He cares very much that we do not get scattered and drown in the waters of the world with its deceptions and dangers, where *even the water, the air and the earth arm themselves against us* with ecological and human disasters.

In spite of all this, we are here, reunited in our convention. We wanted this convention, we desired it, even if it became difficult to believe that it could happen because of the pandemic, which gives us no respite and does not let us calmly and serenely experience and plan times together, which we need urgently!

Unfortunately, the in-person meeting has been limited to the Italian Companies, because gathering from European countries and other parts of the world was and still is uncertain. But even though the pandemic has blocked every meeting and all movement, it has taught us one thing: to use technology more and sometimes only that: online connections. This is a great resource that we also use to unite with all the sisters of Companies and Groups around the world.

Let us bless the Lord: let us bless and thank the Lord because we are here, tired out by the journey, but ready to set out on the road and make another journey: the journey of the heart, of the mind, of the spirit, of communion/sisterhood, of being “united together.” The Lord tells us to *"Come aside and rest awhile,"* and we follow Him and feed on His Word, on His companionship in our times of community liturgical prayer, on the words of the speakers and on the suggestions that they will offer us through images and stories. We are together to

talk with each other, to listen to each other, and then to open new horizons for our personal, Company and Institute life.



Msgr. Tessarollo told us at the Ordinary Assembly of 2018: *"There is always a need to question ourselves in order to try to understand **how** the Companies can better live the Merician charism today and **what further changes** the Church and our time require of consecrated life in secularity, in the various world realities. Do not abandon the criterion and the trust that Jesus gave us: "new wine in new wineskins"! ... We need to fearlessly propose*

*those ideals that help us face the challenges of our time with determination and farsightedness."*

It seems to me that these words summarize well our commitment and our participation in this convention, and St. Angela, our mother and teacher, exhorts us with these words: *"Seek and will all those means and ways that are necessary to persevere and progress to the end"* (Prologue).

Our presence here says that this search and this will is in you, in each one of us, and it does us good to hear St. Angela remind us of it. **Seek and will:** let us put every faculty of our person into action: *Seek...* we must awaken our interest, our curiosity to know, to understand, to experience, to see, to listen.... *Will...* let us strengthen our will and use it to not miss anything that is offered to us.

The words that will recur in this convention will be **"communion, synodality, identity, mission, discernment, co-responsibility, authority..."** All this in order to be women and sisters "present to our present." Being here is not an illusion to forget the hardships of everyday life, it is not a parenthesis to forget for a while the hectic or lonely life we lead, but it is a dive into the heart of the Trinity, where everything had its beginning and in which everything will have its fulfillment.

*"In the name of the most Holy Trinity."* In this name, Saint Angela begins to lay the foundations of the Company by writing the Rule. In the name of the Most Holy Trinity every prayer of ours begins and ends. In the name of the Most Holy Trinity we mark our bodies every day with the Sign of the Cross to express our belonging and to remind us what family we come from.

This is the family that we want to look at in these days: the family of God. In this family, all that we do, all that we celebrate, all that we are – daughters, sisters and spouses – finds significance, meaning and value. In these days of the conference, let us raise our **gaze** to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit to purify our eyes from all shadows, from all specks or beams that make them myopic or cross-eyed. Let us make our **ears** attentive to perceive the breath, the light breeze of the Spirit, the Word of the Firstborn Son, and the voice of the Father. Let us open our **hearts** to the encounter, to the welcoming of

this "special family": the Trinity, so that each of our steps, each of our choices, each of our actions may proceed from the Father, follow in the footsteps of the Son and be propelled by the strength and consolation of the Holy Spirit.

Let us insert our **lives** into this vortex of Love, in order to be as the Father wants us to be: daughters who let themselves be loved and who love, daughters who in His Son become sisters and brides, daughters who let themselves be enveloped and transported by the unique creative and vital force: the Holy Spirit – Love, consoler, relief, shelter, comfort.....

**The Holy Spirit works in all**, says St. Paul. With this certainty, we have included work groups in the convention where each group discusses specific issues and then channels everything into Communion: united together to serve His divine Majesty.

By vocation, we are women with a precise task: to **safeguard** the charism, interpreting and living it, *"Keeping to the old way but living a new life."* The charism is a spring that does not run out and does not dry up after we approach and drink from this source, because it is spring water that comes directly from the Spirit. It is up to us, however, to keep "this water fresh" and available for life, for the life of many brothers and sisters. The charism is a gift for today. It is a gift for the life of the world if we imbue our lives with the Gospel as St. Angela did. By vocation we are women unconcerned with **self-preservation** but women always **going out**, capable of generating life, seeking the truth, discerning and orienting everything and everyone toward the good and the beautiful. We want to be women with great desires and a strong will. Women capable of understanding that with God in our hearts we can accomplish new things, like St. Angela.

*"So now, all of you kindly be attentive, with great and longing heart"* (Prologue to the Rule). This is our wish for one other as we embark on the experience of the meeting: *"United together to serve His Divine Majesty."*



**COMMUNION:**  
**IN YOUR LIGHT WE SEE LIGHT**  
**The Mission of the Consecrated Woman (Part 1)**  
**Sr. Maria Gloria Riva – Nun of Eucharistic Adoration**  
**Republic of San Marino**



In developing this presentation we will refer to some elements: the biblical text first of all, “Mulieris Dignitatem” (“The Dignity of Woman”) of John Paul II, the art of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel and of Hieronimus Bosch.

The foundation of communion lies in the common humanity willed by God for his creature.

Adam is a collective singular that means man, but also



humanity. The first page of Genesis first of all raises the question of the relationship between God and creation, between God and his creature, between the creature and creation.

Through the great positivity of the divine Word (*Dabar* in Hebrew, *Logos* in Greek), it does what it speaks. God's speech over matter, where chaos reigned, was first of all to create the light, life and

origin of all things: *God said: let there be light and there was light* (Gn 1:3).

The simultaneity between command and execution is finely expressed in the biblical text:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהי אוֹר וַיְהי אוֹר

To translate it, one could say: "*God said: it is light and light is,*" that is, there is no gap between what God says and what happens, unlike the human being, who is often unable to keep faith with his own principles.

This simultaneity is effectively represented by the backgrounds of the first fresco dedicated to creation by Michelangelo Buonarroti in the Sistine Chapel. There God simultaneously occupies the entire space of the fresco, as in the frames of a comic strip.

The fresco dedicated to the creation of light portrays God in the same position assumed by the artist himself in creating the work, the same position of the head assumed by anyone wishing to admire the vault of the Chapel. You are gods, says the psalmist, so - in the same way - we want to signify here that profound communion that God wanted with his creatures from the origin of the world.

If light is placed at the beginning of creation, the creation of man, and especially of woman, is placed at its culmination. Let us consider some verses from Genesis, following the same suggestions of *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

## FIRST PAINTING: CREATION



The first picture is composed of two panels: Gn 1:27 and Gn 2:18ff.

*God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created*

*them male and female he created them.* We are in the context of that biblical "beginning" in which the truth about the human person man as the **image of God** is revealed to us<sup>1</sup>.

According to the literary genre of biblical parallelism (chiasmatic), here it is stated that humanity is created in the image of God as male and female. "*Both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree; both are created in God's image*" (MD 6).

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצֶלֶם יוֹ  
בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא  
אֹרֶז וְזָכָר וְנִקְבָּה בָרָא אֹתָם:

Rabbinic tradition captures this same concept through the particularity of the Hebrew language. In Hebrew the term man '*adam* - אָדָם, as mentioned above, is a collective singular; it can designate a male person, but also all humanity and therefore also woman. In Hebrew there are several terms to define man and woman, but the words used here are male: "*zâkâr* זָכָר", and female: "*nêqêbâh* נִקְבָּה", which explicitly refer to the reproductive organs, thus affirming that the divine similarity lies in the miraculous complementarity from which life springs.

And it is precisely in this complementary diversity that the divine likeness and, therefore, communion with him are expressed.

The root of the word '*adam*' is the same as the word '*adamah*', that is, soil, mud, but through a particular vocalic game possible only in Hebrew, the word '*adam*' can be traced back to the term '*adameh*', which means I will resemble God.

The man-humanity ('*adam*') is thus presented as a being made of earth '*adamah*', apex of creation, also a creature, but also '*adameh*', as a being resembling God.

"Man" is therefore a creature ('*adamah*'), but also in the image of God ('*adameh*'), but precisely as a man-woman.

In the fresco of the creation of Adam, God the Father, accompanied by the breath of the *ruah-adonai* (the divine Spirit), is fully stretched out in the Creator's act and his outstretched arm attracts to himself, to his life and likeness, the young Adam who is lying on the formless earth thus testifying to his origin from it. We note the formal



beauty of Adam, so strongly inspired by classical antiquity. In Adam's apparent abandonment, we see inscribed all of Renaissance man's desire for emancipation from God: he is man, in the perfection of his beauty, the center of the universe. Adam, in fact, is a young man with lean and elegant forms. God the Father, on the other hand, is an old man, still in the fullness of his vigor and in the venerable wisdom of his white hair, but still the "ancient of days." Adam rises up towards his Creator, and yet, as he tries to touch God's finger, he already separates and detaches himself from it. Around God the Father: 12 angels or, for some, an allegory of the twelve months or the twelve tribes of Israel. In reality, however, at a closer look, the angels are only ten and right in the shadow of the divine embrace there is a young woman, maybe Eve, already thought of as a help similar to the newly created man, or - more probably considering Michelangelo's Christological conception - the Virgin Mary - chosen by God since eternity for that plan of redemption that the whole work illustrates. The child next to her is, therefore, the same Christ whom God the Father touches with two fingers, just as the priest, in the Tridentine Mass, held the consecrated host.

## MYSTERY OF COMMUNION BETWEEN MAN AND WOMAN

Panel 2: Gen 2:18-25

Then the Lord God said, "***It is not good for man to be alone: I want to make him a helper who is like him.***" Then the Lord God fashioned from the ground all kinds of wild beasts and all the birds of the air and brought them to man, to see what he would call them: whatever man called each of the living creatures, that had to be its name. So the man imposed names on all the cattle, all the birds of the air, and all the wild beasts, but the man found no helper like himself. Then the Lord God brought down a stupor upon the man, and he fell asleep; he removed one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. The Lord God fashioned a woman out of **the rib**, which he had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. Then the man said: 'This one at last is flesh from my flesh and bone from my bones. She shall be called **woman** because she was taken from **man**. Therefore the man shall leave his father and mother and join himself to his wife, and the

*two shall be one flesh. Now both of them were naked, the man and his wife, but they were not ashamed of it."*

Man, created last, is the apex of creation. To man, the only creature that God wanted for himself, God entrusts every other created reality. At this point, man begins a fruitless search. In naming the animals (that is, in discovering their profound identity), he discovers that they are dissimilar and distant from him. At this point God himself bursts out in a moving exclamation: *"It is not good for man to be alone; I will make him a helper who is similar to him."* Woman faces life as a gift for man, as the only being in creation similar to him, as the fullness for man himself. The biblical scene, through the symbolism of Adam's sleep and his rib, presents man and woman as a unity of the two in their common humanity. The term "sleep" (in Hebrew *tardemah*) indicates a state of deep and mysterious torpor, a mystical sleep, the same sleep that fell upon Abraham when he made the covenant with God (cf. Gen 15). It is therefore a symbolism which emphasizes the greatness and solemnity of Eve's creation.

This second picture *"helps us to understand even more profoundly the fundamental truth which it contains concerning man created as man and woman in the image and likeness of God."*

*In the description found in Gen 2:1 8-25, the woman is created by God 'from the rib' of the man and is placed at his side as another 'I', as the companion of the man, who is alone in the surrounding world of living creatures and who finds in none of them a 'helper' suitable for himself. Called into existence in this way, the woman is immediately recognized by the man as 'flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones'" (MD 6). The vision of woman, in fact, brings a cry of joy to the man: *"She will be called woman because she was taken from man";* only with her does the man experience fullness.*

The word rib: צֶלֶע *tsêlâ'* is a mysterious term (it occurs only a few times in Scripture) and is normally associated with a rib, a side (of the body itself). But another Hebrew word similar to this we find placed in many places in Scripture punctuated as *tselê*. This punctuation is never read aloud and indicates a space of silence, a contemplative pause which reinforces the preciousness and importance of the text being read. Thus the word, beyond its meaning, suggests, as does



*tardemah*, Adam's sleep and the solemnity of the moment filled with mystery and contemplation.

The man's cry expresses the absolute reciprocity between man and woman, a reciprocity highlighted by a linguistic game possible only in Hebrew. Unlike the passage examined above, in Gn 2:23 two other terms appear designating the man and the woman. They are terms that express being a man or a woman in a generic way but expressed by vocabulary choices that manifest the common humanity of the two.

יְקָרָא אִשָּׁה בִּי מֵאִישׁ לְקַחָהּ זֶאת:

In fact, the biblical text says: "she will be called 'issah (אִשָּׁה-woman), because she has been taken from 'is (אִישׁ-man)" (Gn 2:23) The root of the two words is identical; what distinguishes woman is only the suffix used for the feminine. Woman, then, is another "I" in a common humanity. From the beginning they appear as a "unity of the two" (MD 6).

Unlike other artists, such as Hieronimus Bosch who makes the woman sprout from the earth, Michelangelo makes Eve bloom from Adam's body, thus making their being one flesh evident. In this sense, their attraction expresses the desire for that unity that God himself wanted. The position of the two progenitors in relation to the divine figure creates a triangular structure whose apex culminates in the face and gesture of the Creator.

Man (as the human person) is therefore in the image of God as both man and woman; the human person cannot exist alone, but only as a unity of the two. If in observing the first panel "in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them" we have seen that both man and woman are in the image of God, in the second we have specified that this image of God is constituted by the unity of man and woman.

Interpreting the scene of creation allegorically, the fathers of the church (Ambrose and Augustine) saw in Adam the rational part of the soul and in Eve the sensory part, thereby implicitly affirming the presence of the two components, male and female, in the one creature of God.

A text in the Bekarot Treatise of the Talmud, in §61, speaks of the duality present in humanity from the beginning. A textual anomaly

found in the Hebrew word "formed" "*wajizer*" written with two *jod* (a letter in the Hebrew alphabet) instead of one, pushes the Talmudic doctors to inquire about its meaning (believing that nothing in the sacred text is accidental, not even errors). One of the possible answers affirms that the two *jods* are the sign of the "two faces" with which "the Holy One, blessed be He, created the first man" and this is reflected in Psalm 139, v. 5: "You close behind and in front, and you pass your hand over me."

Man – as the human person - therefore has two faces before God. This means, on the one hand, that nothing is uncovered in his eyes, and on the other hand that in every human being there are two faces: the masculine and the feminine. In fact, the fact that in order to speak of these two faces we have not resorted to Chapter 1 of Genesis, where it says "he created him man and woman" implies that the two faces of the human being still have nothing in common with the two faces of the couple, but that "to be under God's sleepless gaze is precisely to be, in one's own unity, the bearer of another individual."

## CALL TO INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP

Therefore, precisely because he is the bearer of another individual, man (as a unity of the two, man and woman) experiences an irrepressible call to interpersonal relationship.

The second consideration which arises spontaneously, and which was amply emphasized by John Paul II in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, is that "*In the 'unity of the two,' man and woman are called from the beginning not only to exist 'side by side' or 'together,' but they are also called to exist mutually 'one for the other.'*" This also explains the meaning of the 'help' spoken of in Genesis 2:18-25: '*I will make him a helper fit for him.*' The biblical context enables us to understand this in the sense that the woman must 'help' the man - and in his turn he must help her - first of all by the very fact of their 'being human persons.' In a certain sense this enables man and woman to discover their humanity ever anew and to confirm its whole meaning. We can easily understand that - on this fundamental level - it is a question of a 'help' on the part of both, and at the same time a

*mutual 'help.' To be human means to be called to interpersonal communion"* (MD 7).

The loneliness experienced by the man with the animals is broken only with the appearance of the woman. The expression "help similar to him" used in the Hebrew text is *kenegdô*, which literally means to be in front "face to face." Only with woman does man experience the joy of being reflected in the face and gaze of another similar to him. Woman is therefore presented as "fullness for man." Being for the other is an essential characteristic of femininity.

## IN THE IMAGE OF THE TRINITY

If each individual human being is in the image of God insofar as being male and female (i.e., insofar as being the bearer of another individual) and insofar as being a unity of the two (i.e., because of being in relationship with the other), we can affirm that from the very first pages of Scripture there is *"the definitive self-revelation of the Triune God: a living unity in the communion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.... man and woman, created as a 'unity of the two' in their common humanity, are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God, through which the Three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life"* (MD 7).

The conciliar text *Gaudium et Spes* emphasizes in the chapter on "The Community of Mankind," *"The Lord Jesus, when he prays to the Father 'that all may be one'"* (Jn 17:21-22), putting before us horizons beyond human reason. It suggests a certain similarity between the union of the divine Persons and the union of the children of God in truth and charity. This similarity shows that the human being, who on earth is the only creature that God willed for himself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself."

According to the conciliar text, *"man [whether man or woman] is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself."* He is therefore a person. Being a person means striving for self-realization (finding oneself) and a person *"cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself."* The model for this interpretation of the person is God himself as Trinity, as a communion of Persons. In fact,

the three divine persons love each other in a mutual gift to the point of constituting a unity. “*To say that man is created in the image and likeness of God means that man is called to exist ‘for’ others, to become a gift*” (MD 7) so as to constitute with others a communion of love that reflects the Trinitarian communion of love.

## CREATION IN HIERONIMUS BOSCH



The artist who allows us to fathom this reciprocity that becomes an image of the Trinity is Hieronimus Bosch. In his *Triptych of the Garden of Earthly Delights*, the concept of creation, although expressed some thirty years before Michelangelo, is certainly closer to the post-modern experience. The closed doors of the Triptych present the creation of the terrestrial globe on the third day, that is, the middle day, suspended between the “already” of the possibility of life and the “not yet” of environmental conditions. The lack of color and light expresses the precariousness and desert-like silence of the absence of human life, while the crystal bowl-like transparency accentuates the absolute fragility of creation. The Creator does not dominate the scene as in Michelangelo, but is modestly placed in the upper left corner of the composition.

The Creator is described with the same absence of color and transparency of his creation, as if to say that even the divine image

shines fully only with the creation of humanity and creatures (of which humanity is completion and fulfillment).

## FROM CREATION TO THE FALL

**The second account of Genesis that we have examined** (Gen 2) belongs to a more ancient tradition called Yahwist. For the Yahwist narrator, in fact, the human being is created first and God shapes the Garden of Eden for him. The opening of Bosch's Triptych traces this grand setting. Only human presence fills the world with color. The open doors in fact present a phantasmagoria of colors that describe in three panels the whole human drama from creation to the fall.

## CREATION

Bosch, however, presents the creation of man and woman as simultaneous, thus following more directly the Priestly source of Genesis 1. For the Priestly tradition, God creates the human being in his own image: of no other created reality is this said. In creation God infuses life, beauty, and love, but only in creating the human being does he model himself. God is standing upright and wearing clothes very similar to those with which Christ is usually depicted. The two progenitors are naked and, most notably, Adam appears seated, clinging to the earth from which he was taken. Furthermore, the contact between God and the first human being is the feet, symbol of sexuality (feet in the Bible are a euphemism for genitals), but also a sign of adherence to the earth and therefore to a journey. A journey that must lead him to the full and perfect likeness of his Creator.

The likeness of God is constituted by the unity of man and woman. This is why Bosch connects the man's feet to God's and the woman's hand to the divine hand. However, the woman does not give her hand to God, but allows herself to be taken by the hand, abandoning herself to the guidance of her Creator who leads her to man. Moreover, Eve is not seated, but almost sprouts from the ground, thus implicitly attesting to her life cycles so similar to those of the earth. Adam is full of amazement at the sight of Eve, while the woman remains enclosed in her mysterious gift. In this Bosch follows the lesson of the Yahwist author, who describes Adam's astonishment and seals with a linguistic

device the absolute unity between man and woman: *"This one at last is flesh from my flesh and bone from my bones. She shall be called woman ('issah), because she was taken from man ('is)"* (Gen 2:23).

The unity of the two, their love, is produced by God who stands in the middle, and that God who stands in the middle is the Father but has the face of Christ and wears a pink garment of the same color as the spring that gushes at the center of creation: therefore it is the God-Trinity.

If we have examined the profound reasons for the communion between God and humanity and between human and human, we cannot fail to look also at that mystery of evil which has corrupted the grace and beauty willed by the Creator. In fact, after the pages dedicated to creation, the Bible watches the drama of the fall: the great harmony willed by God in creation is shattered because of sin.

## SECOND PAINTING: THE FALL

The biblical narrative of Genesis 3 is well known: the devil tempts the woman. Note that the woman is tempted by the devil precisely in regard to her communion with God (*"If you eat of the fruit of the tree ... you will be like gods"*) and, inducing her to pick the fruit of the forbidden tree, he urges her to tempt her companion, involving him in the same sin. Having broken the communion with God regulated by obedience to his will, man and woman hide from their creator, losing confidence in him. They "realize that they are naked," that is, they become dramatically aware of their limitations and, on the other hand, of God's infinite greatness.

Sin introduces a triple rupture, thus paradoxically confirming the truth about the human image and likeness to the triune God. Sin brings about the original rupture of what humanity had enjoyed in the state of original innocence:

1. union with God as the source of unity within one's own "self." By losing communion with God the human beings realizes their limitation.

2. the mutual relationship of man and woman;

3. connection with the external world, with nature. With sin, in fact, the balance and harmony that God wanted in creation are broken.

## THE DEVIL

The very name of the tempter "devil" expresses the concept of division, of rupture. In fact, the Greek word is composed of two terms: "*dia*" which means to separate and "*bállō*" which suggests instead the idea of "throwing together." The opposite of this term can be found in the word *sýnballo* (*sýn* 'with' and *bállō* 'to throw'), that is, a symbol that indicates precisely the necessity and reality of combining and matching of the edges of two separated elements that had been united.

We can say that with sin the human person forgets being a symbol, a revelation of God in the world, forgets being a person in relationship with God, with the other and with creation.

By introducing separation between God and humanity (and ultimately within human consciousness itself), sin induces the human person to deny being a creature, to deny God himself, and by committing sin, the human wants to become like God.

Precisely when the human beings refuse their creature-hood, they experience in a dramatic way their non-similarity with God, their being earth (*'adamah.*) And this begins especially with a life painfully marked by the necessity of death. This dramatic reality is echoed in the divine words "*dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return.*" However, these words do not mean that the image and likeness of God in the human being have "*been destroyed by sin, but rather that [they have] been 'obscured' and, in a certain sense, 'diminished'*" (cf. MD 9).

## THE CONSEQUENCE OF SIN

The rupture of the original unity causes the parts to come apart.

The man placed at the apex of creation is, by the will of the creator, in a particular relationship with creation. (He led the animals to him ... etc.) In the divine project of creation, the woman placed next to the man as a "helper like himself" is in a particular relationship with the human being. The consequence of sin deeply marks these dynamics of relationship.

After sin, the man takes on an attitude of dominance toward creation and woman, while woman, called to "be for," refuses to give herself, falling into self-closing.

Your urge shall be for your husband, yet he shall rule over you.

The whole human journey is presented as a process of inner unification that leads through a healthy detachment from things (rejection of the attitude of domination) and a sincere gift of self (rejection of the attitude of closure) to that self-realization that God wanted for his creature from the beginning. From what has been said so far we draw conclusions that are valid for us in our consecrated life.

In the first analysis, an observation emerges:

## **HUMAN MATURITY IS A DECISIVE ELEMENT ON THE PATH TO HOLINESS**

In the original plan of the Creator, the person called to holiness is also called to the attainment of the fullness of one's humanity.

Human maturity, understood as the conscious fullness of all one's physical, mental and spiritual capacities, well harmonized and integrated with each other, is a prerequisite for a flourishing spiritual development. The achievement of human maturity involves a process of individuation that we can schematically distinguish in two stages:

## **SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS**

This division is actually fictitious because it is a closely linked dynamism: the relationship with others contributes to self-knowledge.

### **SELF-KNOWLEDGE**

It is agreed throughout the monastic tradition that the principal experience of the person taking the first steps in monastic life is self-knowledge.

To experience oneself means to experience one's own limitation and one's own being marked by sin. But if the experience of one's own limitation must lead to the discovery of one's own form, the awareness that the mystery of sinfulness is at work even within one's own existence leads the candidate for religious life to a deeper understanding of God's love for her. At times, this leads to attitudes in candidates for religious life that might suggest a return to adolescence, attitudes that are common to every process of maturation.



## RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS

The relationship with others in the community or in the novitiate requires overcoming the ego.

The relationship with the other is marked, often unconsciously, by the desire to enrich and know oneself. In the process of human maturation, it is necessary to pass from the love of others for the sake of oneself to the love of others for themselves. This allows us to take the next step, that is, to reach the fullness of spiritual maturity, which calls us to love others with the same charity as Christ, that is, to love others not for what they are but for what they are in the eyes of God.

## THE CALL OF THE COMMUNITY TO REPRODUCE THE LIFE OF THE TRINITARIAN COMMUNION OF LOVE

The second thesis we can consider is the call to Trinitarian communion. The spousal union of the couple is a symbol of the Trinitarian love for which every human community must strive. The religious community, therefore, is also called to reproduce the communion of love of the Trinity.

Our rule is very significant in this regard because becoming one heart and one soul in the tension towards God is the inspiring principle of the Augustinian Rule (Rule, Chapter 1). However, just as a person finds the source of inner unity in God, so too the community can find the source of its unity only in God. From the text of the Augustinian Rule we deduce, in fact, that the union of hearts and souls in the community is made possible by the individuals' reaching to God.

Furthermore, revealing Jesus' saying *"that they may be one as you Father are in me and I in you"* through love for God and mutual love, is the style of life that comes from a life shaped by the Eucharist.

## ASCETICISM

The third and final consideration concerns asceticism. It is an indispensable component of Christian life in general and monastic life in particular. The concept of person, in the original project, is defined as striving for self-realization. This language is unusual for ancient asceticism, which more typically used the term "self-denial" instead.

The contradiction is only on the surface. Self-realization in fact becomes possible only through the sincere gift of self.

Thus, realizing oneself means giving oneself. Sin, on the other hand, produces in a human person, as the unity of man and woman, a selfish closure expressed both as the will to dominate and as withdrawal. So asceticism becomes a combat against these selfish tendencies in order to achieve that sincere gift of self which alone allows personal fulfillment.

Synthesizing, one could say that "asceticism is denying oneself in order to realize oneself," a paraphrase of that Gospel paradox expressed in Jesus' saying, *"he who loses his life finds it."*

The triple rupture introduced by original sin corresponds directly with the Johannine breakdown of sin: Concupiscence of the eyes/concupiscence of the flesh/pride of life. The struggle against these concupiscences on the basis of the biblical passage of Gen. 3 can be reformulated in this way:

Overcoming concupiscence of the eyes means denying that will to dominate that marked the man after the original sin. ("He will dominate you.")

Overcoming concupiscence of the flesh means repudiating the selfish search for the other, which has as its goal one's own enjoyment, and which marked woman after the Fall. ("Your urge shall be for your husband.")

Overcoming the pride of life means finally recognizing one's own creatureliness and accepting to refer one's existence and destiny to God. ("You will be like God.")

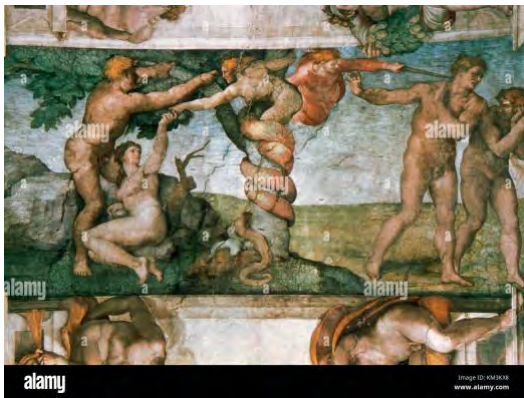
Woman has a special role in the struggle against such concupiscence and, precisely because sin developed through her, she feels its drama more acutely than man. Often the relationship of the first woman with sin has been interpreted as proof of her inferiority with respect to man. (In the Middle Ages woman, precisely because she allowed herself to be seduced and then tempted man, was seen as the devil himself.) In reality, the fact that woman was created last, after man, and the fact that she was tempted by the devil are not proof of her inferiority, but rather signs of her great dignity.

Woman was given to man as a great sign of God's love for him: this is her great dignity. And this is the reason that drives the devil to begin his destructive work through her, because wounding woman wounds love and wounding love wounds the very heart of God. The great dignity of woman is to be a sign of love for man, for humanity.

## THE FALL IN MICHELANGELO

As the previous fresco recalled two moments – the creation of the sun and the earth – so does this one – the temptation and the expulsion from Paradise.

The first panel, on the left side of the fresco, shows the couple harmoniously nestled at the foot of the tree of good and evil. The woman, completely turned to her man, is the helper who is like him, according to the Creator's will emphasized by the Yahwist narrator. Woman is thus presented as "fullness for man." But this reciprocal belonging, this mutual giving emphasized by the complementary position of the bodies, experiences a trauma. The tempter, who according to Michelangelo is half woman and half serpent, distracts them from their mutual discovery of themselves as a gift by introducing another focal point to which both, dramatically united, turn. In the second panel, on the right, Michelangelo records the consequence of the fall: the expulsion from Paradise.



## THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE FALL

In the second frame, on the right, Michelangelo records the consequence of the fall: the expulsion from Paradise. The fact that one moment results from the other is underlined by the angel whose gesture mirrors that of the tempter. The half-hidden right arm is not only

parallel to the half-hidden arm of the serpent-woman, but is placed in continuity with the serpent's tail. Adam's arm strengthens this movement; it is in opposition to but paradoxically in continuity with his gesture at the moment of sin. On the one hand, he would like to remove from himself the guilt into which he has fallen, but on the other hand, he is also inexorably distancing himself from the earthly garden; his fallen condition has been freely chosen precisely with the gesture of reaching out to the tempter. Eve, on the other hand, is totally in the shade and as if annihilated within herself; she has lost the pride of being dedicated to her man, the profound and satisfying joy of being-for. She has fallen into a subjection full of remorse and darkness. Her contracted face turns a sorrowful glance to the angel just as, a little earlier, she had naively turned her gaze to the evil one.

The only ray of light that touches her person is precisely upon her eye. The future of humanity will depend on how the woman will look at life and her man. Guilt has turned the eyes of the two away from their deep relationship. Their reprimand and the flight from Paradise force the two to look at each other again and to find their center there. However, it will be a look marked by the malice of the tempter. For this reason, a woman with a very clear gaze will be born, who will bear within herself the New Adam and who will redeem humanity from its guilt: Mary. In the Doni tondo, Michelangelo had painted Mary in the same position as Eve before her sin. Like Eve after her disobedience, she too turns her face towards the man whom God has placed beside her; however, her gaze is not fixed directly on Joseph, but on the divine Child, the true bond of unity between the two. Without the presence of Christ with the couple, and in human relations in general, chaos reigns.

## **SIN AND HELL IN HIERONIMUS BOSCH**

In his triptych of the Garden of Earthly Delights, Bosch has painted the irrational explosion of a lustful life imposed by a miss-educated look at the True and the Good, a look turned far away from the Creator. The serene harmony of the first panel where everything has its own role and where fauna and flora live satisfied around the first human couple, closely united to the Creator, is completely overturned by the decomposed swarming of bodies and nature in the central panel.

Unlike Michelangelo, the very modern Bosch erases the sense of sin. There is no trace of anguish over guilt in the couples that invade the scene. The “unity of the two” seen in the first triptych is destroyed by a multiplication of erring couples, where men and women without sexual distinctions seek pleasure for its own sake using any means, without restraint. It is chaos, a chaos that has its own dramatic beauty to which humanity ignorantly clings.

Bosch has unwittingly taken a faithful snapshot of our time: with the sense of sin erased, everything is permitted, but everything remains without perspective or purpose. The woman has lost her gaze for her man, her absolute and full dedication that guarantees the meaning of the development of the history of society. Rather, everything is entrusted to the body, to emotion, to instinct, and the Creator



has no place anymore. Everywhere there are people without direction and without goal, without distinction of sex, animalistic and impoverished. The consequence of this, however, is cruelly illustrated by Bosch himself in the next panel, the one opposite Paradise. The glittering colors of the central panel have given way to an anguished darkness where the only flashes of red come from flames, flashes that illuminate musical instruments of abnormal size and the hideous whiteness of a man-egg and mushroom together. The swarming full of enjoyment of the previous scene is transformed here into the swarming of bodies tortured by a deafening and discordant music caused by devilish crickets.

The divine Word here is completely annulled: there is no longer any possibility of listening. Two enormous pairs of ears severed by a blade announce this in dismay.

History's yearning for the progress shatters against an inexorable self-destruction. Where the original gaze toward the Creator is totally erased, there is no more nature, no more truly human face, no more city, no more eternity and no more peace.

<sup>1</sup> Cf "The Dignity of Woman" n. 6. (From here on abbreviated as MD; the numbers refer to the paragraphs cited.)

**COMMUNION:**  
**IN YOUR LIGHT WE SEE LIGHT**  
**The Mission of the Consecrated Woman (Part 2)**  
**Sr. Maria Gloria Riva – Nun of Eucharistic Adoration**  
**Republic of San Marino**

One cannot speak of the consecrated woman without rooting the Consecration itself, not only in baptism, but also in the biblical icon of the Virgin Mary receiving the angel's Annunciation.

So in this second part of our presentation too we will refer to some elements: the biblical text first of all, "Mulieris Dignitatem" ("The Dignity of Woman") of John Paul II, the art of Jan van Eyck and of Grunewald

**MARY: VIRGIN AND MOTHER**

The biblical passage on the original sin closes with a hopeful proclamation. It is the so-called proto-gospel: *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and her offspring, and she will crush your head, and you will strike at her heel"* (Gn. 3:15). Tradition sees a reference to Mary of Nazareth in this text. The struggle between this woman and the serpent is perpetuated in her lineage and it will be precisely the *"fruit of her womb"* that will crush the head of the evil one. This prophecy is reflected in the words of the Apostle, *"In the fullness of time God sent forth his son, born of a woman"* (Gal 4:4). These words were fulfilled at the moment of the Annunciation. Mary herself is foreshadowed in the promise made to the progenitors who had fallen into sin.<sup>1</sup>

The fullness of time is inaugurated by that "woman" who, because of her virginal conception and her divine motherhood, represents the culmination of the expectation of the Jewish people and, ultimately, of all humanity.<sup>2</sup>

**FIRST PAINTING: THE ANNUNCIATION**

The Annunciation of the Angel to the Virgin (Lk 1:26-37)

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<sup>1</sup> Redemptoris Mater 3,15.

<sup>2</sup> cf. MD n°3

Together with the proto-Gospel, this passage from Luke is one of the biblical foundations to which tradition refers (especially the Fathers), in support of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. The fact that Mary was preserved from original guilt leads back to that "principle" described in the second chapter of Genesis.

## **FULL OF GRACE**

Mary is greeted by the Angel as "full of grace." In other words, Mary is presented as the New Eve, a creature in her original state before the fall, "not discovered recently or by chance, but chosen from eternity, known beforehand by the Most High and prepared for him."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, Mary's Immaculate Conception is a divine project, a project that leads humanity back to the new creation.

But how does this new woman deal with the two fundamental dimensions of womanhood, virginity and motherhood?

To the angel who proposes divine motherhood, she responds with the words:

## ***HOW IS IT POSSIBLE, I KNOW NOT MAN***

The Garofalo Bible, in its commentary on this text, underlines the peremptoriness of the statement "I know not man," comparing it to that of the teetotaler who says "I do not drink wine." In Greek the present tense of the verb "know" is a present of duration that includes the notion of future, that is: "I do not know and I will not know."<sup>4</sup> The comments of the Fathers are unanimous in attesting to Mary's intention for virginity. St. Jerome, for example, writes in his polemic against Elvidius, "You say that Mary did not remain a virgin; I claim greater things myself, affirming that Joseph also was a virgin because of Mary,

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<sup>3</sup> Saint Bernard, Homily in Praise of the Virgin Mother (Homily 2:4)

<sup>4</sup> S. Garofalo (ed.), *Il Nuovo Testamento*, Marietti, 1964, 146, note 34: "'I do not know man' indicates a decisive and lasting will to abstain from conjugal relations (cf. Mt 1:25); the Greek present tense [translated into Latin as] *conosco*, in fact is a present of duration, which includes the notion of the future: I do not know and will not know (cf. the common "I do not drink wine" to indicate the absence of a habit).



so that from a virginal marriage the virgin Son might be born."<sup>5</sup> Augustine also stands against the Elvidians and Jovinian in his famous sermons: "[Mary was] virgin in conception, virgin in childbirth, virgin pregnant, virgin perpetual."<sup>6</sup> Augustine discovers in Mary a purpose of virginity, which has become a vow: a free and joyful vow, ratified by God, which Gabriel recognizes: "Mindful of her holy purpose and aware of the holy vow, because she knew what she had promised when she asked, 'How will it come about?' ... she inquired how, without doubting the omnipotence of God... You see that the Angel knows ... and did not hesitate to instruct her. Listen how: 'Thy Virginity shall remain; thou believest in truth alone, keep thy virginity, receive integrity. For your faith shall be whole, your integrity shall be intact.'<sup>7</sup> So Mary, as a new woman, faces virginity with a positive and spontaneous attitude.

## **VIRGINITY**

### **PROPHETIC VIRGINITY OF MARY:**

*How is it possible? I know not man.*

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<sup>5</sup> "Against Elvidius," 19, PL 23, 214. In 383 Jerome, prompted by friends relying solely on Scripture, composed the first Marian treatise, entitled "On the Perpetual Virginity of Mary." In it he demolishes one by one the inferences of Elvidius from the biblical locutions that had become common in the East and in the West such as: "woman," "lay," "before they were together," "he did not know her until," "firstborn" and the even more ancient objection about the "brothers" of Jesus. In order to fully understand the importance of the quotation quoted here, it should be said that, for Jerome, Joseph is not the old widower that the "apocryphal delusions" had staged, but a young man with all the energy of his humanity, and that the divine events that occurred in the conception and birth of Christ distracted him from any conjugal desire, to the point that because of Mary he also chose virginity.

<sup>6</sup> Saint Augustine Sermon 186, 1, PL 38, 999. Or again: "Who will understand the new novelty, unusual, unique in the world, unbelievable become credible and throughout the world incredibly believed, that a virgin conceived, a virgin gave birth and remained a virgin?" Sermon 109,2 PL 38,1008.

<sup>7</sup> Saint Augustine Sermon 291,5, PL 38, 1318-1319.

Mary's spontaneous and positive attitude towards virginity *"constitutes a clear 'innovation' with respect to the tradition of the Old Testament. Certainly that tradition was connected in some way with Israel's expectation of the Messiah's coming, especially among the women of Israel from whom he was to be born. In fact, the ideal of celibacy and virginity for the sake of greater closeness to God was not entirely foreign to certain Jewish circles, especially in the period immediately preceding the coming of Jesus. Nevertheless, celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom, or rather virginity, is undeniably an innovation connected with the incarnation of God"*(MD 20).

We could define Mary's virginity as a "being for," a total gift of herself to God, a total gift of herself to God in view of the Kingdom. "It is not a question, therefore, of legal purity or of escape from the world, as was the case for the Essenes.... The meaning of virginity must be placed at the apex of the eschatological impetus and energy aroused by the prophetic movement."<sup>8</sup> Therefore it is prophetic virginity.

Here we can cite as an example the prophet Jeremiah, whose celibacy was prophetic in the sense that his life became a sign of the relationship between God and Israel. The total penetration of God's Spirit in the prophet, so that the prophet could exist only for the Spirit, made visible in the flesh that call to belong exclusively and totally to God, which was the call of all the people.

Mary's virginity is therefore placed in this line. It is prophetic virginity in the sense of pointing to something that does not yet exist but which, in her person, is already present and operative in history.

## **VIRGINITY AS A WOMAN'S VOCATION "TO BE FOR"**

Mary inaugurates, so to speak, the sense of virginity as a woman's vocation, as the way to her realization as a person and as a woman. In Mary's definitive answer to the angel: *"Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord,"* the profound meaning of her purpose of virginity is outlined: the exclusive and radical gift of her whole person

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<sup>8</sup> Stefano DE FIORES Salvatore MEO (ed.), *Nuovo Dizionario di Mariologia*. Advent, Ed Paoline Milano 1988, p. 208.

to God, in a total availability that allows the Spirit to mold her body and heart.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, we understand how virginity is constitutive for woman. *Being-for* is a fundamental dimension of woman in view of spousal union. The Gospel, following the example of the Virgin Mary, proposes the ideal of a personal consecration to God. That is, the woman reserves herself, her virginity, not for a man, but for God and his Kingdom. In the radicalism of the Gospel, virginity "*cannot be compared to remaining simply unmarried or single, because virginity is not restricted to a mere 'no' but contains a profound 'yes' in the spousal order: the gift of self for love in a total and undivided manner*" (MD 20).

From this point of view we can say that in Mary's virginity the other two main evangelical counsels, obedience and poverty, are also implicit. In fact, Mary's virginity as "total availability to God and his plan" also describes her total obedience: "*Behold the handmaid of the Lord,*" her "fiat" – "*let it be done according to your word*" and at the same time her poverty before him, her humility. Through the expression "handmaid of the Lord," present also as "humble servant" in the Magnificat, Mary places herself within the ranks of the "*anawim*," the poor of JHWH whose poverty is identified with a humble and trusting faith. And it is because of this faith that Mary, as Augustine wrote, generated Christ, first in her mind than in her womb.

## **ANNUNCIATION AND VIRGINITY IN THE POLYPTYCH OF GAND**

A work that allows us to enter this mystery and feel it familiar, that is, accessible and addressed to us, is the Polyptych of the Lamb of Ghent by the brothers Hubert and Jan van Eyck.

This famous Polyptych was commissioned by a nobleman among the lower nobility of Ghent (in Flanders) to Hubert van Eyck, but his death came before he could complete the work; his younger brother Jan completed the work making many changes.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibidem.



The work was completed on May 6, 1432. (It had been commissioned around the year 1420, and Hubert died in 1426). At that time Europe was in turmoil. (Joan of Arc had been burned alive the

previous year, 1431). Only in the Flemish region was there an air of peace.

Intended for the Church of St. John in Ghent (today the Cathedral of St. Bavon), the polyptych is surprising for its size (2.58 x 3.75 meters high when closed and 5.16 x 3.75 meters open). It is located in a relatively narrow chapel that almost does not allow the work's doors to be opened completely and aligned on the same plane as the central panel. The entire work is entitled "To God, His Blessed Mother and All the Saints" and refers to the feast of All Saints. According to a belief attested by one of the most widely read works in the fifteenth century, *The Golden Legend*, on their feast day, November 1, all the saints go to pay homage to God in Heaven."

The central section allows us to enter the house of Nazareth. The whiteness of the cloth hanging from a shelf – a sign of Mary's virginity – and the clear light coming from the mullioned window contrast with the dark, earthy frame of the closed polyptych. Here the eternal enters into time, the divine enters into the human: an event that has radically changed history but that takes place in domestic simplicity in a house similar to many houses in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Flanders. The eternal Spirit and the human Mary here and now. We understand precisely from this house with its mullioned window opening onto a view of the city of Ghent, with its domestic and everyday objects, that this Mystery is accessible to us.

Though the words of the angel: *Ave gratia plena Dominus tecum* (abbreviated) are legible to us, Mary's response is written in reverse. That *Ecce Ancilla domini* was only and principally Mary's response, but we must each give God his or her response, so that we may welcome here and now the work of Redemption and open ourselves in docility to the breath of the Holy Spirit, who leads the Church in time according to God's will. Our Lady's *fiat*, in fact, will explode one day in the lives of many others and will be a mysterious and fertile root of many another "yes."

This break-in of the divine into the human was an event carefully prepared by God throughout the centuries and times. The lunettes of the sibyls and prophets tell of it. The Erythraean Sibyl testifies to the supernatural nature of the event; it bears the inscription:

“You do not utter human words but you are inspired from the height of your divinity.” The Cumaean Sibyl already sings the glory of the resurrection: “Your king of the future ages will come to judge the flesh.”

The prophet Zechariah strengthens the Virgin's heart in the Word: “Rejoice, exult, daughter of Zion, for behold, I am coming.” Micah, on the other hand, reassures her about her Son: “Out of you will come forth the One who is to be the ruler of Israel.”

Our “yes” was also prepared by the faith of the generations that preceded us. We too were not born by chance, but thought of by God from eternity and given to this time and this history for heaven's good plan.

The cloth and the mullioned windows of the house weave a mysterious dialogue between a light inside and a light outside: there is no interruption of the continuity between the sacred and the profane, between the human world and the kingdom of God: the Word became Flesh. This, which was the first epiclesis in history, confirms us in the faith of the Church: “as it was for the Virgin, so, through the Eucharist, God's life-giving breath enters into us and transfigures us” (cf. SC 8).

This is the foundation of every consecration, and in Mary a woman's vocation is fulfilled in all its multiple forms.

In the lower register there is a married couple, Joos Vijdt and Lysbette Borluut. They commissioned the work that frames two great witnesses of the virginal charism given to the Church: St. John the Baptist, the first among the prophets of the new covenant, and John the Evangelist, the last apostle to die, the longest living.

## **VIRGINITY AND MOTHERHOOD**

Two dimensions of women's vocation, virginity and motherhood, coexist in Mary; they are not mutually exclusive. “*The person of the Mother of God helps everyone – especially women – to see how these two dimensions, these two paths in the vocation of women as persons, explain and complete each other*” (MD 17).

Mary's fundamental attitude of “being for” “*opens the way to a full understanding of the woman's motherhood.*” If “man”: the human person as the unity of the two – man and woman – cannot find himself

except through a sincere gift of self, then the union of the two in one flesh (Gn 2:24), “*brings about – on the woman's part – a special ‘gift of self,’ as an expression of that spousal love whereby the two are united to each other so closely that they become ‘one flesh’*” (MD 18). In Mary, maternity was not the fruit of a matrimonial “knowledge” as is the common order of things, but the work of the Holy Spirit, the fruit, as we have seen, of a total availability to the intervention of the Most High, who, by “overshadowing,” brought about in her the mysterious divine maternity and left her virginity intact. “*Hence Mary attains a union with God that exceeds all the expectations of the human spirit*” (MD 3).

## **MOTHERHOOD AS PARTICIPATION IN GOD’S ETERNAL GENERATING**

In Mary's answer “*may it be done to me according to your word,*” Mary's acceptance of God's plan is delineated. In the motherhood of woman, united to the fatherhood of man, God’s eternal generating is reflected.

Such cooperation in the project of creation was inscribed from the beginning. Though in Mary it shines out clearly that what is generated in her is a gift of God, “Son of the Most High,” this is also true for every woman who gives birth. In the exclamation of the first woman, after the birth of Cain – “*I have produced a son with the Lord’s help*” – was the awareness that the child, before being the fruit of “flesh and blood,” is a gift of God and that in this way the woman participates in the great mystery of eternal generation.

## **SPIRITUAL MATERNITY and the PASCHAL MYSTERY**

The “pains of childbirth” are a legacy of original sin (“*In pain you will bear your children*”). In the context of the new principle inaugurated by the birth of Christ, these pains become a sign of redemptive suffering. Jesus' words at the Last Supper place his “hour” alongside the “hour” of the woman who suffers in childbirth, but who finds joy again immediately after giving birth to her child. With this, Jesus himself indicates the link between a woman's motherhood and the Paschal Mystery.

*“This mystery also includes the Mother's sorrow at the foot of the Cross”* (MD 19).

## SECOND PAINTING: THE HOUR OF THE CROSS

And so we come to contemplate the second scene of our reflection: *“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’”* (Jn. 19:25-27).

## WOMAN

Alongside the word “Mother,” which is repeated five times in this brief Johannine passage, there is another word taken from Jesus' own lips: “woman.” Here, even more than at Cana, it is difficult to understand how the evangelist could have used this term if the Son himself had not pronounced it.

The term “woman” brings us back to the very center of the fulfillment of the promise contained in the proto-gospel: *The woman's offspring will crush the head of the serpent* (cf. Gen 3:15). Here Mary's “**motherhood**” coincides with the supreme hour of her Son's death and reconnects the **woman** Mary to the event of redemption that was promised from the beginning.<sup>10</sup>

## ANNUNCIATION OF A SPIRITUAL MOTHERHOOD

Here Mary receives another annunciation, not from the angel, but from Jesus himself: the annunciation of a new motherhood. She is called to become the mother of the disciple whom Jesus loved.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Significant in illustrating this passage and what follows (the universal motherhood of Mary) is the antiphon of the second Psalm in the First Vespers of the Solemnity of Our Lady of Sorrows, according to the Proper of the Order of the Adorers and the Passionists: *“Eve plucked the fruit of the tree and offered it to man; Mary took the nourishment of life from the cross and offers it to all.”* On the subject of the proclamation, compare instead the commentary on the fifth sorrow of the Virgin Mary: *“The proclamation of this universal motherhood expanded your heart and in an impulse of self-giving love you accepted it.”*

<sup>11</sup> Cf. in this regard Redemptoris Mater n° 23.

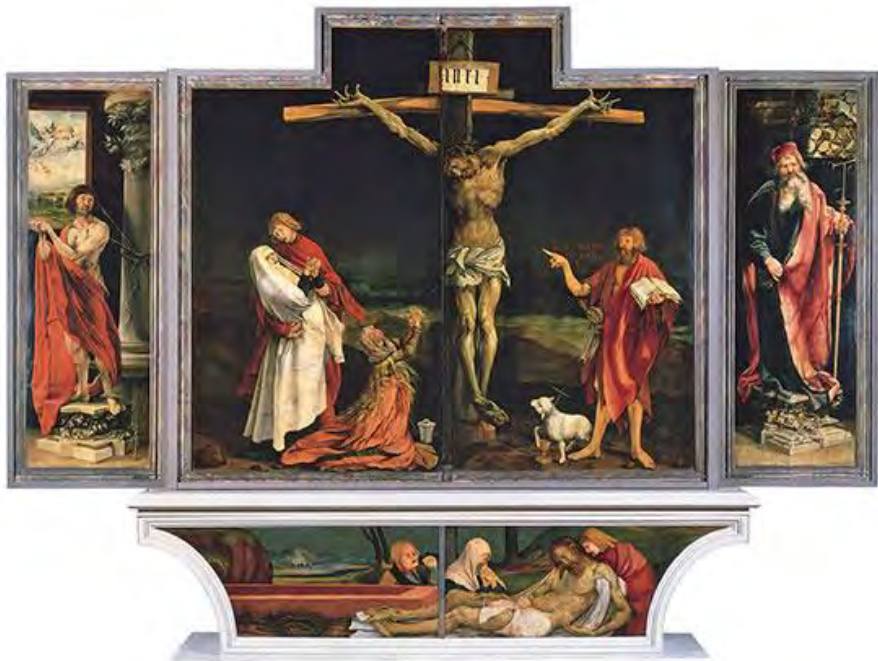


Here we see the spiritual motherhood of Mary, the archetype of all motherhood in the spirit. Through her care of this specific person, the disciple John, Mary becomes the mother of humanity and, more properly, the mother of the members of her Son Jesus. In this mysterious pain of childbirth in which a sword pierces Mary's soul, she comes to the fruitful joy of a greater and unexpected motherhood, a universal motherhood. (Cf. the "admirable exchange" of St. Bernard.)

The Flemish painter Grünewald offers us an attentive look at the hour of the Cross as the Church's faith celebrates it in the Paschal Mystery.

## THE MOTHERHOOD OF MARY ACCORDING TO GRÜNEWALD

The polyptych of Isenheim is a great liturgical machine composed of numerous doors. These were opened by the Antonites. They were doctors commissioned by the Pope and consecrated to the cure of shingles and other skin diseases. They offered this viewing to



their patients during the healing process, which was marked by liturgical themes.

The hour of the cross is portrayed in an unprecedented darkness where nothing can be seen. Even the historical elements are suppressed (there are no Romans, nor Jews, nor crowd, nor the disciples of the Lord with Mary and John). Indeed the anachronism is reinforced by the presence of John the Baptist under the cross. This hour is therefore an hour that spreads into the time of yesterday and today. If the Baptist, with his outsized finger, indicates which is the true Lamb (in full agreement – as we shall see – with the Ghent Polyptych), on the left side here is John embracing the Virgin Mary. The fainting Mother is seen almost in the light of a birth. The Virgin, white and luminous because of her virginity, gives birth to her

son John, given as son by Jesus himself, who is covered by the red blood of childbirth (i.e. the Blood of the Redeemer). Another reading that does not contradict this one, but rather reinforces it, is given, precisely, by the timing of the liturgy. The white, curved Madonna is the Moon, while Saint John the Apostle is the Sun. Together they denounce the eclipse that marked the arrival of the hour. On the other hand, Mary of Magdala represents the Earth that waits, brown and parched, for the dew of the Spirit and the fertile blood of the Savior.

In this snapshot, which places the entire polyptych within the liturgy, Christ stands out with the same draining wounds that afflicted the sick (with the skin disease called “St. Anthony’s fire”), an obvious symbol of the wounds of sin.

Mary’s motherhood, therefore, and her fruitful virginity, just as they allowed the Word to become flesh in history, continue to generate children for God, thus becoming characteristics of the Church.

## **MATERNITY IN THE SPIRIT: ENTRUSTING HUMANITY TO WOMAN**

Virginity chosen for the Kingdom of Heaven leads woman to a motherhood similar to that of Mary, similar to that of the Church. If in marriage, too, there must be an openness within the couple that leads to a spousal love available to be poured out on all those within its range, in virginity this availability is open to all people, embraced by the love of

Christ the Bridegroom *“to be poured out for the sake of those who come within one's range of activity.... In virginity this readiness is open to all people, who are embraced by the love of Christ the Spouse”* (MD 21). Spiritual motherhood therefore opens the woman, every woman, to live in a personal way her bond with the Paschal Mystery of Christ, which places her at the center of the struggle against sin and entrusts her with the care of all those whom providence places within her reach.

In this regard, we cannot fail to refer here to that passage in the book of Revelation where the woman appears in the throes of childbirth, fleeing from the ancient serpent who seeks to devour her male child. Physical motherhood here becomes a clear symbol of the suffering that threatens humanity because of sin. Woman is personally involved, precisely because of the role she played in the sin of the beginning, in this struggle for humanity, for its true good, for its salvation.

***God entrusts the human being to woman, to her moral and spiritual strength, in a special way. This is the proper meaning of all motherhood, even motherhood in the spirit.***

## **CONSECRATION, IMAGE OF THE CHURCH AS BRIDE OF CHRIST**

### **THE BRIDE OF CHRIST, COLLECTIVE SUBJECT AND INDIVIDUAL PERSON**

Let us return for a moment to that biblical "principle" which has guided all our reflection in order to express the truth about the Church as the Bride of Christ. The love that must unite the two is, as we have seen, love that gives itself. Unconditional giving of self to the other. The ethic of self-giving underlies every human relationship because it is only through a sincere gift of self that a person finds him/herself again. Christ fully assumed this way of life willed by the Father from the beginning, for he loved the Church and gave himself for her. The face of every human being is inscribed in the disciple whom Jesus loved and entrusted to his Mother at the hour of the Cross.

The Church *“is therefore a collective subject and not an individual person..... ‘Christ has loved the Church’ precisely as a*

*community, made up of many persons, both women and men. [In this Church] he has loved every individual person” (MD 25).*

## **FUNDAMENTAL CALL TO UNITY**

In this great mystery we see the fundamental call of the Church, and I would like to say of humanity, to unity, to be one as Christ with the Father. All human beings, both men and women, are called to be the "bride of Christ."

## **THE FEMININE SYMBOL OF THE HUMAN**

*“In this way ‘being the bride,’ and thus the ‘feminine’ element, becomes a symbol of all that is ‘human,’ according to the words of Paul: ‘for you are all one in Christ Jesus’” (Gal 3:28) From a linguistic viewpoint we can say that the analogy of spousal love found in the Letter to the Ephesians links what is "masculine" to what is "feminine", since, as members of the Church, men too are included in the concept of "Bride" (MD 25).*

This should not be surprising if we think that the Apostle Paul, in order to express his mission in the Church, speaks of his "children with whom I am in labor" (cf. Gal 4:19). The "Bride" is the one who accepts the love of the Bridegroom and at the same time responds to it with the gift of self. Such is the attitude of the Church towards Jesus. Every human being in the Church accepts the love of Christ as a gift and tries to respond to it with the gift of his or her own person.

## **THE MASCULINE SYMBOL OF DIVINE LOVE**

*"Christ is the Bridegroom." For He has "loved first" (1Jn 4:19) and "to the end" (Jn 13:1). "The symbol of the Bridegroom is of the masculine gender." Jesus fully reveals "the human character of the love in which God expressed his divine love for Israel, for the Church, for all people." God in Jesus has loved us with a human heart.*

*We can conclude, then, that "precisely because Christ's love is spousal love, it is the paradigm and exemplar of all human love, particularly the love of men."*

## **THE EUCHARIST: Sacrament of the Bridegroom and the Bride**

Keeping in mind the background of the "great mystery" of the Church as "bride" of Christ, we can now look at the Eucharist as the "sacrament of the Bridegroom, of the Bride." In a sacramental way, the Eucharist makes present, actualizes, the gift of Christ the Bridegroom who "gave himself," his body and blood for the Church-Bride. The Eucharist is the sacrament of our redemption through which Christ "creates" the Church his Bride and unites us to himself. "*Christ is united with this body as the bridegroom with the bride*" (MD 26). It is not by chance, therefore, that Jesus linked the institution of the Eucharist to the priestly service of the apostles. In fact, the Eucharist expresses in a sacramental way "*the redemptive act of Christ the bridegroom towards the Church, the Bride*" (MD 26). The symbolism maintains its transparency when the Eucharist, in which the priest acts "*in persona Christi*," is performed by a man.

## **THE GIFT OF THE BRIDE**

But all the baptized participate in the "one" priesthood of Christ. Universal participation in Christ's sacrifice makes everyone in the Church a "kingdom of priests." All are included in the "great mystery" of the Letter to the Ephesians: the Bride united to the Bridegroom, including those who share in the ministerial priesthood, which has the character of service. "*In the royal priesthood, which is universal, the gift of the Bride is expressed.*"<sup>12</sup> This gift is the love and holiness with which the Bride (Church) responds to the love of the Bridegroom (Christ).

In order to fully understand the Bride's gift as a response of love to the Bridegroom, it would be necessary to include the women who followed Christ on his earthly journey or those who played a significant role in the life of the early Church. Since time does not permit, I leave this biblical research to your personal commitment to in-depth study.

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<sup>12</sup>cf MD 27.

## WHO IS THE CONSECRATED WOMAN?

Let's take up what has been said so far and make some applications to our lives as consecrated women, applications that can provide inspiration for our personal or group reflection.

### PROPHETIC VIRGINITY

The choice of celibacy for the Kingdom of Heaven is eschatological in nature. We offer the world an effective witness to future goods. Jesus words reflected this witness when, in declaring the transitory nature of marriage, he defined the virginal life as similar to that of the angels of God. I would like to emphasize here, however, that being similar to the angels of God (an expression used by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel) refers not so much to their purity (with which God does find fault, cf. Gab 4:18) as to their condition of freedom from human conditioning which makes them available to the divine will. The female virgin, as Paul writes, is free from worries about the flesh, not because she lives in a privileged condition compared to the married woman, but because she is concerned about the things of the Lord.

### SPIRITUAL MOTHERHOOD

To be *concerned about the things of the Lord* means to have the same concerns as the Lord Jesus who, in the supreme hour of the cross (like the pains of childbirth) wanted to entrust those he loved most to the woman, through the entrusting of the beloved disciple to his Mother. This is how spiritual motherhood is inserted. The consecrated woman welcomes with a maternal heart all the concerns and sufferings that affect those whom God places within the reach of her action and experiences the mystery of suffering as "the pain of childbirth."

Thus we are called to live our daily suffering as pain open to hope, each according to the nature and vocation of his/her Institute. The cross represents not only "giving one's life for others," but also "being so that others may exist," a mother's attitude toward her children. We are at the foot of the cross, we are at the heart of the paschal mystery so that others may exist, like the love of a mother for her children; she lives and offers herself unceasingly so that her children may be.

## THE CONSECRATED WOMAN IN THE POLYPTYCH OF THE LAMB

The Polyptych of the Lamb helps us at a glance to reflect on the



root, and at the same time, on the individual ways, of living that consecration which leads one to follow the Lamb wherever he goes.

When the polyptych is opened, the brown and earthy appearance of the closed doors gives way to a kaleidoscope of colors.

In the open polyptych, we are offered the scene, dear to medieval tradition, in which on October 31 (the eve and thus the true beginning of the solemnity of Halloween - that is, of All Saints), the hosts of Saints and Blessed ascended into the heavenly halls to pay homage to the Trinity.

If the Trinity occupies the entire central axis of the broad perspective painted by van Eyck (the Father on the throne, the Spirit breathing on the altar and Christ the Lamb/God standing upright and immolated on the altar itself), at the top, on the throne, we have the Latin *deesis*: Christ in the center (God the Father has the face of the

Lord Jesus: “*Whoever sees me sees the Father*”); to the right the Virgin Mary and to the left Saint John the Baptist. Mary is wrapped in the blue of the Mystery, John in the green of divine life. On the sides of the open polyptych, we are once again brought back to that principle, that beginning point, within which every consecration takes on meaning. We see Adam and Eve enclosed in earthy niches. They cause our gaze to be directed to the three great figures of *deesis*, not by chance.

The two, in fact, are clearly assimilated to Mary and the Baptist. With great psychological and introspective finesse, van Eyck paints the same faces but charging them with completely different feelings. Adam's torment turns to peace in the faithfulness of John the Forerunner; Eve's desolation because of the pains of childbirth turns to serenity in Mary's virginal conception. Moreover, if we observe the lips of the progenitors, they are sealed, like the lips of someone who, through the desolation of guilt, loses his/her speech. On the other hand, the lips of the Baptist and the Virgin are unclenched and on the point of speaking. Both speak the eternal Word that has been fulfilled in their lives. John the Baptist holds the book open to a page of Isaiah, the one in Ch. 40 known in the Latin version as the *Consolamini* (be consoled). It is God's promise of a Redeemer who would redeem the people from their guilt. Mary is intent on the reading and holds a finger between the pages of the book, to mark an important point, perhaps the other Isaiah passage in which the Virgin's conception of a son is announced.

We can evoke here two dimensions of the Church: the contemplative and the missionary-apostolic. The contemplative life keeps all the words of the Lord in its heart, proclaiming, after the example of the Virgin Mary, the eternal Word; the active life carries out the task of consoling God's people, proclaiming in word and deed the Year of Mercy promised by Christ, to be fulfilled only at the end of time.

In support of this, we see in the lower register the procession of eight categories of people. They are the witnesses of the eight beatitudes that spread through history the merits of Christ, of the Virgin Mary and of the Baptist, tracing paths of salvation for every human being. Starting from the panels on the left we see: the just judges and the knights of Christ; in the central panel, clockwise: prophets and



patriarchs, confessors of the faith, virgins and nuns, apostles and martyrs; in the panels on the right, hermits and pilgrims. Eight groups representing those who, in their lives, have lived out the eight beatitudes.

The fulcrum and center of the lives of the blessed is the Eucharist, signified by the altar, by the Lamb standing and immolated and by the Holy Spirit who descends, fulfilling that epiclesis capable of making the Paschal Mystery present here and now.

Our life too winds its way, like this endless procession, here, before the throne of the Lamb. In contemplating our life in this way, almost from above, we see how prayer, familiarity with the Word, with the Eucharist, with the sacraments, with the liturgical actions of the Church, have often been the instruments through which our existence is transfigured. Both in apostolic works and in the contemplative life, we must not forget this other, eternal point of view, which does not make our work in the world futile, but makes it an effective instrument for the Kingdom.

Jan van Eyck teaches how, in the Heaven that awaits us, there in the midst of the redeemed Jerusalem, nothing is lost. The meadow is dotted with infinite varieties of plants and flowers: in the Heaven that awaits us, the particularity of each one will reach its fullness and perfection. Next to the throne are the cross and the column of the scourging of the Lord, the other symbols of the Passion are also present, carried by the angels: in the heavenly Jerusalem the pain is not forgotten, but is transfigured by glory. The contemplation of the glorified passion of the divine Lamb gives meaning and light to the sufferings of life, and the well, with its twelve spouts, assures limitless fruitfulness.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> MD 27.

# **SYNODALITY IN THE LIFE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH (Part 1)**

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## **0. The title of the reflection and the sources of reference**

The perspective triggered by the synodal vision of the Church, the

title of the present

exposition, could in the end encourage what in the authoritative document of the International Theological Commission, «Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church» is indicated as «the paschal transition from “I” understood in a self-centered way to the ecclesial “we”, where every “I”, clothed in Christ (cf. Galatians 3,27), lives and journeys with his or her brothers and sisters as a responsible and active agent of the one mission of the People of God» (§ 107).

The reflection offered in our lecture takes into account the thrust of three recent important official documents on the theme of synodality in the Church:

\* Pope Francis’ Address on the occasion of the «Commemoration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops» (October 17, 2015) in which, speaking of the strengthening of synergies to be promoted in all areas of its mission, the Pope states that “It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium. What the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word ‘synod.’”

\* The document of the International Theological Commission entitled «Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church» (March 2, 2018) in which the theological significance of synodality in the perspective of Catholic ecclesiology is explored. Spread over 121 paragraphs, with 170 footnotes, its extensively documented content is structured

according to an ample introduction, four chapters, and a brief conclusion.

\* Pope Francis' Apostolic Constitution, «*Episcopalis communio*. On the Synod of Bishops» (September 18, 2018)

in which, while configuring the Synod of Bishops as an essentially episcopal body, the Pope - recalling the solicitude of each bishop, as a member of the College, for the universal Church, something that expresses the supradiocesan dimension of the *munus episcopale* (episcopal office) - affirms that «it is a suitable instrument to give voice to the entire People of God, specifically via the Bishops, established by God as “authentic guardians, interpreters and witnesses of the faith of the whole Church”, demonstrating, from one Assembly to another, that it is an eloquent expression of synodality as a “constitutive element of the Church”». So true is it - he continues - that «the consultation of the faithful must be followed by discernment on the part of the Bishops chosen for the task, united in the search for a consensus that springs not from worldly logic, but from common obedience to the Spirit of Christ» (§ 6-7).

## 1. Introduction

It is necessary to recall the etymological and conceptual data necessary to clarify in a preliminary way the content and the use of the word “synodality”, and then contextualize the significance and the novelty of the teaching offered to us by the Magisterium in the footsteps of the Council and of Theology.

“**Synod**” is an ancient and venerable word in the Tradition of the Church, whose meaning recalls the deepest contents of Revelation. Composed of the preposition σύν (syn), *with*, and the noun ὁδός (odos), *way*, it indicates the journey entered together by the People of God. It therefore refers to the Lord Jesus who presents himself as «the way, the truth and the life» (Jn 14:6), and to the fact that Christians, following him, are originally called “disciples of the way” (cf. Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).

In ecclesiastical Greek, it expresses the act of being summoned into the assembly of Jesus' disciples and in some cases it is synonymous with the ecclesial community. St. John Chrysostom, for

example, writes that Church is «a name that stands for walking together (σύννοδος)» (*Exp. in Psalm.*, 149, 1). The Church in fact - he explains - is the assembly convened to give thanks and praise to God as a choir, a harmonious reality where everything is held (σύστημα), since those who compose it, through their mutual and ordered relationships, converge in the *ἀγάπη* and in the *ὁμολοία* (the same understanding).

Since the earliest centuries, the word “synod” has had a specific meaning for the ecclesial assemblies convened at various levels (diocesan, provincial or regional, patriarchal, universal) to discern, in the light of the Word of God and in listening to the Holy Spirit, the doctrinal, liturgical, canonical and pastoral issues that arise.

The Greek σύννοδος is translated into Latin as *synodus* or *concilium*. Concilium, in secular usage, means an assembly convened by legitimate authority. Although the linguistic roots of “synod” and “council” are different, the meaning is convergent. Indeed, “council” enriches the semantic content of “synod” by recalling the Hebrew *qahal* - (קהל) the assembly convened by the Lord - and its translation into the Greek *ἐκκλησία* (ecclesia), which designates in the New Testament the eschatological convocation of the People of God in Christ Jesus.

In the Catholic Church the distinction in the use of the words “council” and “synod” is recent. At the Second Vatican Council they are synonymous in designating the conciliar assembly. A clarification is introduced in the *Code of Canon Law* of the Latin Church (1983), where a distinction is made between a particular council (plenary or provincial) and an ecumenical council, on the one hand, and a synod of bishops and a diocesan synod, on the other.

In the theological, canonical and pastoral literature of recent decades, a newly coined noun, “synodality,” has emerged, related to the adjective “synodal,” both derived from the word “synod.” In this way, we speak of synodality as a “constitutive dimension” of the Church and, thus, of “synodal Church.”

## **2. The ecclesiological context of synodality: relationship between communion, synodality, collegiality**

The dogmatic constitution (Vatican II) on the Church *Lumen Gentium* proposes the fundamental principles for understanding

**The ecclesiology of the People of God** emphasizes the common identity and mission of all the baptized, exercising of the multiform and rich richness of their charisms, their vocations and their ministries. This concept of communion expresses in this context the profound importance of the mystery and mission of the Church, which has in the

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fellow travelers, destined to be active subjects in the call to holiness and mission, because all participate in the one priesthood of Christ and are enriched by the charisms of the Spirit. Along these lines, Pope Francis always refers to the Church as the «holy faithful People of God», thus completing a rich conciliar expression (cf. LG 12a).

In the concept of synodality there is therefore mutual implication between the *communio fidelium* (of the faithful), the *communio episcoporum* (of the bishops), and the *communio ecclesiarum* (of the churches). The concept of synodality is broader than that of collegiality, because it includes the participation of everyone in the Church and of all the Churches. Collegiality properly expresses the rise and expression of the communion of the People of God in the episcopal class, namely, in the College of Bishops *cum Petro* and *sub Petro* (with Peter and under Peter), and through it the communion among all the Churches. «The notion of synodality implies that of collegiality, and vice versa, inasmuch as the two realities, being distinct, support and authenticate each other» (CTI, 66). The teaching of Vatican II regarding the sacramentality of episcopacy and collegiality represents a fundamental theological premise for a correct and integral theology of synodality.



### 3. The “threshold of innovation” crossed by Pope Francis in his teaching on synodality

Francis speaks of **synodality** as a «**constitutive dimension**» of the **Church and therefore of a «synodal Church»**. This novelty of language, with respect to that found in the conciliar expression that spoke of the hierarchical constitution of the Church or of hierarchical communion - and which requires careful theological fine-tuning - attests to a growing understanding that is maturing in the ecclesial consciousness starting from the Magisterium of Vatican II and from the lived experience, in the local Churches and in the universal Church, from the last Council until today.

In his Address, citing the Council in which it is said that «The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot

err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples' supernatural discernment in matters of faith when "from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful" it shows its universal consent in things of faith and morals» (LG 12), Francis affirms that «The *sensus fidei* prevents a rigid separation between an *Ecclesia docens* and an *Ecclesia discens*, since the flock likewise has an instinctive ability to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church». He further substantiates this intuition by suggesting that «Synodality, as a constitutive element of the Church, offers us the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself».

#### **4. The Normative Sources of the Synodal Life of the Church in Scripture and Tradition**

It is worth recalling some basic lines necessary for the discernment of the theological principles that should animate and regulate synodal life, structures, processes and events. To this end, the forms of synodality developed in the Church throughout the course of its history are here outlined in summary form.

##### **In Scripture**

The Acts of the Apostles attest to some important moments in the journey of the apostolic Church. One example for all is the discernment of the crucial question of the mission to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 10). The unfolding of the Apostolic Council of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 15; and also Gal 2:1-10) illustrates the journey of the People of God as a complex and articulated reality in which each person has a specific place and role (cf. 1 Cor 12:12-17; Rom 12:4-5; Eph 4:4). The chief leader who guides and directs this journey of communal discernment of the apostles in the first instance, and of the entire Church, is the Holy Spirit, poured out upon the Church on the day of Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:2-3). This event, throughout the centuries, will be interpreted as the foundational image of the Synods celebrated by the Church.

The decision is made and enunciated by James, leader of the Jerusalem church: «It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and by ourselves». (15:28). It is received and owned by the whole Jerusalem

assembly (ἔδοξε τοῖς ἀποστόλοις καὶ τοῖς πρεσβυτέροις σὺν ὅλῃ τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ; 15:22) and then by that of Antioch (15:30-31), as the fruit of communal discernment at the service of the Church's evangelizing mission.

### **In the First Millennium**

Perseverance on the path of unity, through diverse places and cultures, makes synodality unfold from the beginning as a guarantee and implementation of the creative fidelity of the Church to her apostolic origin and her Catholic vocation.

Ignatius of Antioch describes the synodal consciousness of the different local Churches that recognize themselves as a solid expression of the one Church. In his letter to the community of Ephesus, he affirms that all its members are *σύνοδοι*, fellow travelers, by virtue of their baptismal dignity and friendship with Christ (*Ad Ephesios*, IX, 2).

Cyprian of Carthage, in the mid-third century, formulated the episcopal and synodal principle, attesting that in the local Church *nihil sine episcopo, nihil sine consilio vestro et sine consensu plebis* (nothing without the bishop, nothing without your council [of priests and deacons] and without the consensus of the people) (*Epistula*, 14, 4).

Beginning in the fourth century, ecclesiastical provinces were formed which manifested and promoted communion among the local Churches and which had a Metropolitan at their head. In view of common deliberations, provincial synods are periodically held as specific instruments for the exercise of ecclesial synodality.

The communication of synodal letters, the collections of synodal canons transmitted to the other Churches, the request for mutual recognition among the different Sees, the exchange of delegations which often involves tiring and dangerous journeys, attest to the awareness that each local Church perceives itself as an expression of the one and catholic Church.

From the beginning, the Church of Rome had been held in special esteem by virtue of the martyrdom suffered there by the Apostles Peter - whose Bishop is recognized as his successor - and Paul (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, III, 3, 2). The apostolic faith firmly preserved there, the authoritative ministry exercised by its Bishop at the service of



communion between the Churches, and the rich practice of synodal life attested to there, make it in the West a point of reference and a prototype of organization for the other Churches, which also turn to it to settle disputes, thus serving as a forum of appeal (Clement Roman, *I Clementis*, V, 4-5; Synod of Sardica (343), *canons* 3 and 5).

## **In the Second Millennium**

With the beginning of the second millennium, synodal praxis gradually assumed different procedural forms in the West and in the East, particularly after the break in communion between the Church of Constantinople and the Church of Rome (11<sup>th</sup> century) and the fall of the ecclesiastical territories belonging to (falling into the range of) the Patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem under the political control of Islam.

In the Eastern Churches, the synodal practice continued in accordance with the Tradition of the Fathers. In Constantinople the activity of a permanent Synod (*Σύνοδος ἐνδημούσα*) was consolidated, with regular assemblies, whose synodal practice survives even today in the Orthodox Churches.

In the Catholic Church, the Gregorian reform and the struggle for keeping the *libertas Ecclesiae* (the Church's liberty) contribute to the affirmation of the primatial authority of the Pope (1073-1085). While on the one hand this freed the bishops from subordination to the emperor, on the other, if not well understood, it risked weakening the conscience of the local Churches and consequently weakening the need for discussion and for local decision-making processes.

This also occurred as a result of the politicization of the synodal practice exercised in the Empire; Synods lost their purely ecclesial character and assumed the form of royal or national Synods, in which Bishops and other ecclesiastical authorities participated under the presiding King.

**The Council of Trent** established the norm of holding diocesan Synods every year and provincial Synods every three years, contributing to the transmission of the impulse of the Tridentine reform to the whole Church. An example and model of this is the action of St. Charles Borromeo, Archbishop of Milan, who during his ministry convoked 5 provincial and 11 diocesan Synods.

The diocesan and provincial Synods celebrated following the Council of Trent, however, did not aim, according to the culture of the time, at the active involvement of the entire People of God - the *congregatio fidelium* - but at transmitting and implementing its norms and dispositions. On the other hand, the apologetic reaction to criticism of ecclesiastical authority by the Protestant Reformation and to resistance by numerous strands of modern thought accentuated the hierarchical vision of the Church. The Church was seen as a *societas perfecta et inaequalium* (a perfect society of unequal people). This vision came to identify in the Pastors, with the Pope at the summit, the *Ecclesia docens* (teaching Church) and in the rest of the People of God the *Ecclesia discens* (learning Church).

**The First Vatican Council** (1869-1870) sanctions the doctrine of the primacy and infallibility of the Pope: «in blessed Peter is established the principle and the perpetual and visible foundation of the unity of faith and communion» (*Pastor aeternus*, DH 3051). It proposes the formula according to which the *ex cathedra* definitions of the Pope are irreformable as they stand «by themselves and not by virtue of the consensus of the Church» (*Pastor aeternus*, DH 3074).

Although the *consensus Ecclesiae* (consensus of the Church) is not rendered entirely superfluous, as attested to by the consultation desired by Pius IX around the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, and by Pius XII in reference to the dogma of the Assumption of Mary, it comes to terms with an increasingly strong model of Papal authority by virtue of the Pope's specific ministry. In the mentality of the time before the Second Vatican Council, this model would have rendered the convocation of synods or councils useless if not absurd.

The need for a pertinent and consistent revival of synodal praxis (practice) in the Catholic Church was already announced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century thanks to the work of some prophetic voices such as Johann Adam Möhler (1796-1838), Antonio Rosmini (1797-1855) and John Henry Newman (1801-1890), who referred to the normative sources of Scripture and Tradition, heralding the renewal favored by the biblical, liturgical and patristic movements.

We should not forget the birth and progressive consolidation of a new institution, the Episcopal Conferences, starting from the second half of the nineteenth century. It signaled the reawakening of a collegial interpretation of the exercise of the episcopal ministry in reference to a specific territory.

The nature of the Church as the People of God in history on pilgrimage to the heavenly homeland, as expressed by *Lumen Gentium* at the **Second Vatican Council**, traces the theological premises for a pertinent revival of synodality. The Decree *Christus Domini* emphasizes the individual identities of the particular Churches as subjects (For “subject” see p. 3.) and urges Bishops to exercise the pastoral care of the Church entrusted to them in communion with the presbyterate, with the help of a specific senate or council of presbyters, and formulating an invitation for the establishment in each Diocese of a Pastoral Council composed of priests, religious and laity. It also expresses the hope, on the level of communion among the local Churches in a region, that the venerable institution of Synods and Provincial Councils will regain new vigor. The Decree invites the promotion of the institution of Episcopal Conferences. In the Decree *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* the patriarchal institution and its synodal form are valued in regard to the Eastern Catholic Churches.

In order to revitalize synodal practice on the level of the universal Church, Paul VI instituted the Synod of Bishops. In the more than fifty years that have passed since the Council, awareness of the communal nature of the Church has matured among ever wider sections of the People of God, and positive experiences of synodality have taken place at the diocesan, regional and universal levels. In particular, 15 Ordinary General Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops have been held, the experience and activity of Episcopal Conferences have been consolidated and synodal assemblies have been celebrated everywhere. In addition, Councils have been established which have fostered communion and cooperation between local Churches and Episcopates in order to trace pastoral lines at the regional and continental levels.

# **SYNODALITY: NOT SIMPLY AN OPERATIVE PROCEDURE, BUT A VISIBLE, CONSTITUTIVE FORM OF THE CHURCH'S BEING AND ACTING**

## **(Part 2)**

**Don Rino La Delfa – Ecclesiastical Vice-assistant  
of the Council of the Federation  
Lecturer in Ecclesiology at the Saint John the Evangelist  
Pontifical Faculty of Sicily**



**A synodal Church is a Church of listening**, in the awareness that listening «is more than hearing» (EG 171). It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome: each listening to the others; and all listening to the Holy

Spirit, the «Spirit of truth» (Jn 14:17), in order to know what he «says to the churches» (Rev 2:7).

Starting from this, it is possible to distinguish three meanings of synodality, considering different realities in the life and mission of the Church. First of all, the specific style that distinguishes its ordinary way of living and operating. Second, the structures and processes that express synodal communion at the institutional level. Finally, the timely accomplishment of those events or acts - ranging from a diocesan synod to an ecumenical council - in which the Church is called to act synodally at the local, regional and universal levels.

### **1. Distinctive theological traits of synodality**

The exchange among the prophecy of the faithful, the discernment of the college of bishops and the presidency of the Petrine ministry enriches the Church in no small measure and illuminates her identity. It helps to combine the communitarian dimension of the People of God, the collegial communion of the episcopate and the “diaconal (service) primacy” of the Bishop of Rome within them. A similar process takes place in local Churches and groupings of Churches. Synodality guarantees and promotes the action of subjects (For “subject” see p. 3.)

as well as the need for synodal structures, processes and events that articulate the authority of some and the participation of all: a synodal Church lives a participatory and co-responsible style.

The action of the Spirit in the communion of the Body of Christ and in the missionary journey of the People of God is the principle of synodality. In fact, He, being the *nexus amoris* in the life of God the Trinity, communicates this same love to the Church which is built up as *κοινωνία τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος* (the fellowship of the Holy Spirit) (2 Cor 13:13).

The Eucharist visibly represents and accomplishes our belonging to the Body of Christ and co-belonging among Christians (1 Cor 12:12). In the Emmaus episode, it is the point of arrival and departure of the disciples' journey.

Synodality expresses the being subject of the whole Church and the being subject of everyone in the Church. Believers are *σύνοδοι*, companions on the journey, called to be active subjects insofar as they participate in the one priesthood of Christ. The anointing of the Holy Spirit is manifested in the *sensus fidei* of the faithful.

Synodality manifests the **“pilgrim” character** of the Church. The image of the People of God, summoned from among the nations (Acts 2:1-9; 15:14), expresses its social, historical and missionary dimension, which corresponds to the condition and vocation of the human being as *homo viator* (a human being on the way). The journey is the image that illuminates an understanding of the mystery of Christ as the Way that leads to the Father. The People of God are on a journey to the end of time (Mt 28:20) and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

The synodal dimension of the Church implies communion in the living Tradition of the faith of the different local Churches among themselves and with the Church of Rome, both in a diachronic sense (through time) - *antiquitas* (antiquity) - and in a synchronic sense (at the same time) – *universitas* (as a whole). The normative character of communion in the faith professed by the Church everywhere, always and by all (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*: Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitorium* II, 5).

Synodality describes the path to be followed in order to promote the catholicity of the Church in discerning the ways to be followed

together in the universal Church and distinctly in each particular Church. The intrinsic correlation of these two poles, universal and local, can be expressed as the mutual indwelling of the universal and the local in the one Church of Christ.

The ecclesiological vision triggered by the synodal nature of the Church invites us to promote the unfolding of synodal communion among “all”, “some” and “one”. At different levels and in different forms, on the level of the particular Churches, on that of their groupings



at the regional level and on that of the universal Church, synodality implies the 1) exercise of the *sensus fidei* (sense of faith) of the *universitas fidelium* (all the faithful), 2) the ministry of leadership of the college of

Bishops, each with his presbyterate (a plurality), and 3) the ministry of unity of the Bishop and the Pope (one). Thus, in the dynamic of the Synod, the community aspect that includes the whole People of God, the collegial dimension relating to the exercise of the episcopal ministry and the primatial ministry of the Bishop of Rome are combined. This correlation promotes that *singularis conspiratio* (breathing together as one) among the faithful and the Pastors, an icon of the eternal *conspiratio* lived in the Holy Trinity. Thus the Church “strives unceasingly towards the fullness of divine truth, until in it the words of God are fulfilled” (DV 8).

## 2. Perspectives on developing the understanding and experience of synodality

Not being a mere institutional function, synodality activates a process of conversion. It is not an instrument of government of the Church, much less one of democracy. It is Christ’s way of making himself present in the power of the Spirit, arousing the consensus of the faithful. The vocabulary surrounding the concept of the synodal Church implies that the whole community, in the free and rich diversity of its members, is convoked to pray, listen, analyze, dialogue, discern and

advise the pastors in making pastoral decisions most conformed to God's will.

Synodality expresses concretely the effective history of the formation of consensus among Christians about the forms that the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth is called to take, in the face of the ever-changing demands of history. Synodality, in the process of the growth of ecclesial consciousness, is the process for **«seeking in Christ new paths, even unknown ones, to be taken within history»**. When it is evident that the usual forms of transmitting the Gospel are inadequate, it allows us to inaugurate new paths in history capable of crossing it.

The synodal dimension of the Church is experienced in the activation of dialogue and reciprocal listening as a resonance chamber in which previously unperceived sounds or silenced voices are heard, especially those of the poor and of people left on the margins of communion/communication.

Synodality, while focusing on the search for ways to proclaim the Gospel, also expresses the corresponding process of receiving. Without the ability to receive, there is no living mediation of the Word, either personal or social.



The synodal dimension of the Church implies the choice to take the path of dialogue inaugurated by the Logos (Word) made flesh. The Truth of Christ, in the words of Benedict XVI «is *logos* that creates *dialogos* and, therefore, communication and communion».

Understanding-and-Misunderstanding, is the name of each step on the “path” of seeking consensus and unanimity.

Synodality can lead to an openness of the Catholic Church toward the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities in the irreversible commitment to walk together toward full unity in the reconciled diversity of the respective traditions. It can also express itself in social *diaconia* (service) within the world and in constructive dialogue with men and women of different religious confessions and convictions in order to realize together a culture of encounter.

# "In me love was kindled"



## Pointers from the *Divine Comedy* Purgatory Canto IX

**Gregorio Vivaldelli**

Professor at the Academy  
of Religious Studies "R. Guardini"  
and the Theological Institute of Trento  
Affiliated with the Theological Faculty of  
Triveneto

An evening in the company of Dante Alighieri at a conference  
on unity, communion, synodality...

Is it a fit for our convention? It will be  
out of place, it will be boring...

But no!

*Professor Vivaldelli was so excellent,  
so passionate, so enjoyable... that we were so  
enthusiastic that we did not want his speech  
to end. We were thrilled and we found  
ourselves in a personal examination of  
conscience, in a high level school of  
spirituality, but just right for us.*

So we approached the mountain of Dante's Purgatory:





# Purgatory

a mountain of mercy...

a road to happiness



*... and what I  
sing will be that  
second kingdom,  
in which the  
human soul is  
cleansed of sin,  
becoming worthy  
of ascent to  
Heaven.*

**\*\* All quotations from the**

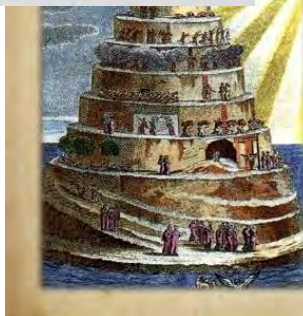
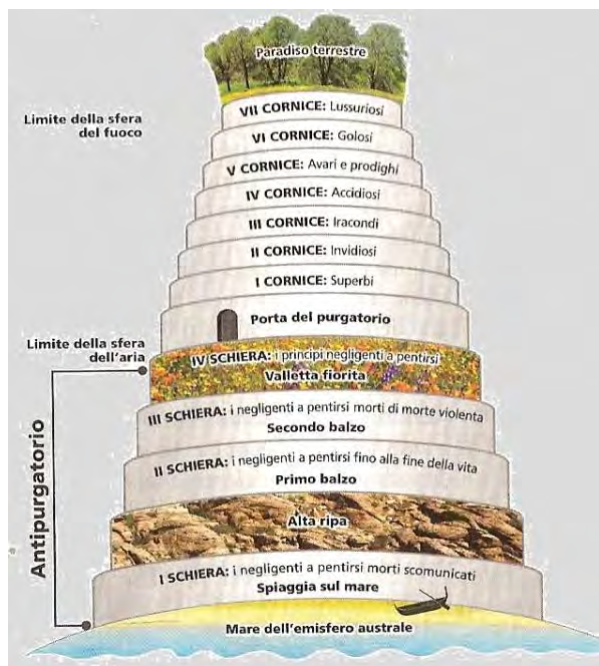
**Divine Comedy are from the English translation by Allen Mandelbaum.**



## *Purgatory: terraces ... vices*

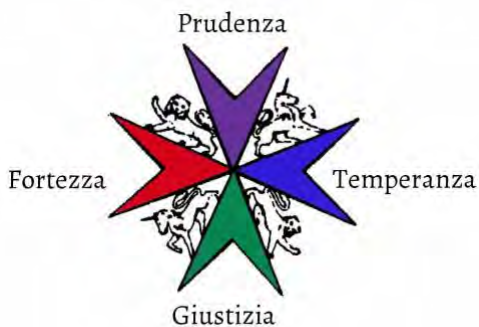
*You have already come to Purgatory: see there the rampart wall enclosing it; see, where that wall is breached, the point of entry....*

*I threw myself devoutly at his holy feet, asking him to open out of mercy; but first I beat three times upon my breast.*



## *The cardinal virtues:*

Prudence, temperance,  
justice, fortitude

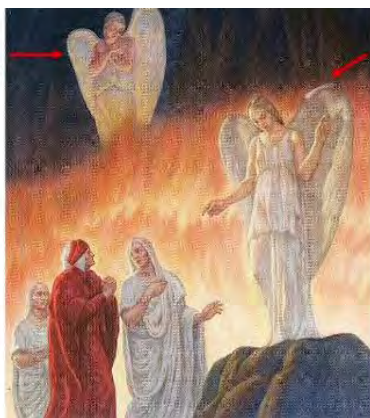


## *Toward Paradise*

*My Lord said:  
“Have no fear; be  
confident, for we are  
well along our way; do  
not restrain, but  
give free rein to, all  
your strength.”*

**“Come, blessed of my Father”**

***‘Venite,  
benedicti  
Patris mei’***



**“Blessed are the clean of heart.”**

***‘Beati  
mundo corde’***

*We met a biblical scholar  
in love with the Divine Comedy...*

Here are some remarks from Gregorio Vivaldelli ...

- ❖ *I have always been attracted by Dante's ability to elucidate the great beauties of our faith...*
- ❖ *Dante proves to be a good traveling companion for each one of us, with his ability to speak to people of every age, even of our time.*
- ❖ *My desire is to try to communicate what I have discovered to be beautiful, true and good in the Divine Comedy and that Dante wanted to share with the reader: the surprising joy of meeting the good of the intellect, that is, God.*
- ❖ *Together with the audience, I want to confront Dante's existential adventure, that journey which involves the awareness of one's own frailties in order to be able to experience a Goodness that precedes us.*
- ❖ *In order to experience Goodness we need to be aware of our frailties.*
- ❖ *Dante speaks to us of the hereafter in order to speak to us of the hereafter and teach us the art of living on earth.*
- ❖ *You live life on the move, being in the midst of it, discovering the reason for walking...and what makes you free, happy and therefore capable of making others happy.*
- ❖ *The happiness that heals is mercy, for those who are merciful to themselves and others change the way they see things, with the gaze of God.*

Gregorio Vivaldelli

***The Seed in Earth's furrow...***  
**From the presentation of the Convention secretary,**  
**Aurora Caramia**



On August 22-25, 2021, the Company of Saint Ursula, the secular institute of Saint Angela Merici,

celebrated its international convention in mixed mode: in person in Rome at the Istituto Santa Maria Bambina (Vatican City) and online through the Zoom platform.

Three phases characterized the planning and development of the convention:

**- Preparatory Phase**

The Council of the Federation planned the convention and supervised the entire preparatory phase.

The choice of the topic was dictated by what had emerged in the general session of the summer 2019 convention, during which the participants proposed a study of the theme/method of synodality.

The Council, making this hope its own, thought it appropriate to develop the theme starting, above all, with the suggestions of the talk given on that occasion by Don Massimo Naro: "Vocation: sisterhood and mission." Having chosen the title of the conference: "United Together to Serve His Divine Majesty," they picked out key words: Communion, Synodality and Mission.

This was followed by the identification of the speakers and the general approach, with the clear intention of involving the participants in conversation. Thanks to the contribution of Father Matteo Giuliani, an expert in group facilitation, break-out groups were set up on specific themes. Once the group leaders and their respective secretaries were designated, a virtual meeting was organized with Father Matteo Giuliani, who provided them with strategies for the good progress of the work.



The Company of Trent, with the president, Valeria Broll taking an active role, undertook to prepare forms for these working groups and to plan the convention's logistics.

### - Celebration of the convention



The convention itself began on the afternoon of Sunday, August 22, and concluded with lunch on Wednesday, August 25.

All the events laid out in the organization and illustrated in the program were experienced intensely: community prayer, reports, break-out groups, evenings of sisterhood, and a plenary discussion.

Sister Maria Gloria Riva's

presentation,

"Communion: In Your Light We See Light. The Mission of the Consecrated Woman,"

was dense in content and occupied a good part of Monday morning. She connected her themes to works of art, creating an interesting and beautiful combination; this method helped explain the topic and made the educational and enriching value of the images intelligible.

Don Rino La Delfa's presentations, "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church" and "Synodality: The Most Visible Form of Communion," laid the foundations of synodality and offered concrete suggestions for synodal life for the Companies.

Prof. Gregorio Vivaldelli's talk on Dante – as a tribute to the year dedicated to the poet – was distinguished and profound, with masterful pointers based on Canto 9 of Purgatory: "In me Love was kindled." With passion, professionalism and vivacity, he captured the



attention of all, even of the sisters who were following the conference from afar. He made us appreciate the theological reading of Dante's work and encouraged reflection on the irreplaceable value of Love that moves everything. This was an important piece of the whole mosaic of this time of formation.



Liturgical prayer was the lifeblood nourishing the days, in the family atmosphere breathed during the convention, and acted as a glue in the fascinating and uncomfortable reflection on "United together," an ever-new challenge which touches the deepest fibers of being and enters into the daily strenuous journey along life's steep and

rocky road, which is, as Saint Angela affirms, "for us paved with finest gold." This gold is the Bread of the Word and of the Eucharist, the gold of communion, the gold of the presence of our holy Mother, who guides us to Christ Jesus and, with a maternal hand, brings us closer to each other and, all together, to every person and every creature.



Another interesting element was the conversation both in the brief pause of "buzz" immediately after the presentations, to ask questions or emphasize aspects enunciated by the speakers, and in breakout groups and in the general session.

The idea of buzz sessions was appreciated, but the time available was very limited.

Breakout groups had active participation that was pertinent and brought forth suggestions as well as sharing experiences and points of

view. The worksheets and the guidance of the group leaders were useful, helping to focus attention on the specific topic to be addressed.

In the general session all the contributions received from the groups gathered in person and at a distance were given voice. The numerous open comments in the hall, including from some sisters following from a distance, further enriched the celebratory moment with active participation and interaction.

On a small scale, we experienced synodality, the path along which we can walk, "helping each other, bearing with each other in Jesus Christ" (Last Counsel, 2).

The technician Davide Pisetta made valuable and indispensable contributions, coordinating the remote connections.



The convention gratefully welcomed the publication of Don Raymond Nkindji

Samuangala's "Theological Principles of Inculturation of the Merician Charism," a work that had already been presented at the online meeting on May 2, and which was given to the Companies with a brief note from the author.

Opened by the President with the embrace of the "Blessed and Indivisible Trinity," the convention was attended in person by fifty-three women, including two sisters from the non-Federated Companies (Brescia and Verona), and by members of several Companies connected by streaming: Italian Companies, Companies from Northeast and Southeast Brazil, Indonesia, Slovakia, Poland, France, Madagascar, Canada, Toronto, Singapore and Australia. It was a joyful, family-oriented conference that moved the companies around the world to work together, mostly in the days leading up to the conference, to reflect on the assigned theme.





What the president hoped for in her opening statement occurred: "To walk with wings on our feet, nourished by his vigor, making the journey of the heart, of the mind, of the spirit, of communion/sisterhood, of being 'united together.'"

- Reception Phase

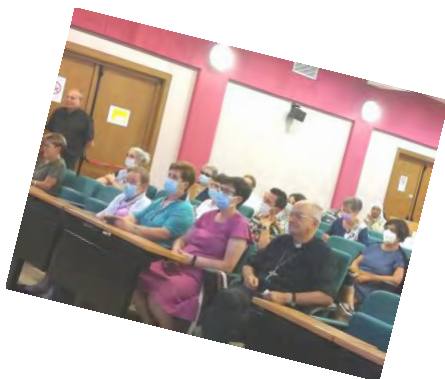
The last phase of the conference is the most demanding and, on the basis of the choices made during the celebration, it will be the moment in which the Companies will be entrusted with ideas for reflection and ripening, starting from biblical texts, the Writings of Saint Angela, the Constitutions, the presentations, and what emerged from the breakout groups and the general session. Once the material has been gathered, it will be entrusted like the seed in the furrow of the earth, to bear fruit when and how it pleases him.



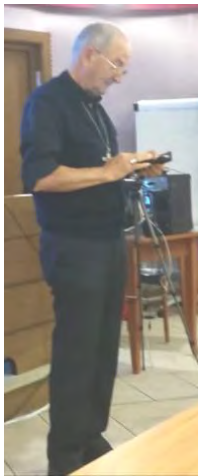
***“United together to serve  
his divine Majesty”***



# communion, synodality, mission



# encounter, listening, discernment



# Participating in a Synod Today



*Participating in a Synod means  
placing ourselves on the same path  
as the Word made flesh.*

*It means following in his footsteps,  
listening to his word along with the words of others.*

*It means discovering with amazement  
that the Holy Spirit always surprises us,  
to suggest fresh paths and new ways of speaking....*

*The Spirit asks us  
to listen to the questions, concerns and hopes  
of every Church, people and nation.*

*And to listen to the world,  
to the challenges and changes  
that it sets before us.*

*Let us not soundproof our hearts;  
let us not remain barricaded in our certainties.  
So often our certainties can make us closed....*

Pope Francis



# Participating in a Synod in Company

## encounter, listening, discernment

*Go and visit... all the other virgins... to comfort and help them... (Rule 11:8-9)*

*And when **you visit them**, I give you this charge: to greet them, and shake hands with them, also on my behalf. (5th Counsel 19)*

*Please **go often....and visit** your dear daughters and sisters and greet them; see how they are, comfort them, encourage them to stand firm in the life begun... (5th Counsel 1-2)*

*You must take care to have your daughters **come together** from time to time in the place you think best and most convenient... so that, **together like this**, they might also meet each other as loving sisters and thus, **talking over spiritual matters, rejoice together**, and together encourage one another, which will be no small help to them. (8<sup>th</sup> Legacy)*

*Make sure that you all meet with the leaders...and thus confer together, and make a **careful examination of the government.... and provide for everything as the Holy Spirit inspires you**. (7th Legacy)*

*And if, according to times and circumstances the need arises **to make new rules to do something differently**, do it prudently and with good advice. (11th Legacy 2)*

*And always let our principal recourse be to gather at the feet of Jesus Christ, and there, all of you, with all your daughters, to offer **most fervent prayers**. For in this way, without doubt, Jesus Christ will be in your midst, and as a true and good master, he will enlighten and teach you what you have to do. (T 11,3-4)*

*... We will try, in **dialogue with the directress**, to find the most suitable means to safeguard our spiritual life. (Constitutions 17)*

*In evaluation within the Company each of us **will learn to discern**... the demands of obedience, “great light” ... (Constitutions*

19.3)

Synod!  
*We live it and we pray...*



*Come, Holy Spirit!  
You inspire new tongues  
and place words of life on our  
lips: keep us from becoming  
a "museum Church",  
beautiful but mute,  
with much past and little future.*

*Come among us,  
so that in this synodal experience  
we will not lose our enthusiasm,  
dilute the power of prophecy,  
or descend into useless and unproductive discussions.*

*Come, Spirit of love,  
open our hearts to hear your voice!  
Come, Holy Spirit of holiness,  
renew the holy and faithful People of God!  
Come, Creator Spirit,  
renew the face of the earth!  
Amen.*

Pope Francis



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